

# TRANSGRESSION IN GAMES AND PLAY

edited by  
Kristine Jørgensen  
and Faltin Karlsen



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## Introduction: Playful Transgressions

Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen

“Can someone help me? PLEASE!” The global chat channel of *ARK: Survival Evolved* (Studio Wildcard, Instinct Games, Virtual Basement, et al. 2017) had been full of this poor player’s desperate pleas for hours, and large parts of the community were actively involved in coming to his rescue after he was captured by a fellow player. *ARK: Survival Evolved* is an open-world multiplayer survival game in which players are stuck on a lonely island with dinosaurs and—to this particular player’s dismay—other castaways. The player informed the chat channel that he had been shot with a tranquilizer, and when he woke up, he found himself handcuffed and his inventory filled with stones. Unable to move or use his hands, he could not empty his overencumbered inventory, nor could he open his map to find his location and tell other players his whereabouts. Insult was added to injury as his captor did not allow him to starve to death and respawn: he was being force-fed whenever his health began to deteriorate. The player also reported having begged his captor for mercy. When the player asked why he was being subjected to hours of torture, his captor simply said, “I hate Americans.”

If we understand transgression as going “beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention ... to violate and infringe” (Jenks 2003, 2), the in-game situation described here is transgressive in several ways. First, the situation transgresses the general idea that play and games concern that which is nonserious, fun, safe, and with little consequence outside itself. The captured player’s pleas for mercy and help demonstrate that sometimes games and play can be emotionally transgressive by offering unpleasant and distressing experiences and that being engaged in play may involve putting oneself at emotional risk. Further, the situation also demonstrates that gameplay can include transgressive play practices in which players act upon other players in a way that is meant to annoy, punish, or simply harass. At the same time, the captor did not break any game rules through his transgression, and, in spite of the hateful comment this person made, the act may even have been carried out from within a playful mindset. “It is only a game,” the captor could have said, thereby

excusing his transgression while also pointing out that the prisoner should not take the situation so seriously.

### Transgression in Games and Play

This book concerns transgressions in games and play. It is a collection of research and scholarly discussions of situations like the *ARK* one just described. Although video-games have a history of engaging with transgressive content such as excessive violence and transgressive play practices—for example, *griefing* (taking pleasure in sabotaging other players' gameplay experience) and *ganking* (killing a player who is at a disadvantage and for this reason no competition)—what is understood as a transgression inside the game context varies not only between a nongamer public and those with firsthand experience in the medium but also between gaming communities. As the *ARK* example shows, a game may take players out of a comfort zone due not only to the challenges of the game but also to its content and to the social situations it facilitates. How players respond to games is highly subjective and may range from disregard, opposition, or acceptance to transgressive play practices that include the breaking of game rules and intended gameplay as well as suggestive modifications of the game. What is transgressive for some may not be so for others, and there are important cultural and historical factors involved in how one responds to specific content. If we accept the idea that the social contract of play allows actions to have a somewhat different meaning than in the world at large (Bateson 1972, 180), we may also hypothesize that transgressions may have a special status in the contexts of games and play. This relationship can be traced to the idea that play in itself is characterized by a tension that makes it “double-edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously” (Schechner 2013, 89). Jonas Linderøth and Torill Mortensen describe play as something precarious that “needs to be maintained unbroken but at the same time needs to be challenged and put at risk in order to remain interesting” (2015, 6), and it is through an investigation of this claim that this book explores how play and games tackle such transgressions.

The motivation behind this book is the need for a contextual understanding of transgressive game content and play practices from a perspective that takes into consideration the cultural, social, and aesthetic aspects of the transgressions. Aiming for a medium-specific and experience-focused approach, this volume explores explanatory frameworks that are alternatives to psychological effect research with regard to how transgressive games may influence player experiences. By connecting uncomfortable, provocative, and offensive game content and play practices to the sociocultural and

aesthetic discourses of transgression, we highlight how games may challenge and overstep boundaries in terms of their content and through the play practices employed by players. Further, we stress that certain games share the intention of transgressive art and cinema to offend and provoke, sometimes for the greater good of creating reflection or debate among players or the public and sometimes so that players may intentionally or unintentionally experience transgression through subversive play practices.

The volume explores transgression in games and play from several angles by game scholars who come from different fields of research and use different methods. Whereas some of the chapters have roots in sociologically oriented player studies, others spring out of traditional humanistic textual analysis and philosophical discussions. A few of the contributors are transdisciplinary, situated within both media studies and cultural studies and oriented toward a broader cultural understanding of how to view transgression in games. Many of the chapters are based on empirical data, documenting how players engage with, interpret, tackle, and negotiate transgressive game content and play practices. The variety of data sources, methods, and play contexts makes this volume a valuable and insightful contribution to studies of transgression, spanning interpretations of in-game content and players' cultural practices.

Apart from this brief introduction, this book has fifteen chapters that explore transgression in games and play from several angles, and we have divided these chapters into four interrelated themes: concepts, practices, emotions, and society.

## Concepts

Talking about games and play as potentially *transgressive* demands an introduction not only to the concept as such but also to how games and play can be said to be transgressive. When we describe controversial, problematic, uncomfortable, provocative, and offensive games and play as *transgressive*, we have not selected this term randomly. Dictionaries define transgression as overstepping boundaries of taste, moral codes, social taboos, or law ("Transgression" 2017), but in scholarly discourse the term has been used to talk about boundary-crossing activities in culture and society, including legal transgressions and cultural transgressions such as the breaking of norms and taboos. For sociologist Chris Jenks, "to transgress" means to violate or infringe limits set by law or convention, but he also stresses that the act of transgression "is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation" that acknowledges and puts into focus the norm, law, or convention that is being transgressed. In this sense, transgression reaffirms the boundaries that are being transgressed and thus "serves as an extremely sensitive vector in

assessing the scope, direction, and compass of any social theory” (2003, 2). Although transgression in many cases may be unintentional, it can also be carried out on purpose, either as a way to mark distance from the established norms or as an act of liberation. Games and play are often understood as taking place inside a subset of everyday life and so tend to be treated as a social frame in which one can act outside the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. In this sense, play and games may be seen as social situations that accept transgressions more easily than other situations.

From this perspective, the first section of the book discusses transgression in games and play from a conceptual perspective, focusing on the idea of transgression as discussed in sociology and philosophy. Jaakko Stenros challenges the idea that play and games are fun and safe by definition in the chapter “Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play.” Delving into the concept of play, Stenros discusses transgressive play as a contrast to *idealized play*, which is seen as inherently good or positive. Presenting a typology of play practices that demonstrate different kinds of “bad play”—which is transgressive because it breaks contextual norms, disrupts other players’ sense of play, or is dangerous or violent—the chapter defines the starting point of how we may understand the concept of transgression in the context of play as well as games.

The idea that games and play have a transgressive side is further exemplified by Torill Elvira Mortensen and Victor Navarro-Remesal’s chapter “Asynchronous Transgressions: Suffering, Relief, and Invasions in Nintendo’s Miiverse and StreetPass.” Using the Buddhist idea of *dukkha*, “thirst” or “dissatisfaction,” these authors examine Nintendo’s quasi-social networks as a case for arguing that players may get relief from pain by playing with other players’ suffering. For Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal, such play is not a matter of a sadistic pleasure but a ludic impulse to up the ante, to increase the challenge and the immersion. Identifying how players may transgress social or individual boundaries, the fictional frame of reference, the technological limits of the game, or the codes of conduct, they present a taxonomy that shows how players may trespass other players even when not playing with them.

Whereas Stenros and Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal focus on concepts relating to transgressive play practices, Holger Pötzsch directly addresses the concept of transgression, criticizing common definitions for not being able to grasp how something comes to be transgressive for someone in a particular context. Introducing the term *transgressivity*, he outlines seven types of it mapped across game form and play practices. His chapter, “Forms and Practices of Transgressivity in Videogame: Aesthetics, Play, and Politics,” accounts for both text- and player-centric approaches and provides a series of examples to illustrate each type. The final chapter in this section explores how transgressions are highly dependent on context and how games present a different moral

context for actions compared to actions outside a game. In “The Bracketing of Moral Norms in Videogames,” John R. Sageng takes a philosophical approach to formulate a model of how in-game actions can be subjected to moral evaluation and investigates the space for moral bracketing that this type of evaluation creates. By way of Immanuel Kant’s deontology and a framing of videogames as comprising distinct deontic worlds, Sageng shows how and why these worlds converge and diverge ethically.

## Practices

The idea of idealized play has often been contested (e.g., Geertz 1973, 432–433; Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 14; Malaby 2007, 107; Montola 2010; Juul 2013; Schechner 2013, 118–119; Jørgensen 2014; Linderoth and Mortensen 2015; Stenros 2015, 72–76), and most game scholars today agree that frustration, failure, and trolling are indeed characteristics of much gameplay. In the second section of the volume, we present case studies of transgressive play practices that illustrate this important point. What characterizes the chapters in this section is the focus on how gameplay practices may at one and the same time be playful and overstep boundaries of social etiquette. The chapters in this section demonstrate how playful transgression may be an act of resistance, either against a certain subculture or against the rules of the game, and what form such transgressions may take in a performative context.

The female streamer Kaceytron, who is the center of Mia Consalvo’s chapter “Kaceytron and Transgressive Play on Twitch.tv,” is an example of someone who commits playful transgressions in a performative context. Through an in-depth analysis of Kaceytron’s live streams, Consalvo investigates what type of toxicity Kaceytron encounters, how she responds to it, and how the elements of community and platform play a role in both perpetuating and challenging these activities. Consalvo shows that Kaceytron, rather than being disrupted by the constant abuse, shapes it into a feature characteristic of her streams, challenging the norms of public appearances and thus making it unclear whether she is the transgressor or the one being transgressed against.

The chapter “Let’s Play Performance as Transgressive Play” presents an example of transgressive practices that go beyond social etiquette to game rules. Hanna Wirman and Rhys Jones discuss how creators of Let’s Play videos use *The Sims 3* (Maxis 2009) to create transgressive situations in a playful and humorous context, thereby allowing themselves to carry out otherwise taboo behavior and renegotiate the meaning of the game. The chapter demonstrates how the interactive nature of games allow players to include transgressive user-generated content that goes against the default message encoded by the developers, thereby turning provocative game content into something

the players can accept through playful engagement with the game. The ways in which players modify games and give them a new meaning is also the topic of Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros's chapter "Queering Games, Play, and Culture through Transgressive Role-Playing Games." The authors discuss how personalization and appropriation of game characters can be seen as part of the subversive practice of *queering*. The chapter addresses use of this term both to denote rebellious practices relating to games and to address sexual and gendered transgressive practices in games.

## Emotions

Research on transgressions in games and play has historically followed the tradition of media-effects research dominated by psychological effect studies focusing on the effects of violent game content and excessive use (e.g., Gentile and Stone 2005; Ferguson, Olson, Kutner, et al. 2010; Kutner and Olson 2008). This research has invited discussions more concerned with whether games may corrupt the young and vulnerable rather than with how they are experienced in the gameplay context. However, with the rise of game studies as a cross-disciplinary field, there has been an influx of more context-oriented and culturally sensitive perspectives that stress games as meaningful in the lives of players. Springing out of these perspectives is research on how players make sense of games and the ways in which they experience and interpret them as media texts. Because transgression may involve overstepping individual sensibilities, emotional response to game content and play practices is a key issue in this section.

In their chapter "Guilt in *DayZ*," Marcus Carter and Fraser Allison discuss emotional responses that players have toward player killing in the multiplayer survivalist game *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive 2017). Studying survey data they gathered on how players reflect on the act of player killing through the lens of *moral management*, Carter and Allison show how players negotiate and rationalize their actions when they find themselves overstepping personal ethical boundaries. A related issue concerns player attitudes toward transgressive content and how players reflect on uncomfortable topics in games. In her chapter "When Is It Enough? Uncomfortable Game Content and the Transgression of Player Taste," Kristine Jørgensen reviews players' responses to transgressive game content in four focus groups, arguing that the in-game context and knowledge of genre conventions are crucial for how the content is experienced.

Kristian A. Bjørkelo takes a more introspective approach in his chapter "Transgressive Realism in *This War of Mine*." Through an autoethnographic exploration of the indie game *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014), Bjørkelo presents an experience he describes as both harrowing and insightful. This combination of emotions led him



to develop the idea of *transgressive realism*—a sense of social realism that cannot be attributed to the graphical style of the simulation of game mechanics but to game experiences that feel real because they are able to create a sense of truthfulness through their presentation of in-game situations as uncomfortable, disturbing, or otherwise transgressive.

## Content

The aim to transgress is a common denominator in many forms of rebellious and oppositional aesthetic practices, from high art to independent cinema and videogames. *Transgressive art*, for instance, is a postmodernist genre that questions the idea of art itself. It aims to shock and to subvert conventional moral beliefs (Cashell 2009, 1) and is characterized as art that “disgusts, discomforts, unnerves, offends as well as art that triggers in us experiences of pain and shame” (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016, 1). It is in conflict with social and aesthetical norms and is sometimes condemned as a speculative attempt to draw attention under the alibi of art; at other times, it is accused of going so far in its taboo breaking that it becomes impossible to engage with as art (Cashell 2009, 1). It rebels by taking the audience out of their comfort zone and questioning “all received and ostensibly incontestable values” (Grønstad 2012, 38), potentially enabling reflection and awareness by forcing the audience to confront issues that tend to evoke unease and discomfort (Julius 2002, 189).

We also see a similar breach of norms in other media content. Splatter films and other subgenres of the horror genre are examples, not to mention the *cinema of transgression*, an oppositional movement in underground cinema (Sargeant 1999). Sometimes described as “punk cinema” (Beattie 2005, 40), the cinema of transgression explores topics such as drug abuse, nihilism, and sexual experimentation, with the aim to transform cinematic creativity by going “beyond all limits set or prescribed by taste, morality or any other traditional value system” (Zedd 2016). Although there has been no similar oppositional movement in videogames, they have historically been notorious for transgressive content. Excessive violence, exemplified by explicit cases such as *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games 1992) and *Manhunt* (Rockstar North 2003), is a classic issue, and in recent years indie-game development has begun to explore the darker aspects of life. Featuring cancer in children and post-traumatic stress syndrome, respectively, *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012) aim to induce reflection by exposing the player to uncomfortable experiences. *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft 2006) and *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015) have received wide criticism for their speculative representations of rape and mass killing.

Further, certain kinds of game mechanics, such as gamification and other persuasive design, have been accused of transgressing what is in their own best interests by being exploitative (Bogost 2011).

With reference to this discourse, the fourth part of the book is concerned with game content and the aesthetic side of transgressive games, focusing on techniques and game mechanics and the ways in which they function and are used for transgressive purposes. Tomasz Z. Majkowski carries out one such analysis in “The Renaissance Ass: Ezio Auditore and Digital Menippea.” Through Michel Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, Majkowski argues that the otherwise noncontroversial game *Assassin’s Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009) transgresses game conventions in its take on death and killing, on character development, as well as on the issue of freedom of action central to sandbox games.

Ragnhild Tronstad’s chapter “Destruction, Abjection, and Desire: Aesthetics of Transgression in Two Adaptations of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’” offers another analysis of transgressive game properties. Tronstad’s mission is to conduct a comparative analysis of how the horror art game *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009) and the theater performance *Footnote to Red Riding Hood* (Jonasson and Vislie 2014) represent the transgressive potential inherent in the classic fairy tale, as identified in readings of historical versions of the tale informed by psychoanalytic theory. Applying a hermeneutical perspective, Tronstad argues that expectations of violence and horror function as inspiration for play in both works.

Faltin Karlsen’s chapter “Exploited or Engaged? Dark Game Design Patterns in *Clicker Heroes*, *FarmVille 2*, and *World of Warcraft*” takes a third and more design-oriented approach to analyzing transgressive game content and mechanics. The chapter discusses whether game designers may transgress ethical boundaries by manipulating players through design. Employing the concept *dark game design patterns*, Karlsen discusses mechanics in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), *FarmVille 2* (Zynga 2012) and *Clicker Heroes* (Playsaurus 2014) that aim to stimulate the player to alter daily routines and develop long-term loyalty to the games.

## Society

Ever since the launch of the car race game *Death Race* (Exidy 1976), in which players got points for running over pedestrians, videogames have been accused of tearing apart the moral fabric of society (Provenzo 1991; Kocurek 2012). However, what is experienced as transgressive varies with time and place. What is seen as transgressive today is not the same as what was deemed transgressive in the 1980s. Also, how different audiences

and subcultures inside gamer culture respond to transgressions in games and play are also in flux. From within the gaming community, controversies over game content are prevalent but often over very different issues. When Bioware included the option of homosexual romances in its role-playing game *Mass Effect 3* (2012), this decision was hailed by parts of the gaming community but greeted with outrage from other parts of the community over what they saw as a matter of yielding to political correctness and pressure groups (Oulette 2014; Holmes 2016). In other contexts, certain audiences are put off by subversive play practices such as ganking and griefing (Lin and Sun 2005) or by the explicit language and harassment that sometimes infuse online games (Consalvo 2012). The last section of the book is dedicated to how transgressions in games and play are and have been approached from a societal perspective.

Alan Meades looks at arcade gameplay through a historical lense in “The American Arcade Sanitization Crusade and the Amusement Arcade Action Group.” In his comparative analysis of arcades in the United States and the United Kingdom, he shows that arcade gameplay was seen as transgressive in the early 1980s but “sanitized” and further accepted through being subject to regulation, especially in the United States. To a much larger degree than the arcades in the United States, the English arcades functioned as autonomous social arenas with less infringement by external entities to sanitize game culture.

Taking a contemporary perspective on gamer culture, Kelly Boudreau looks at the emergence of new forms of transgression in the age of digital online games. In “Beyond Fun: Transgressive Gameplay, Toxic and Problematic Player Behavior as Boundary Keeping,” Boudreau identifies play practices in which players disrupt other players’ gameplay in the name of boundary keeping. Through a review of literature on toxic gamer culture and historical literature on deviant subcultures, Boudreau identifies and explores an underresearched area: how toxic and problematic behavior may fit within the broader, historical frame of resistance to mainstreaming by subcultures and niche cultures.

This book is an attempt to provide a contextual understanding of content and play that has traditionally been framed as offensive, harmful, speculative, uncomfortable, or otherwise problematic. This contextual understanding emphasizes actual player experiences, including their renegotiation of, appropriation of, and playful orientation toward such content and practices. Although the book does not pretend to provide a simple answer to how such content and practice should be understood in the game-play context, it does demonstrate that there are different and more culturally sensitive explanatory models to understanding games and play than the problem-oriented effect studies tend to provide.



## I Concepts



# 1 Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play

Jaakko Stenros

In academic discourse, scholars often conceptualize play as positive. The attributes associated with play are celebratory, such as Roger Caillois's characterization of play as an activity that is essentially free and voluntary, disconnected from material pursuits and consequences ([1958] 2001b, 9–10). Although idealized discourses surrounding play have a long history of being questioned, acts of play that transgress against the ideal of play as positive still run the risk of going unrecognized.

On the whole, “play” and “playing” are associated with contradictory characteristics such as being free, voluntary, spontaneous, autotelic, safe, unserious, separate, absorbing, uncertain, unproductive, rule governed, trivial, creative, wasteful, fun, familiar, joyous, repetitive, regenerative, cathartic, preparatory, predatory, mirthful, childish, disruptive, dangerous, uncivilized, and fragile (see, e.g., Huizinga [1938] 1955; Gilmore [1966] 1971; M. Ellis 1973; Sutton-Smith 1997; Burghardt 2005; Schechner 2006).

In this chapter, the focus is not on games but on play more generally. To fully understand play, we need to examine its expressions, if they are valued as positive or negative, regardless of whether they comply with norms or transgress them. If we look at only half the picture, we cannot grasp the whole phenomenon and its nuances. This chapter begins with a conceptualization of play and playfulness, which is followed by a discussion of the idealization of play. After that, it explores numerous different forms of transgressive play. Finally, it addresses the role of transgressive play in relation to play in general.

## Play and Playfulness

“Play” as a concept is complicated. It is used in numerous conflicting ways. To make it easier to approach play as a concept, it is useful to analytically separate the *biological from the cultural*, the *subjective from the social*, and the *hegemonic from the transgressive*.

Although drawing such lines can be impossible in practice, it is useful when thinking about play.

The phenomenon of play in animals, including humans, is rooted in biology (Burghardt 2005), yet the concept of “play” is a social construct. Humans, like most vertebrates, engage in activities that have limited immediate function, have an endogenous component (such as being voluntary, pleasurable, or autotelic), are structurally or temporally different from so-called serious activities, tend to be a repeated performance (as opposed to exploration), and are performed when humans are in a relaxed state (Burghardt 2005, 68–72). These are the characteristics that some ethologists look for when they are trying to identify play behavior in animals. In human cultures, some of the activities that fit these descriptions are culturally recognized as play. However, not all such activities are included under the umbrella of recognized play, and what gets included as play varies over time and from one culture to the next. This is the first analytic distinction, separating the biological from cultural.

The second distinction separates the subjective experience of playfulness from the activity socially recognized as playing (Makedon 1984; Burghardt 2005, 68–72; Stenros 2015). As defined by motivational psychology, the experience of playfulness is an autotelic (Csikszentmihalyi [1975] 2000) or paratelic metamotivational state (Apter 1991) or mindset of the player. In other words, it is a mindset where tasks are carried out for the sake of doing them (such as, usually, dancing or playing chess) and not for the end result (such as vacuuming or doing one’s taxes, at least usually). It can be difficult to assess the subjective experience of a person simply by observing, which makes the study of the play of children and animals difficult. In comparison, numerous activities are recognized as play regardless of the participants’ mental state. This is playing as the enacted activity that tends to be socially recognized and negotiated. All activities rooted in playfulness are not culturally recognized as playing, and, correspondingly, not all activities branded as play are carried out in a playful mindset.

The third distinction separates the hegemonic from the transgressive. Play activities that are seen as positive, constructive, or part of an established tradition tend more commonly to be culturally recognized as play. These celebrated forms of “good play” are currently hegemonic. However, following David Myers (2010), it is important to look at all forms of play and not just its positive expressions. Activities that somehow defy norms and “go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention” (Jenks 2003, 2) seem to be more easily discarded from the category of play: *transgressive play* activities are not always identified as play when play is discussed. To better and more fully understand play—and transgressive play—it is



first important to map playful expressions and only then to start dividing play into different categories.

In this chapter, I adopt a broad conceptualization of play: play includes both all the activities performed and rooted in a paratelic mindset and all the activities that are culturally branded as play.

### **Idealization of Play**

There has been a tendency in the discourse surrounding play to equate it with “good play”—that is, to see play as inherently positive (e.g., Caillois [1950] 2001a, 159, and Bateson and Martin 2013, 15–16; cf. Lieberman 1977). The logic behind this idea is that play is good for the player because it encourages learning and builds character; play is child’s work; sports build character; play is preparation and learning; play is fun for everyone involved! In practice, all these things mean play is by definition positive.

Although this idealization of play is still common, especially in texts that do not specifically address play, more inclusive accounts of play have proliferated in past decades. As early as 1984, Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne questioned the idealization of play. They identified the positive idea of play, dating back to Johan Huizinga (1955), as describing play as “necessarily voluntary (intrinsically motivated), of positive affective value, egalitarian, flexible and functional” (305). Their formulation of play as at times obligatory is inspired by anthropologists’ accounts (especially Turner 1982, 20–59) of societies where a distinction is drawn between sacred or profane activity and not necessarily between play or work. Indeed, the same concept of play is not applicable in all (historical) contexts. Play (as separate from playfulness) is a social construct, and it is subject to change over time (cf. Connor 2005). In addition, children’s play that contains teasing and bullying is not voluntary for all parties involved. However, the central aim of Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne’s article seems to be to cast play as sometimes not nice. They convincingly parade examples of play that have a negative affect, are not egalitarian or flexible, and are dysfunctional. They conclude:

We have sought to counter the idealization of play which on the everyday level is expressed by saying that the child’s play is its work, or that sports build character, and on the academic level by finding the essence of play in voluntariness, positive affect flexibility and socialization. These characteristics may be present in some play in some circumstances. Unfortunately the opposite characteristics of obligatoriness, negative affect, rigidity and dysfunctionality are also characteristic of some play in some circumstances. (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984, 316)

Yet even some contemporary accounts of play do not engage with bad play. Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin consciously exclude bad play from their conception of play (2013, 15–16). They are particularly interested in the concept of *playful play* (cf. Make-don 1984), for which a positive mood is a base requirement. Although they recognize that teasing, bullying, and humiliation have been discussed as (bad) play, they leave them out of their conception of not only playful play but also play itself because the target or victim of such activity is not participating voluntarily or in a positive mood. However, Bateson and Martin disregard the possibility that the perpetrator of such bad play may very well be in a playful mindset and a positive mood. The idea that different participants experience the situation differently—some as play, others as something else altogether—does not seem possible in their conceptualization of play. Nor do they allow for the possibility that some people might be in a positive mood while carrying out actions to which others object.

This idealization of play is in practice a culturally constructed category. Play as a primal, brute fact rooted in mammalian biology is bracketed. In the process of delimiting and idealizing, those playful aspects of human behavior that are deemed negative are ignored and obfuscated, and, possibly, their playful nature is denied. Indeed, if play is seen as rooted in a biological impulse of playfulness, then such arguments are revealed as normative.

The idea that play should be recognized regardless of whether it manifests in a way that is culturally deemed positive or negative is hardly new. Johan Huizinga noted this early on in *Homo Ludens*: “Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity it has no moral function” (1955, 6). Even so, Gregory Bateson (1979) posited Huizinga’s definition of play as culturally bound. Bateson was, among other things, an anthropologist, and he spent time with the Baining of Papua New Guinea (Fajans 1997), a culture that actively devalues play. It is worth noting that although play is idealized today, a century (and more) ago it was not uncommon to see play mainly as trivial and morally suspect, something that should prompt censure (see, e.g., Dewey 1922, 160–164).

The wrong sort of play that is not recognized as play creates an opening for a category of transgressive play. Next, we must distinguish transgressive play from idealized, playful play by identifying categories of activities that transgress against the more common cultural conception of (positive, good, and idealized) play and those that transgress against wider cultural norms.

### Play and Transgressive Play

Numerous activities are recognized by some conceptualizations as play but disregarded by others. The core of culturally recognized play, the kind that most conceptualizations agree upon, can be called *playful play*. It is voluntary and positive for all participants, and there is a relatively uniform understanding among participants as to what they are doing together. It does not overly challenge contextual social or cultural norms, at least not in a way that makes anyone uncomfortable. Such play is engaged in by children and particularly playful adults. It is “normal,” norm-abiding play.

This core, playful play, is surrounded by numerous groups of activities that some conceptualizations of play rule as “not-play.” They all are, in some way, forms of transgressive play. The following list is not comprehensive—indeed, it could not be because ideas of play change—but it serves to display the plurality of play. In addition, the categories are not mutually exclusive, and an instance of play can belong in more than one category.

#### One-Sided Social Play

It is not necessary for all who participate in an activity to experience or interpret it in the same way. Bullying, teasing, hazing, and mistreatment can be playful for the perpetrator, even if not for the victim. If flirting can be seen as play, then are at least some instances of sexual harassment considered play from the point of view of the harasser? A bully who later justifies her actions as “merely play” may also have been engaged in one-sided play (see also Groos [1899] 1976, 68–72; Henricks 2006, 6; Farr 2009; cf. chapter 15 in this volume), and older siblings can harm, hurt, or humiliate their younger siblings as part of playful encounters in the form of bullying (Sutton-Smith 1971, 104). Online grief play and trolling (Stenros 2015) as well as, possibly, cheating may fall into this category. Guards have mistreated prisoners for thousands of years—and have taken joy in it (Burghardt 2005, 388). One-sided social play in animals is recognized as teasing and harassment (Burghardt 2005, 87), though we are hesitant to call it play when carried out by humans.

Even though such actions break social norms and may even be illegal, they should be recognized as play in humans as well. Carnivores, including humans, can play with other, usually smaller, animals. This predatory play is akin to object play; the other animal is treated as an object (Burghardt 2005, 85). Notice also that there can be multiple participants on both sides, a group of bullies and a host of victims, a group of hazers and a pack of initiates.

This category transgresses against two key notions associated with play. First, it transgresses against the idea that play is shared among its participants and that there is a mutual understanding of its rules, goals, and limits. Instead, in one-sided social play, the victim or the target has not consented to the rules. Indeed, although some people in the encounter are playing, not everyone is. Which leads us to the second notion: play is commonly conceived of as voluntary. The targets of this category of play do not really play, even if they are part of the activity, except that sometimes, as part of the one-sided play, they can be forced to pretend that they are playing and that they are also enjoying the proceedings. Joyce Goggin (2011) describes, for instance, office workers who are forced to pretend that they enjoy their work.

### **Dangerous Play**

*Dangerous play* is a form of play in which there is a sizeable risk to the player's life, reputation, or resources. It is play that potentially has a very large impact on the player's everyday life. The most obvious examples relate to physical danger and extreme sports such as skydiving, off-piste skiing, and BASE jumping. The fact that some of these practices are illegal only makes them more attractive for some players because it further raises arousal. In the digital realm, the risk to one's life is lessened, but in this realm dangerous play can take the form of, for example, high-risk gambling or illegal playful activism or trolling.

Dangerous play is closely related to the oldest academic articulation of transgressive play—namely, *deep play* (Bentham [1802] 1894, 106; Geertz 1973, 432–433; Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984, 314–316; Csikszentmihalyi [1975] 2000, 74–101). Deep play is playing in which there is a very high risk involved, either psychological, physical, or monetary. Examples include gambling, having unsafe sex for kicks, and driving drunk on a dare. In sociology, high-risk leisure activities that require particular skills are sometimes discussed using the curious term *edgework* (Lyng 1990, 1991).

### **Violent Play**

Play where the player inflicts damage or pain on another being as part of playing is *violent play*. Examples of violent play include bareknuckle fighting, engaging in some BDSM practices, and torturing animals. The violence can be consensual or nonconsensual. The former is close to dangerous play because a player is subjecting their body to (potentially dangerous) harm. The latter is an extreme version of one-sided social play.

Neither dangerous play nor violent play corresponds to the expectation of play being free of consequences. Risk of harm or actual harm that extends outside the

*magic circle of play* (Huizinga 1955; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Stenros 2015) renders these forms of play “too real.” Yet such risk is largely the point of these activities (cf. Geertz 1973).

### **Parapathic Play**

*Parapathic play* is a form of play that is not fun and does not make the player feel “good,” yet there is some other component in the activity that renders it meaningful and worthwhile. In parapathic play, the player feels emotions often characterized as negative—and indeed plays in order to feel those emotions. The most obvious example, though hardly transgressive, is playing horror games. The player experiences dread and fear—and experiencing these emotions is a key reason for playing. The player is able to experience in a safe way emotions that are usually considered negative.

More transgressive is playing with topics considered too sensitive for games and play to handle because play is seen as trivializing. Dystopian live-action role-playing games (larps) and larps dealing with real-world issues (e.g., Pettersson 2014) fall into this category, as do many digital art games (Sharp 2015). Grief tourism—that is, visiting places where tragedies unfolded—is another example.

### **Sensation-centric Locomotor Play**

Play where the aim is to create a pleasurable sensation (i.e., what Caillois calls *ilinx* [(1958) 2001b, 23]) for oneself is referred to as *sensation-centric locomotor play*; it is often excluded from conceptualizations of play. This is especially true in the context of adult human play. Sensation-driven thrill seeking, the riding of roller coasters, and masturbation all fall into this category.

Play with one’s body is one of the basic categories of animal play (Burghardt 2005); indeed, it is the most basic form of play in the animal kingdom. In humans, it is often delimited from the play category—perhaps because as driven by sensation it is less mediated by culture. This is what makes sensation-centric body play transgressive; it is too primal, too childish, too uncultured. It is a transgression against the notion of play as culture and cultured.

### **Context-Insensitive Play**

Play that would be recognized as play at some other time or in some other place but that is not deemed play in the here and now is *context-insensitive play*—for example, play in serious contexts such as courtrooms, operating theaters, and funerals (see also Holger Pötzsch’s description of situated transgressivity in chapter 3 of this volume). Not all context-insensitive actions are play (cf. Goffman 1974), but when actors are in a

playful mindset or their activities would be recognized as play in another context, their transgressions are also considered play. Furthermore, playing in the wrong way within a game also counts as context insensitive (cf. chapters 2 and 6 this volume). Grief play, common in multiplayer online games, is an excellent example of context-insensitive play; in grief play, players derive their enjoyment not from playing the game but from playing the other players (Mulligan and Patrovsky 2003, 218; Lin and Sun 2005).

Most transgressive play could be called “context insensitive” by someone, and this category is similar to one-sided social play because, again, there are competing readings of the same social situation. However, the transgression here is not so much against any ideal of play but against the social contract that is in place in the situation. Context-insensitive play breaks traditions, customs, and etiquette—that is, the “proper” way of conducting oneself. Context-insensitive play can often be *appropriative play* (Stenros 2015, 168), meaning that a nonplayful context is taken over by acts carried out in a playful mindset, such as using quotidian streets for parkour or cruising or playing bullshit bingo at a work meeting.

These transgressions against propriety can also be power struggles—challenges to who gets to define the norms in a situation. For example, in the context of school, doodling, note passing, mocking, making faces, sneaking candies, and other such activities that are ways for children to express their disdain are called *illicit play* (King 1987; Josephson 2009). Illicit play is a playful way for pupils to undermine the teacher’s authority.

A subset of context-insensitive play is *playing the system* (Stenros 2010). Any system of rules can be used for what it is meant for, or it can be subverted and used for alternative, player-set goals. The system is a context, and players undermine or appropriate it for their other playful purposes. Chan culture (Manivannan 2013) abounds with examples, from tampering with search results (i.e., googlebombing) to ordering a hundred pizzas to a specific location.

### **Player-Inappropriate Play**

Activities that are not recognized as play simply because the player is somehow wrong are considered player-inappropriate play. Certain types of play may be deemed unfitting for people of a particular age, class, ethnicity, gender, profession, religion, background, or other personal quality. The actions of a police officer on duty or a soldier on border control are not easily interpreted as play. This restriction may even extend to leisure time because to some extent professional roles cross over. Another example is culturally appropriative or insensitive play; a colonized people may not see it as play when the colonizer plays with their cultural artifacts as if they were toys. Like the

previous category, player-inappropriate play is not a transgression of the play category but of social or cultural expectations.

Play can also be restricted based on the player's age. Play among adults in and of itself is sometimes seen as transgressive because adults are not supposed to play—even if they can have hobbies or interests (Heljakka 2016). Similarly, there are forms of play children are not supposed to engage in. The obvious example is sexual and erotic play in adolescence, but adults have all kinds of ideas about appropriate play scripts for children. When children play in ways that oppose these scripts—for example, morbid funeral doll play—it is called *unplaying* (Flanagan 2009, 33; cf. Heljakka 2013, 336–347). *Dirty play* (Fine 1986, 1988) is another related term. It refers to immoral and distasteful preadolescent play—for example, aggressive pranks, vandalism, and sexual talk or racist remarks.

### **Brink Play**

Games and play have a quality of being “merely” something (Riezler 1941): they are just play and need not be taken seriously. When the “mere” nature of the play is in question, and when the alibi of play is used to get away with things one would like to do outside of play, we arrive at the category *brink play* (from the term *brink games*; see Poremba 2007). The social recognition of an activity as play is used as an alibi to be able to do things that would otherwise be socially difficult. This form of play draws its power from positioning itself on the boundary surrounding play. Twister is the classic example: players are physically very close to each other, much closer than in usual interactions, but this proximity is not threatening because it is “just a game.” Yet Twister is played in part because of the physical intimacy created. *Games of steadfastness* (Stenros 2015, 190–191) are another example: here, the goal is to make coplayers lose their cool, to “flood out,” as Erving Goffman (1974) termed it, and to stop playing. This type of game is prominent also in chan culture (cf. chapter 5 in this volume).

As these framings show, play connected to power structures is especially useful to tactically (cf. de Certeau 1984) undermine existing power structures. Brink play is not necessarily transgressive play, but it does flirt with transgression. It does its darnedest not to get caught in transgression, but this dance is the source of its draw—which makes it useful to consider in this context. In brink play, norms are played with but not necessarily broken.

### **Taboo Play**

Actions that are not acceptable even when marked as play can be discussed with the term *taboo play*. Whereas player-inappropriate play refers to activities that some people

are not allowed to do in play, taboo play encompasses activities that are ruled out for everyone. The most obvious examples are activities that do not lose their edge even when there is pretend play involved, such as racism, rape, and incest.

Taboo play is discussed under numerous names in the literature on play. *Forbidden play* (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 477–481) is taboo-defying play, such as kissing games, defined as such by the “proper” social context that surrounds playing. Without those norms, the playful expressions would not be forbidden; they would just be play. *Edgeplay* is used in BDSM communities to refer to sexual activities that tend to cause people to convulse (Moser 2006; Weiss 2006). Taboo play breaks general societal norms, but it also shows the limits of what one is not allowed to play about.

### Repetitive Play

Playlike activity that is composed of routine (often referred to as “grinding,” especially in online play) can be seen as lacking an element of playfulness. These activities might have started out as play, but when they persist, they are no longer engaged in a playful mindset. Play has deteriorated into grinding and repetition—for instance, the familiarity of *Candy Crush Saga* (King 2012) or the weekly hours of squash (cf. Karlsen, chapter 13 in this volume). In animal studies, the term *stereotypical behavior* is used. In humans, we sometimes use terms such as *compulsion*, *addiction*, and *abnormal* when referring to such activities. Here, I call them *repetitive play*. Theodor Adorno sees play as not only repetitive but also worklike:

The element of repetition in play is the afterimage of unfree labor, just as sports—the dominant extra-aesthetic form of play—is reminiscent of practical activities and continually fulfills the function of habituating people to the demands of praxis, above all by the reactive transformation of physical displeasure into secondary pleasure, without their noticing that the contraband of praxis has slipped into it. ([1970] 2002, 318)

This category transgresses against the idea that play is creative, spontaneous, and liberating. Although play can certainly be all of those things, certain kinds of play can also be quotidian and repetitive.

### Instrumentalized Play

Finally, there is play devoid of playfulness—*instrumentalized play* in the service of external goals (Stenros 2015, 168). This type of play includes playing professional sports, playing as research for game scholars, goldmining in virtual worlds, and kindergarten teachers’ playing with children. Playing to order, where the goal is to create activity that has the appearance of play, is also relevant here—for example, being forced to play



certain games at school and possibly even having to go on a family vacation. Instrumentalized play transgresses the idea that play is purposeless.

The shifting boundary between play and work has recently been discussed extensively in academia (e.g., Deterding 2013) in connection to concepts such as “playbor” (immaterial labor that generates value while looking like play [see, e.g., Goggin 2011]), gamification (using game elements outside of games [see, e.g., Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, et al. 2011]), and cultivation of *ludus* (games becoming more like work [see Deterding 2015]). This blurring occurs in both instrumentalized play and appropriative play. In instrumentalized play, the game is just another system and a social context where one’s actions can be optimized.

This list of categories of transgressive play is not complete or final. The categories overlap, and there are probably areas that are not covered. The list aims to be a synthesis of discussions conducted in academia, and one example of how transgressive play can be divided. The list cannot be final, for play and transgressions as cultural categories are moving targets. Furthermore, both play and transgression are metaforms, and action without context can be play or not play, can be transgressive or norm abiding—we cannot determine that without context.

## Discussion

As the previous section shows, there is a growing literature on transgressive forms of play (e.g., Sutterby 2009). We have come a long way from Bateson’s rant questioning Huizinga’s account of play. Currently, the term most commonly used in academic literature is *dark play* (e.g., Mortensen, Linderoth, and Brown 2015). According to Richard Schechner, dark play “subverts order, dissolves frames and breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed” (1988, 12–13; see also Schechner 2006, 118–120). This type of play is similar to David Myers’s (2010) *bad play* or *anti-play*, although Myers holds that play is paradoxical by nature and always survives the paradox; thus, he believes that the play survives even if you play darkly with something. Myers concentrates on videogames in his book *Play Redux* but offers a different contextualization of play that seems to have wider relevance. The book offers a formalist analysis of play based on biological naturalism, looking for a shared form of (human) play. Indeed, for Myers, transgressive play is central to the understanding of play in general. Attempting to break rules is important to understand the limits of the setting and thus to facilitate free play. The game object and its limitations are just two more things to play with.

Transgressing in and of itself may have a connection to playfulness. *Negativism*, characterized as deliberate and provocative rule breaking, has been identified as a strategy to increase arousal (Apter 1991, 18–20). According to the structural-phenomenological approach to play, being in a paratelic mindset (essentially, being playful) makes raising arousal exciting, whereas being in a telic (goal-oriented) mindset when arousal increases leads to anxiety (or a reversal of the paratelic mindset). Thus, negativism easily goes hand-in-hand with exiting play. This kind of play “involves taking pleasure in the feelings [that] accompany acting in a way which contradicts internally or externally imposed directives and norms” (McDermott 1991, 98). Although it is possible for negativism to become pathological, it has been stressed in reversal theory that negativistic play is not only widespread and common but also a normal part of human experience (Kerr and Apter 1991). Michael Apter goes so far as to note that “the power of negative thinking” is fundamental to progress (2007, 114).

Furthermore, learning to break the rules is a key step in human development. According to psychologist Jean Piaget’s research of various groups of children playing the game of marbles, the last stage of a child’s development with regard to rules is the understanding that rules are not eternal and unchanging but socially negotiated and open for experimentation ([1932] 1983, 9–72). Indeed, for Piaget, play is improvisation that de-emphasizes reality (Gilmore [1966] 1971). Learning to understand that the rules are just one more thing that can be put in play is an important stage in a child’s development, according to Piaget.

The proper incorporation of “bad play” into the general theory of play casts in an odd light those approaches that want to see playing as learning. Furthermore, many definitions of play, such as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s formulation of play as free movement within a more rigid structure (2004, 304), become definitions of “good play.” Play that is transgressive, illegal, transformative, or harmful seldom fits within these definitions; thus, a possible reformulation would be “free movement within *and challenging* a more rigid structure.” No matter what rigid structure attempts to surround play, that structure can be played with as well. In an elaborate “footnote to *The Ambiguity of Play*,” Sutton-Smith argues that play has a “universal equilibrial-disequilibrial structure” (1999, 251). After reviewing conceptions of play in biology, neurology, anthropology, and psychology, he concludes that play has a tendency to redundancy, repetition, hierarchies, and rules (*equilibrium*) as well as to quirkiness, disorder, lability, and fantasy (*disequilibrium*).

Ever since Sutton-Smith (1997) introduced the concept of *adaptive variability*, many have argued that transgressive and transformative “bad play” is indeed the basis of creativity (e.g., Sutton-Smith 1999; Burghardt 2005; Henricks 2009; Myers 2010, 162). No

wonder that some parts of society attempt to limit and hinder such disequibrial play. Indeed, not only is play a threat to the conservative aspect of society, but games are also a technology for attempting to contain and control the power of play (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 24; Makedon 1984, 40–43; Turner 1986, 31).

### **Coda**

Transgressive play has been discussed under numerous terms outside traditions that approach play in relation to learning and development, emphasizing different aspects of norm-defying play. This chapter has gathered those discussions together. Play is polyphonic; it is not an amoral category. It is common for it to misbehave. Transgression is in its nature. Any conceptualization of play that disregards this will render the researcher half-blind.

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## 2 Asynchronous Transgressions: Suffering, Relief, and Invasions in Nintendo's Miiverse and StreetPass

Torill Elvira Mortensen and Victor Navarro-Remesal

How is suffering, including frustration, anxiety, and even pain, a relevant part of play and games? In this chapter, we discuss how play and games are deeply dependent on suffering and relief. We explore how players try to overcome communicative restrictions in quasi-social game spaces, defined by asynchronous interactions and parallel play, in order to maximize suffering and relief, both for themselves and for others. We demonstrate how players play with the suffering of others in a situation where they do not meet them directly or even have access to the consequences of their actions. To illustrate these quasi-social interactions, we focus on StreetPass and Miiverse, two Nintendo services with strong codes of conduct (CoC) to prevent transgressions.

Our discussion of suffering starts with two concepts, Roger Caillois's *ilinx* and Jesper Juul's *paradox of failure*, and progresses to the Buddhist idea of *duhkha*. Duhkha, "thirst" or "dissatisfaction," conceptualizes pain in a way that is both wide and specific, without making it neither ennobling nor sexualized, with a strong focus on the chain of causes and consequences that shape it.

We have found five types of transgressive interactions in this study: ludic transgressions; tone transgressions; CoC transgressions (against rules, norms, codes, and agreements); strawman transgressions; and transgressions of liminality. These five types of transgression highlight not only that suffering and relief are part of the ludic and social construction of games but also that players can rebalance these two experiences for others even when they do not play together.

At the heart of our theory of suffering and relief is the idea that play is about voluntary, purposeful suffering, frustration, and effort to which the player has chosen to submit and hence controls to a much larger extent than in other contexts.

### Control, Pain, and Play

Asynchronous services and games provide spaces for social interaction, and these interactions can directly modify the single-player experience. In certain single-player

spaces, invading players can leave a mark or create an imbalance in the game without meeting other players physically or even participating in the current play session. We discuss how doing so influences the experiences of tension and relief within the game. This situation presupposes that suffering is a central aspect of play and that play experiences rely on short-term relief. Playing does not create a continuous state of joy; rather, players endure longer stretches of frustration, struggle, and even physical pain, broken by glorious moments of getting it right, of sudden relief from struggle. In his taxonomy of games, Roger Caillois uses the term *ilinx*, the Greek word for “whirlpool,” to describe games that emphasize “the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” ([1958] 2001b, 23). The experience of *ilinx* games includes surrendering to a shock, to a loss of control that destroys reality. It relies on the sense of immediate danger or loss of control, but it is not a reckless exposure to danger. Caillois, using traveling fairs and funhouses as examples, stresses that vertigo necessitates, first, that players are carefully separated from reality through the creation of an aestheticized, fictional world “in desired contrast with the ordinary life” and, second, that there must be an assumed temporariness that guarantees the safety of the player, in which “the duration and intensity of the shock are controlled in advance” (1976, 135).

*Ilinx* gives *ludus*—contained, rule-bound play—a context and opposing state: “The desire to overcome an obstacle can only emerge to combat vertigo,” and *ludus* is “training in self-control” (1976, 31). In other words, play demands the risk of failure, which Jesper Juul describes in *The Art of Failure*:

I dislike failing in games, but I dislike *not* failing even more. ... In fact, we know that players prefer games in which they fail. This is the *paradox of failure* in games. It can be stated like this:

1. We generally avoid failure.
2. We experience failure when playing games.
3. We seek out games, although we will experience something that we normally avoid. (2013, 2)

Games do not purge us of the sense of failure and defeat; games produce this feeling in the first place. Rather than seeking a reward, we play because games are a safe place in which to fail (Juul 2013, 122). The special hallmarks of *ilinx* give failure, suffering, and pain a value in themselves. For Caillois, the feelings of panic these kinds of games evoke attract and fascinate—they simply are pleasurable: “[It] is not so much a question of triumphing over fear as of the voluptuous experience of fear” (1976, 169). Caillois writes about how the child likes to play with his own pain, “for example by probing a toothache with his tongue. He also likes to be frightened. He thus looks for a physical illness, limited and controlled, of which he is the cause, or sometimes he

seeks an anxiety that he, being the cause, can stop at will" (1976, 28). The experience of *ilinx* is about submitting to pain and failure, even to the sensation (or the illusion) of abandoning control.

This understanding of *ilinx* and failure is related to what we are looking for: play as suffering and relief, not as continuous ease and relaxation. Game designers Mike Selinker and Thomas Snyder agree: "People solve puzzles because they like pain, and they like being released from pain, and they like most of all that they find within themselves the power to release themselves from their own pain" (2013, 6). Pain and control shape play, and we want failure as a horizon or possible outcome.

Although we agree with Juul that fun is not the core element of play, we focus on the tension between control and failure rather than on the awareness of make-believe that is vital to Juul's conclusion: we consider suffering to be real, not pretense, and far more prominent in games than his paradox acknowledges. Play is a form of controlled exposure to suffering where overcoming this suffering is not necessary for games to be meaningful experiences. Every play experience, then, must have a threshold of suffering, a type and intensity the player not only tolerates but requires—and any change to the threshold would potentially result in transgression. How can we describe this suffering and look for this threshold? To do so, we need a conceptualization of suffering that integrates vertigo, fear, failure, and pain. This is why we turn to Buddhist thought as a theoretical and methodological tool.

## Dukkha

We approach Buddhism from a philosophical and secular perspective, taking into account its ethical elements but not delving into its esoteric, metaphysical, or soteriological elements. In this, we follow, among others, Byung-Chul Han's philosophy of Zen Buddhism, which is a "philosophizing about" and "with" Zen (2015, 11); Mark Siderits's (2007) investigation of Buddhism as a philosophy; and the agnostic Buddhism of Stephen Batchelor, for whom the dharma (the teachings of Buddha) is a method, "not something to believe in but something to do," which "might well have more in common with godless secularism than with the bastions of religion" (1997, 17).

In all Buddhist thought, *dukkha* is the first of the Four Noble Truths (and, together with impermanence and nonself, one of the three marks of existence): suffering is part of life, "both ubiquitous and banal, neither ennobling nor a mistake" (Carpenter 2012, 37–38). *Dukkha* includes all the states one feels when wanting something to be different from what it is: sadness, sorrow, physical pain, anxiety, distress, longing, dread, and boredom. Mark Siderits translates it as "dis-ease" and calls it the sense "of not being at home with ourselves" (2007, 20).

Duhkha need not be sought or enjoyed, but it should be acknowledged and understood. For Batchelor, what he describes as *the unmanageable* will always erupt “as sickness, aging, sorrow, pain, grief, despair.” We cannot control our lives; we get what we do not want and do not get what we want (1997, 23). The possibility of failure is always real, and it leads to anguish, which emerges from craving for life to be other than it is (25).

The third Noble Truth is *nirodha*, or “the cessation of pain”—that is, the realization that pain can be stopped. Nirodha does not mean eliminating desire because one “cannot even want to not want” (Han 2015, 41), but rather “detaching” from it, accepting the impermanence of reality and the virtual irreducibility of duhkha. For Batchelor, “an agnostic Buddhist looks to the dharma for metaphors of existential *confrontation* rather than metaphors of existential *consolation*” (1997, 18, italics in original). This is where the *liminoid* nature of play, as inhabiting a domain that has crossed outside the boundaries of mundane norms but is voluntary and optional, separated from work, changes our relationship with suffering (Turner 1982, 65). It can be argued that in play we expose ourselves to suffering not (only) to redeem it in power fantasies but (also) to face it and understand it. Games make us want the game state to be other than it is, so we thirst for a change of sensations; in other words, games demand that we experience duhkha—a distilled, simplified form of duhkha we can control significantly, but real duhkha nonetheless.

Similar to the fictional pact Umberto Eco describes (1998, 75), we make a *ludic pact* with play, wherein we establish the rules of the game (M. Lopes 2005). Here we agree to submit to the experience of the game, including forms of chaos and suffering such as chance, dissatisfaction, and guilt. Play needs purposeful suffering, the same way it needs uncertainty (Costikyan 2013) and failure, and offers not consolation but relief through both victory and confrontation. As we agree to observe the rules through the virtual pact, the rules seem to create two types of suffering: a “wanted” one that sets up the space for relief (a “normative nuisance”) and an “unwanted” one that can break the game either by unbalancing the challenge or changing the conditions of the confrontation with duhkha. This unwanted suffering, which the player cannot control, is particularly relevant in social spaces. To understand it, we turn now to the second Noble Truth of Buddhism: the causation or origin of suffering.

### The Social Dimension of Suffering

In addition to pain (both physical and psychological) and impermanence (the transience of things), Amber Carpenter distinguishes a third level of suffering in Buddhist



tradition: a metaphysical state in which “being is suffering” because we depend on others and other things and lack “freedom from determination” (2012, 43).

According to the second Noble Truth, *samudaya*, or “the origin of suffering” in Buddhism, everything is a process dependent on other processes, and we all are “equally agent and patient” (Carpenter 2012, 46). The world is a chain of causes and consequences where “nothing rests upon itself” (Han 2015, 58). This is why, for Byung-Chul Han, listening has a political dimension: “Nowadays, somehow, each one of us is left alone with his or her sufferings and fears. ... No link is established between my suffering and your suffering. The *sociability of suffering* is ignored” (2017, 120, italics in original, our translation).

In single play, or play in which only one person is involved, the causes of *duhkha* are easier to pinpoint because all the elements seem to fall under that one player’s control. It is with the inclusion of other players that the chain of causes and consequences within the play activity becomes harder to see. However, even single-player games can be affected by online discussions, fandom communities, streamings, walkthroughs, or Let’s Play videos (videos with added commentary documenting the playthrough of a game).

In social play, we engage other players to satisfy our own desires and get some relief from suffering. In this, our interactions do not need to be “sociable.” Society asks for cooperation and demands increased civility as humans are ever more interdependent, but games can invite sabotage, trickery, and opposition. Games and play offer an arena where the unacceptable is accepted but bound by rules, which serve to contain *duhkha* to gratuitous consequences. And in games, limits are designed to be at least overcome if not broken. Going beyond limits is what makes Victor Turner (1982) talk about play as taking place in liminal space, a state of mind that invites chaos and transgression (see also Linderoth and Mortensen 2015, 11). Digital multiplayer games may aspire to be havens of happy cooperation, but they are frequently charged with resentment, frustration, and malicious joy. The line between “normative nuisance,” permitted by design and agreed upon by the players, and transgressive enjoyment is fuzzy. The research of multiplayer games shows that *schadenfreude* may be as important for play as so-called wholesome fun.

The joy of making life hard for others is, however, also available in single play. Quasi-social game spaces demonstrate how players play with each other even while not in touch. Some examples include using “ghosts” (recordings of previous actions) or surrogate avatars in *Miiverse* games; leaving traces through in-game messages, as in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011); playing parallel in *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016); helping other players with lures or messing with them via pranks, as actor @LoganPaul

demonstrated in a YouTube video (later deleted from the original address), where he shouted the name of a rare Pokémon in the middle of a crowded space in Central Park, New York; or even being close physically while not sharing the same game space, as in the Nintendo 3DS service StreetPass.

Considering our core hypothesis that games and play need some form of *duhkha* and relief from (or control over) *duhkha*, it would follow that the balance of games can easily be skewed by player intervention. In asynchronous play, the other becomes invisible: we cannot address the source of our *duhkha* or see the consequences of our actions on others. In quasi-social spaces, the sociability of suffering is more hidden from us. This is why we focus here on the asynchronous play of Miiverse and StreetPass.

### **Asynchronous Play: Miiverse and StreetPass**

Asynchronous play is a type of game interaction that has a long history in video-games, from high-score boards in arcades and tracking other players through social media to Nintendo's StreetPass system (Nintendo 2017c), which invites new forms of social engagement in urban environments (Moore 2016). Asynchronous play of this kind is facilitated by the few meeting points where the game integrates the real world in its structure, allowing the player to become aware of the surrounding network of players (Harpold 2007; Conway 2010). Communication and interactions in asynchronous play are normally very limited, almost anecdotal and integrated as side notes and additional content. For example, in *Affordable Space Adventures* (KnapNok Games 2015), the player is stranded on an alien planet and has to fill in a form asking for help, which includes a Miiverse post. During the ending credits, the silhouettes of other players are shown scattered in an abandoned office—with the player's form being the last to join the pile.

In asynchronous play, the player discovers the traces of others in her play; she is connected to—and partly depends on—others. These games highlight how players can influence others while not even virtually meeting them. Unlike massively multiplayer online games, these games lack a strong notion of “shared space” and social interaction, and any “visit” can potentially end the self-sufficiency of playing. Indirect appearances of other players highlight the liminal nature of games when these other players are perceived as trespassing on a personal play session, whether the intention was to transgress on the single player's experiences or not. The form of these asynchronous moves can be carefully designed, but their content and with them their risk of being perceived as trespassing are ultimately up to the player.

Nintendo is of special interest in this context, in particular StreetPass and Miiverse, where players as a rule are not aware of the physical bodies of other players, either in the game or on the streets. StreetPass is an automated, wireless short-range connectivity system for the 3DS and 2DS systems established in 2011 and still active as of autumn 2017. One of the functionalities of StreetPass is that when two players are physically close, a copy of each player's avatar is sent automatically to the other player, without any need or possibility to interact, but carrying with them necessary gifts, optional challenges, or greetings. Miiverse, described by the company as an "online service," is the closest Nintendo has to a social network. It is organized around closely moderated communities related to specific games and their contents, and functionalities can be integrated in-game at the designers' discretion. The service opened in 2012 for WiiU, 3DS and 2DS, personal computer, and smartphones and, according to Nintendo, was planned to close in November 2017 "because, among other reasons, many users are shifting to social networking services" (Nintendo 2017b).

Nintendo is known for its clean, family-friendly aesthetics, and its efforts to avoid toxic behavior in its online, shared spaces have caused considerable barriers between players, preventing, in the case of StreetPass, "true networking of users," with "no venue for true communication between its players" (Briceño 2014, 1). For Vanessa Briceño, StreetPass creates "player connections while simultaneously barring them" (2014, 2). This may prevent some forms of transgressive engagement, but it can also eliminate other players as factors of relief and sociability.

### **Blind Interactions, Blind Transgressions**

At a distance, these services—especially Miiverse—are more similar to social networks than to multiplayer play. Asynchronous interaction in social media has been hypothesized to reify people and increase otherness or to decrease compassion (Turkle 2011, 223). However, StreetPass and Miiverse are more limited than social networks: in StreetPass, there is no way to filter "visits" or to respond to being hailed. Briceño calls the users' avatars in StreetPass's MiiPlaza "impersonal" and explains that although players need to connect with others to advance, there is no avenue for meaningful social interaction, so "3DS users come to view each other as a valuable commodity" (2014, 1). Unlike T. L. Taylor and Mikael Jakobsson's claim that "friends are the ultimate exploit" (2003, 88), in StreetPass the *friendly* aspect of using other people to progress in games is missing. Kyle Moore speaks of a hierarchy of encounters: "Those who engage in the public practice of portable gameplay are, through the process of software sorting, trained to view encounters and locations within a hierarchy of value" (2016, 2).

Asynchronous interactions, where we do not see other players or the impact of our actions, amount in practice to blind interactions.

Visitors in StreetPass and Miiverse can relieve players of their suffering (e.g., by sharing affordances or information), but they can also negatively alter the process of the game (e.g., by giving misleading clues or spoiling locked content of the game) or inject subversive and transgressive content in the game space (e.g., by manipulating the stamps of official Nintendo illustrations that players can collect in WiiU games). They do so, again, without meeting their interactees: their attempts to transgress are as blind as their interactions.

If transgression is about stepping over a boundary (Jenks 2003, 2), it is difficult to assess the potential these asynchronous modes of play have for transgression. In the absence of immediate interaction, direct replies, or shared spaces, the design of these services has problems when it comes to limiting transgression. Studying asynchronous play can reveal the differences between private and social pleasures because it is the player on the receiving end of a transgressive act who decides if the act is a normative nuisance or has gone too far. This is why a study of transgression in StreetPass and Miiverse needs to consider the actual potentially transgressive content and specifically the way that content has been discussed.

### **Gathering Material**

To gather information about this behavior and the potential for player-induced suffering in asynchronous play, we used StreetPass and Miiverse and played popular games that integrate them to study their general design and the construction of their parallel social possibilities. However, we also looked into paratexts created by players: forums, blog posts, and repositories, such as the humorous Twitter account @BadMiiversePost (@BadMiiversePost 2017), which specialized in reposting screen captures of all kinds of transgressive content in some of the Nintendo services we study.

Nintendo is famously protective of its online spaces, and its services feature heavily limited interactions and attempt to control the use of their public spaces, so its CoC are included here.

In cases where players have made remarks in discussion forums with a reasonable expectation of being ignored and where our study might make them vulnerable to retaliation or criticism, we have not directly quoted them or cited the reference. We follow this protocol in consideration of the concerns outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee (Markham and Buchanan 2012).

Following the framework we establish in this article, we classify instances of suffering according to their nature and interpretation: Is it *ludic suffering* that concerns the game and its challenges or *social suffering* related to social awareness and interactions? In the first case, the causes of dukkha are located in the game system; in the second, they come from other players. We also study whether the players consider this suffering a “wanted” (or tolerated) one, which we call a *normative nuisance*, or an “unwanted one,” a transgression that goes too far and thus can be seen as a *profound* transgression (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2016). Finally, we categorize our findings under five types of transgression, from more individual (player to player) to more general: ludic transgressions; tone transgressions; CoC transgressions; strawman transgressions; and transgressions of liminality.

### Ludic Transgressions

When we play, we accept the “normative nuisance” that creates a state of dukkha, or wanting things to be different from what they are. By accepting it, we, like the child in Caillois’s example, become the cause and cure of our pain. Play presupposes the promise of control over voluntarily accepted suffering. But many games on the 3DS and WiiU platforms integrate StreetPass and Miiverse and thereby open a window for others to enter our single-player play space and modify game elements. Games such as *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo 2012a), *Super Mario 3D Land* (Nintendo 2011b), and *Kid Icarus: Uprising* (Nintendo 2012b) often use the services to add extra content, providing players with new affordances (often in the form of “gifts” from other players) and extra challenges. Affordances such as power-ups, new weapons, and new characters can help players in their main quest, easing the challenge, whereas extra challenges, such as sharing one’s best times or “ghosts” in *Mario Kart 7* (Nintendo 2011a), can add motivation to play and new challenges.

One example of a ludic transgression is the optional boss-fights sent to others in *Bravely Default* (Silicon Studios 2012). In this game, players can place so-called Nemesis monsters in their StreetPass profiles, which will be automatically shared when physically passing another player. The sent monsters are usually the hardest to beat, denying regular players the feeling of victory and potentially creating frustration. Invading players can expand the game, while at the same time pushing the boundaries toward the unplayable by placing monsters that can be beaten only by proficient players. However, the optional nature of these challenges, unlike challenges in competitive online games, reduces their potential to produce suffering. The player remains in control and can opt to ignore them. They are normative nuisances that can become transgressive

if they are too frustrating, but their optional, anonymous nature bars them from being game breaking.

A similar example is the “Tingle bottle” mechanic in *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker HD* (Nintendo EAD 2013). Most of playtime in *Wind Waker* is spent sailing virtual seas, and in the WiiU version of the game players can send messages in bottles for others to find. The in-game description stresses the anonymity of the dynamic. Some players applaud the inclusion. Andrew Gatrell emphasizes that the Tingle bottles are “hilarious,” “ridiculous,” and “weird” but also helpful, as in “several posts providing hints pertaining to where you can find upgrades and other secrets” (2014). The world of *Wind Waker* is vast, and using the bottles to exchange information can alleviate the boredom of endless searching.

The *Wind Waker* community has used Tingle bottles to complete the Nintendo gallery sidequest. The objective of this sidequest is to take pictures of different characters, including enemies, to win figurines of them—and many of these characters can be photographed only at specific moments. Gatrell describes the original quest as “not for the faint of heart, [and] pointlessly more difficult than it should have been” (2014). In the WiiU version, players can share these photos through Tingle bottles, and the photos get saved in the player’s personal Nintendo gallery. Gatrell adds: “This small detail has miraculously sparked a large series of chainmail within the Zelda community. ... When given the chance, would one go the extra effort to help strangers with something seemingly pointless? For a large quantity of players, the answer is a definite yes.” Gatrell uses the language of suffering and relief—for him, the new version of the game “alleviated some of these difficulties” of the original game (2014).

These altruistic (or at least collaborative) intrusions represent a particular kind of transgression—going against the rules to help others. Nintendo gallery completionists are changing the system to turn what was a single-player quest in the original GameCube version into a collective one. Philosopher Joan-Carles Mèlich writes about an “ethics of compassion,” in which transgression means questioning the (normative-symbolic) order of a world and ethics are an answer against the rules (2010, 236).

There is, however, a caveat: because transgression depends on point of view, intrusions such as the Tingle bottles can be seen as unwanted nuisances. Unlike the Nemeses in *Bravely Default* mentioned earlier, the Nintendo gallery was originally designed as a single-player sidequest. From complaints in the forums, we see that the Tingle bottles are a source of annoyance, even if they can supposedly just be ignored. The existence of a simple, ready-at-hand solution can render the sidequest meaningless for some achievement-oriented players—and intended compassion becomes *duhkha*.

Increasing or alleviating ludic suffering is a kind of metaplay that relies on the rules of the game and the space for remote action. The potential for transgression depends on the goals and mechanics of the game system and on the pain (and control over it) that players perceive they have agreed to endure. The mere presence of the traces of others creates a social awareness of play and changes the play activity. The value of the outcome changes and is no longer gratuitous but becomes a social reality. Even if the ludic challenge remains unchanged, social awareness ups the ante—or breaks the game.

### Tone Transgressions

The intended audience for tone transgressions are still other players. Unlike in ludic transgressions, however, in tone transgressions the intrusion is not intended to change the balance of the game system but rather the whole feel of the ludo-fictional game-world. Silliness and random messages fill the games with something akin to spam, and the fourth wall is assaulted with direct addresses and in-jokes to break the unity of the ludo-fiction. The main transgressions are against the cozy and innocent Nintendo aesthetics and the players' suspension of disbelief because these intrusions become a constant reminder that the player is not the only or the first or even the 536th player of the game.

When gathering material, we found most of the tone transgressions at the Twitter account @BadMiiversePost, curated by journalism student Daniel Switzer. The posts in this account, normally unrelated to the game at hand, can be classified as weird opinions, self-deprecating messages, apparently fake posting “mistakes,” bad or weird art, “edgelording” (shocking views, often alluding to nihilistic or taboo topics in a juvenile style), and strange confessions. Most of them seem to be humorous and take the reader's complicity into account, so it is hard to distinguish tone transgression from CoC transgression. However, some cases show a clear intention of reaching other players, be it to increase their suffering or to reduce it.

For instance, some games, such as *Super Mario 3D World* (Nintendo 2013) and *Yoshi's Woolly World* (Good-feel 2015), integrate Miiverse via Miis (player representations or avatars) standing in the world map with fixed messages. A message attached to a *Super Mario 3D World* Mii featured in @BadMiiversePost reads, “Hitler did nothing wrong”—a statement that could be ironic “edgelording” or plain hate speech. In any case, it demonstrates how the game provides a means for the player to invade other players' spaces and thus affords a disruptive social agency. Hate speech requires a hated—someone who can be harmed by the message. It illustrates the sociability of suffering

mentioned by Han. The CoC for Miiverse clearly addresses exactly this social suffering and attempts to control it. This attempt at control, however, acknowledges the system's vulnerability to social transgressions and recognizes the power of the social, of the well-built and maintained community.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Tumblr user named Jellicent shared posts about sending uplifting Tingle bottle messages, such as "You are absolutely, positively AWESOME!!," "You look lovely today!!:D," and "Whoever is reading this, please know that you are loved, and you're perfect just the way you are! <3." In the Tumblr posts, Jellicent admits to sending these positive posts to "brighten someone's day, and I really like knowing that I can make someone smile by simply sending a message through a game I love!" Even without useful information, Tingle bottles can be of help. Another Tumblr user wrote about her experience as a receiver. She found a Tingle bottle with a reference to a popular Internet meme and explained that she "was going through this really tough part of the game" when she found it, and she "laughed for about 5 years." Even if the message did not change the challenge, it helped reduce her suffering.

Positive tone transgressions are only rarely a transgressive act—unlike hate speech—but they break the illusion of being in a different world. Both positive and negative tone transgressions acknowledge the importance of fiction and aesthetics in the play experience and try to influence them, thus changing the player's perception of their experience.

### Codes of Conduct Transgressions

In our analysis, we found that many of the Miiverse posts could be considered attempts to test the CoC and to create a shared state of playfulness in the community. Although some of these posts can be considered questionable and in poor taste, they all seem to try to be humorous. They break the clean aesthetic and ethics of Nintendo worlds, but they do not seem intent on provoking other players' suffering to the point of breaking their games. For instance, a Mii found in *Super Mario 3D World* said, "Sometimes, you just need to look into the distance and ask yourself: who was that man in mom's room?" In *Yoshi's Woolly World*, a player arranged the in-game collectable stamps to form a badly drawn but quite obvious penis. Nintendo spaces, as we have said, are heavily moderated, but this weird, ironic, and/or sexual content sometimes slips through.

The interactions in Miiverse are moderated by a service team with clearly defined CoC and list of manners (Nintendo 2017d) that cover infractions that can be penalized, such as violent or sexual content; invasion of privacy; political or religious



content; content referring to feces and vomit; and content that can “disrupt the community,” such as repeated or empty messages, message windows colored black, and meaningless scribbles. In addition, the Miiverse CoC clearly specify a few social rules, such as be nice to one another, do not post personal information—yours or others’, do not post spoilers, and respect other people’s work. It could be argued that CoC transgressions commit some of the aforementioned infractions while still respecting the service’s social rules.

There have been organized Miiverse transgressive movements where users participated in and supported transgression of the CoC. “Miiverse after Dark” (MAD) was started by a user called “The Bard,” who organized contests around specific themes and encouraged participants to push the limits of the system. It started in the Super Smash Bros. Series Community, but because most of its content was deleted by Nintendo administrators, it is quite hard to trace. However, the wiki *le-Miiverse-resource* has an entry for it, specifying that the drawings were “quite popular, usually getting lots of Yeahs (mainly 40+)” (the “yeah” is the Miiverse equivalent to the Facebook “like”). MAD posts usually featured Nintendo characters sexualized or performing barely concealed sexual acts, normally put together with a weird sense of humor. All of the MAD participants were in on the joke, and “going too far” was part of their practice. In a way, they framed Miiverse as a challenge, a liminal space or game in itself, not breaking other players’ experiences but playing together. A message from The Bard in the Wii Fit U Community that could be his last—he had to create new accounts many times because he kept getting suspended—said, “I’m [*sic*] think I’m gonna leave Miiverse. [I]t’s not really fun anymore. ... I’m glad I was able to make some people laugh and smile, but I’m done.” This post got 63 yeahs.

Perhaps a case like this is better understood as an example of the “paradox of transgression,” or the phenomenon that is experienced as the “profoundly transgressive negates the transgressive aesthetic, while the transgressive aesthetic mitigates the profound transgression” (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2016). This experience creates a paradox of transgression, wherein play that is boundary breaking and uncomfortable to the point where it provokes rejection becomes the desired state of gameplay and hence ceases to be transgressive. In other words, in these scenarios the lack of what is considered transgressive according to the CoC is the source of unwanted *duhkha*—the players suffer from the inability to be “edgy.”

Some users of Swapnote, a messaging system exclusive to the 3DS, made this paradox explicit when the service was canceled. On October 31, 2013, a notice at Nintendo.com announced what was supposedly abuse of Swapnote through the exchange of offensive material. In order to prevent this abuse, Nintendo discontinued the service.

The 3DS User Agreement is designed to keep the platform's services "a friendly and safe environment" and includes a detailed CoC (Nintendo 2015) that prohibits misrepresenting, impersonating, abusing, stalking, threatening, or harassing any person or company. Further, players are prohibited from doing anything illegal, discriminatory, defamatory, hateful, harassing, abusive, obscene, threatening, physically dangerous, or otherwise objectionable. Because the 3DS online functionalities are not fully monitored, however, Swapnote was deemed too risky, allowing minors to access "offensive material." This consideration is related to strawman transgression, discussed in the next section.

Some users did not agree with the need to cancel the service. At Destructoid.com, Dale North wrote, "I wish I could see some of these notes!" (2013). For some, this precise content was what they wanted. A commenter joked, "So now I can't send poorly drawn penises to my friends?" and others affirmed, "Friends don't let friends go through life without being perverts." These individuals apparently perceived themselves to be part of a general culture of transgression, not against each other but against the rules of the service, again the neutered style of Nintendo, and even against what society considers acceptable.

Swapnote was something the users wanted, and Nintendo was preventing them from getting it. Also at Destructoid.com, Steven Hansen complained: "Nintendo actively removing an established feature because it was misused by some and because children use the system is heavy-handed and irritating. ... Controversy-shy Nintendo's overbearing paternalism has left it behind in a connected world. This isn't new, but the regression is a pain" (2013). Offensive content is seen here as an inevitable part of a "connected world," where overprotection by the CoC (and their enforcement) is a cause of pain.

### **Strawman Transgressions**

When Nintendo closed Swapnote, it was anticipating not only uncontrolled transgressions but also something more complex: an uncontrolled framing of the 3DS experience. A large section of what can be construed as transgressive play is based on concern for the expectations of others, and these expectations include the whole universe of users of the service. In strawman transgression, the ones who speak up against the transgressions are not worried about being offended but rather about the experience of a potential and vulnerable other. The concern for minors seeing a drawing of a penis is a typical framing of a message as being over the limit. Strawman transgression thrives on moralism.

After the demise of Swapnote, the website EverybodyPlays.co.uk (2014) wrote a guide on how to block StreetPass, based on the fear that children could receive inappropriate messages or be bullied. The authors of the site admitted they had never “experienced anyone using StreetPass to send offensive messages or otherwise abuse the system” but had followed the recurring fear of children finding “inappropriate” content. Their worries extended beyond personal suffering to include others, and the language used to describe dangers, with words such as *unpleasant*, indicated fear of *duhkha*—in particular the suffering of others they felt compelled to protect and the personal fear of not being able to do so. This is the sociability of suffering in a complex, multilayered form.

It is difficult but not impossible to find players using StreetPass to send offensive messages. At the forums of the independent game community GBATemp, a user explained that they had received a Nazi slogan on StreetPass Mii Plaza, the space where the avatars of everyone the player has met through StreetPass are shown, and this user was concerned that children might see this slogan. Once more, in cases like this, the controversial messages are considered not only a personal annoyance but also a danger to others, especially minors. The same concern appeared again on the website StreetPassGreetings.com (which we consulted in 2016 and the first half of 2017 but has disappeared since then), where the administrator collected and curated different “random and whacky” Mii greetings and provided brief commentary on them. One of them said, “Please kill me,” to which the admin added: “Not exactly a positive greeting to give, especially when a lot of 3DS players are kids.” Other greetings along the same lines were clearly strawman transgressions given the context, such as “Suck it and see!” or “I just farted,” about which the admin reactions were equally negative. In strawman transgressions, the social context and the potential presence of others who might consider the content to be crossing the line are central.

### Transgressions of Liminality

The last type of transgression we have detected is the most complex—that of the liminal nature of the play activity. Ludic transgression is about the basic game challenge; tone transgression deals with the aesthetic and fictional; CoC transgression attacks the law that regulates the shared play space; and strawman transgression is about the sense of community that arises in that context. Transgression of liminality, however, focuses on breaking the liminal spaces that contain that very community, turning the presence of others into an unwanted nuisance and rendering the act of playing meaningless.

Most of all, suffering and transgression in games appear to be, as we have theorized, about finding positions, about pain and control, about *duhkha* and play with the desire

for change. This desire may be the desire for something to alleviate boredom or for a shock to the system. It is about the risk to the balance of play, the increased contrast to the sudden relief when everything comes together right. But this contrast can exist only in a space where both pain and control have meaning, where the confrontation with *duhkha* is real and agency has weight.

Turner affirms that in liminality “profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down,” and this abandonment of traditional order is compensated by “cosmological systems” of symbolic patterns and structures that the elders teach the novices. The novices are “confronted” by the elders, and these symbolic systems teach the novices “about the structure of the cosmos and their culture as a part and product of it” (1982, 59). Liminality “may also include subversive and ludic events,” according to Turner (59), but its inner cosmology is one of meaning.

When some users at the GameFAQs forum complain that they find ghosts in *Super Mario 3D World* distracting and say that they want to get rid of them, they are talking in terms of liminality—it is not that they find the game harder because of the ghosts or that the illusion is broken or that they worry about a potential offense for others. The players are being challenged by perfect strangers within their liminal space—other players who take on the role of elders or tricksters without consent. This assumption jolts the players out of their play space.

Another way of transgressing the explicit and implicit limits of StreetPass is to transgress the technological limitations of the game—for instance, by cheating or modding the game as a form of “counterplay” (Consalvo 2007). The practice of “homepassing,” in which players deceive the system to connect to a remote SpotPass (wireless hotspots where players can exchange data) from their homes, is one of these breaches. A thread in the GameFAQs forum about homepassing caused a discussion in which some participants defended the practice as a legitimate way of making up for the system’s social and geographical shortcomings, including the lack of other players in their area and how this delayed their progress. For these players, homepassing was a relief from a design flaw in the system that was preventing them from getting what they wanted, just as the Mii plaza games are not playable without StreetPasses. Others homepassed to make time for play between work. But some players considered these cheats not only impolite but transgressive enough to make the play experience fall apart. If one does not need to travel to a SpotPass to earn rewards, the whole system becomes meaningless.

Some messages in Miiverse can break a game not by attacking the challenge or the tone but by disparaging the very act of playing. The assertion that games waste time

is one of the biggest transgressions of playing because it eliminates all possibility of meaningfulness. A Tingle bottle message shared in Tumblr attempted to do precisely that—it featured a weird face saying, “This bottle was placed to waste your time.” It is a silly message, but wasting time is a probable cause of suffering—and one that can put the whole play activity in doubt. In a discussion at the GameFAQs forum, some users stated that the Tingle bottles were mainly trash or requests for help—and thus wastes of time. Looking for them, it follows, is a meaningless activity, yielding no confrontation, reward, or relief.

Fitting the act of playing into a structure of meaningful sense making is important to handle the pains of the game, and, for some players, intrusions such as the Tingle bottles can break this structure. The social annoyance related to being forced to coexist with other players in the same virtual space can be enough to consider asynchronous play an unwanted *duhkha*, as it was for the GameFAQs users who saw Tingle bottles as childish. Finding a position in play is harder when sharing the play space with others, and some players can decide to turn the online functionalities of *Miiverse* and *StreetPass* off, isolating themselves from the wider community.

## Conclusions

Play needs some form of pain or suffering and some degree of control of pain and suffering. Confrontation and relief are among of the main rewards of play. We consider *duhkha* a useful conceptual and methodological tool for the study of the combination of pain and relief due to its focus on goals (wanting something to be different), its naturalization of dissatisfaction and suffering, and, in particular, its social dimension. Players want to want something to change, and they commit to this dissatisfaction with the game state as part of the play activity. Games, then, become extremely vulnerable to the intervention of external agents, who skew the balance of this wanted *duhkha*.

Asynchronous, semisocial services such as *StreetPass* and *Miiverse* hide the direct consequences of our actions and are therefore ripe for anonymous and faceless transgressions. Other players become props, mere set dressing for aimless acts of anarchy. But these services are not alternative realities; they are real social spaces with real players. The hybrid nature of these games and services creates a clash between worlds. Playing alone while an unseen gallery of other players leaves more or less helpful notes and forces digressions is difficult to deal with. In this context, some players can see even the friendliest message as crossing a limit, and the language of play is a language expressing pain and suffering.

**Table 2.1**

Transgression in Asynchronous Parallel Play

<b>Transgression</b>	<b>Transgressor</b>	<b>Receiver</b>	<b>Object</b>	<b>Suffering</b>
<b>Ludic</b>	Player (agent)	Player (agent)	Challenge	Frustration, boredom
<b>Tone</b>	Player (agent)	Player (presence)	Fiction and aesthetics	Offense, breaking of illusion
<b>CoC</b>	Group (agents)	Law	Software owner authority	Submission to unwanted rule
<b>Strawman</b>	Player (agent)	Player (on behalf of others)	Context	Social offence
<b>Liminality</b>	Player (presence)	Player (agent)	Play space	Impermanence, meaninglessness

In our taxonomy of transgressions, we have considered who is the transgressor and who is the receiver of the transgression, what exactly is being transgressed, and what type of dukkha is at play. We summarize this taxonomy in table 2.1.

These five asynchronous transgressions highlight not only that suffering and relief are part of the ludic and social construction of games but also that players can rebalance suffering and relief for others even when they are not playing together. In our connected interdependence, everything we do can invade, trespass, assist, and transgress the play of others. Play presupposes not only pain and control but also the sociability of pain and control.

### 3 Forms and Practices of Transgressivity in Videogames: Aesthetics, Play, and Politics

Holger Pötzsch

When starting to ponder the issue of games and transgression for the present chapter, I remembered some incidents of gameplay from my childhood and adolescence that I now, in retrospect, would conceptualize as transgressive. On one occasion, I was playing a simple game in an arcade with my father while we were on a holiday trip in Italy. The game was called *Bazooka* (Project Support Engineering 1977),<sup>1</sup> and the aim was to shoot and destroy primitive representations of enemy vehicles traveling across the screen and at the same time to avoid hitting ambulances. After some initial attempts to play by the rules, I subsequently started deliberately to target civilians, resulting in early game-overs and low scores—much to the dismay of my father, who refused to spend additional coins in the arcade. I do not remember the exact reasons for my attempt to break the game, but I recall a diffuse feeling of dismay regarding the way the game was forcing me to do things—a feeling I today would refer to as dismay with generic design conventions, or, as Espen Aarseth (2007) would describe it, a struggle against the “implied player” of the game.

A second personal experience with transgression in games was a vivid sense of overstepping certain boundaries when I played *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (Sierra Entertainment 1987) as a teenager in 1987 or 1988. Crouching in front of my new Amiga computer and working a small German–English dictionary for all it was worth, I tried to find the right terms to make Larry succeed in his relentless efforts to lose his virginity in the fictitious City of Lost Wages, hoping to catch a short glimpse of him enjoying this “forbidden” fruit. I was aware of a certain controversy regarding the allegedly explicit content of the game—this content was, after all, the main trigger of my adolescent curiosity—and I had acquired a pirated copy of the game, which was rated Adult in Germany at that time. My hapless attempts to find suitable words and expressions that could guide Larry through bars, hotel lounges, or stores toward his (and my) ultimate goal had a feeling of venturing into forbidden territory—within the game as well as beyond it.

Revisiting the original game on YouTube almost 30 years later made me seriously wonder how such a harmless product could ever have triggered any controversy at all. Encountering a personal moment of transgression at the level of allegedly sexually explicit content, I marveled at the small figures composed of oversized pixels meeting up and ultimately engaging in some form of rhythmic activity veiled by huge signs reading “CENSORED.” But what strikes me as transgressive now, 30 years later, is the overtly sexist story, in which the female characters are framed as a sexual prize to be won through the strategic deployment of soft talk and cheap gifts. Apparently, transgression in games and play is not static but rather subject to constant change and adaptation.

Another element of the game that evaded my attention in the 1980s is its intrinsic sense of humor and the ironic and at times sarcastic stance toward the player-character it invites. After all, Larry is a forty-year-old virgin who lives in the basement of his parents’ house when he decides to go on his personal quest, which is doomed to failure. From this perspective, the sexist presentation of female characters might be more about Larry’s—and other men’s—perception of women and about what they take to be the “rules of the game” than about real women and their sexuality as such. Pointing in this direction is also Larry’s notorious and outright funny inadequacy in reaching his objective. From this vantage point, what the game transgressed were the received notions of femininity in a particular segment of the population.

These two examples demonstrate instances of transgression in games. What is transgressed stretches variably from generic rules, the law, taste, and morale up to conventionalized perceptions and idiosyncratic understandings and feelings. Moreover, what was perceived as transgressive in the 1980s had by 2016 apparently lost (much of) its challenging appeal. In this chapter, I try to sort out some of these contingencies regarding the concept of transgression in games and play and propose a viable categorization of transgression.

### Rethinking Transgression

Before I address the specific topic of transgression in videogames, a brief overview of how the concept in general has been used in other fields seems appropriate. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines transgression as an “action of passing beyond the bounds of legality, a violation of law, duty, or command, disobedience, trespass, sin” (“Transgression” 2017). This definition appears to be straightforward, leaving little room for debate or discussion. However, as is the case with all formal definitions, the trouble starts once one brings the ideal world of terminology up against the messy realities of everyday



practices and contexts. Then the question inevitably changes from “What is transgression?” to the more difficult—and far more interesting—problems “What exactly constitutes a boundary?” and “What does the act of (illicitly) crossing this boundary mean?” A notion of contingency thus enters the analysis that makes transgression as such “intangible” (Jenks 2003, 175) and moves the focus toward the manifold actual instantiations of something that appears transgressive to some people in specific contexts. In the present chapter, I propose the term *transgressivity* to conceptually grasp this phenomenologically inspired transition from formal definitions of transgression to accounts of perceptions and experiences in context.

Contingent forms and practices of transgressivity can be properly addressed only through piecemeal empirical approaches that take their own historical, cultural, political, economic, and epistemological situatedness into account and that also retain awareness of the reciprocal nature of instances of transgression—that is, once transgression has taken place, it rapidly loses its subversive and challenging aspects and often quickly turns into a new norm. As Anthony Julius adequately puts it, transgression is “ruler and revolutionary in one” (2002, 12)—it both breaks and affirms the boundaries ordering our lives.

Chris Jenks (2003) asserts that transgression is ultimately about boundary work—the challenge and negotiation of the contingent dividing line between sanity and insanity, order and chaos, inclusion and exclusion, us and them. According to Jenks, the reason we constantly reach out to the excessive, the unknown, the unpleasant, the disgusting, the dangerous is not only the perceived necessity of questioning received sociocultural or other norms and conventions but also the underlying urge for confirmation of the established, a reconstitution of normality in the face of imminent chaos. From Baudelaire’s poetry to the notion of the carnivalesque in Bakhtin via Dadaist art and Situationist performance, aesthetic expressions and practices have always played a crucial role in enabling and at the same time limiting and confining a potentially subversive and disruptive alterity. The conceptualization and visualization of an ultimate “beyond,” a place where “there be dragons,” as such become both implicitly constitutive *and* potentially subversive of spaces where such creatures do not dwell.

Kieran Cashell provides a contrast to this notion of the transgressive as a potentially stabilizing social regulative in discourses about experiences of art. He writes that “what contemporary transgressive art ... has actively sought to do is *invalidate the principles of institutional aesthetics* ..., namely, the so-called ‘disinterested’ mode of aesthetic contemplation” (2009, 4, emphasis in original). Cashell argues that the direct, visceral, and revolting nature of much contemporary transgressive art is meant to evoke the type of

embodied, affective, emotional, and nonconscious responses that have, not least since Kant, been frowned upon.

Feelings and emotional involvement have often been deprived of meaning and function in discourses about art and have been described as a minor and inferior form of reception allegedly without the capacity to elevate the perceiving subject. In reinstating the body and affect as crucial components of aesthetic experiences, contemporary transgressive works can, according to Cashell, undercut attempts to reduce culture to a sphere of rationality and, precisely due to their direct visceral nature, provoke ethical responses that “the revisers of disinterestedness attempt to neutralize” (2009, 11). Videogames, too, afford an embodied form of reception that actively involves players in the constant emergence of their aesthetic form. As such, they are peculiarly well suited to invite the visceral experiences that transgress a rationalized and disembodied contemplation of aesthetic objects.

Attempting to classify different forms of transgression, Julius (2002) introduces a threefold typology of how art can challenge boundaries and evoke sociopolitical or cultural responses. Art can (1) break the rules and norms of its own field; (2) violate taste and general sentiments by invoking and highlighting what is perceived as taboo; or (3) break the law. According to Julius, many works will be “multiply transgressive” (2002, 103) in that a transgression in one field might also imply transgressions in others. Approaching a processual notion of the term *transgression*, he argues that the boundaries questioned through transgressive expressions are in constant flux—due in part to artistic interventions and in part to other processes. As a result, what once was perceived as transgressive soon becomes a new norm.

### **Toward a Notion of Transgressivity**

Based on what has been established so far, the following description of key characteristics of transgressivity (as opposed to transgression as such) becomes possible: transgressivity emerges as (1) relative to momentarily prevailing conventions, values, and norms—including those of genre; (2) contingent upon historical, cultural, and sociopolitical context; (3) subjectively experienced by situated individuals; and (4) gradually negating its own conditions of emergence. What appears unbearable for some to watch or enact or deeply offends fundamental beliefs or values widely accepted at a given historical period might serve as an extra thrill or even appear boringly mundane to others at other times.

In the cultural sphere, transgressivity is negotiated in the encounter between artistic form, contingent context, and situated individuals who subjectively perceive both

this context and the artistic act or work. Whether a certain phenomenon is labeled as transgressive or not depends on (1) the particular boundaries to which the formal elements of a specific work or performance relate and (2) the situated subjects perceiving both these boundaries and the cultural expression at hand. Accordingly, transgressivity emerges as a relational concept that demands a contextual and processual understanding of the phenomenon in question. Transgressivity is that which is perceived as such by someone in some context.

The apparent fluidity and contingency of transgressing works and acts require a flexible, dynamic model that can account for the various contexts that make certain interventions appear transgressive to some audiences at some moments in some situations and that can pay due attention to the inherent historicity of transgressed limits and bounds. I suggest a shift in attention from transgression as such to contingent and contextual forms and practices of transgressivity to fathom a move from questions of formal definition to notions of temporary, precarious, and contextual identities.

In contrast to transgression, then, transgressivity implies a phenomenological approach that looks at individual experiences and practices within varying life worlds. As such, transgressivity enables a processual understanding of boundary-breaching-as-lived that remains open to constant changes and adaptations. Transgression is defined as the breaching or trespassing of an abstracted boundary. Transgressivity, in contrast, refers to how concrete breaches and boundaries change over time or across contexts, how they are experienced and negotiated by situated individuals, and how they reciprocally change their own conditions of emergence. As such, transgressivity is contingent and ultimately lies in the eye of the beholder.

In the cultural field, transgressivity refers to the way cultural expressions *invite* meanings with *perceived* disruptive effects in relation to ultimately *contingent* frames and to the actualization or subversion of these formal meaning potentials by active audiences in various contexts of reception. Transgressivity is thus invited through form but will always be dependent on situated practices of negotiation to actually unfold. In addition, a formally neutral work that does not deliberately invite transgressivity can be reappropriated for transgressive purposes by audiences who recontextualize it, break it, or read it against the grain. As such, there is no transgressive work or act per se that can be seen to inhere timeless and decontextualized boundary-breaching characteristics. There will instead always be all kinds of works that transgress, intentionally or not, certain limits and frames in specific contexts. In the next section, I propose a heuristic ordering of such actual instantiations of transgression in videogames and play.

## Frames, Forms, and Practices: Ordering Transgressivity in Videogames and Play

On the basis of what has been established so far, I propose the following typology to capture forms and practices of transgressivity in videogames and play: ludic, diegetic, critical, hegemonic, juridical, situational, and idiosyncratic (table 3.1). Each category signals transgressivity in relation to specific frames, and the type of frame transgressed determines which category can be productively applied. Games and play can and in fact often will be transgressive in numerous ways in the sense that transgressivity in one field will imply or facilitate transgressivity in others. Transgressivity in videogames is invited by specific mechanics and design features (aesthetic form) and is actualized through particular performances by situated players (practices of play and witnessing of play).

### Ludic Transgressivity

The first category, *ludic transgressivity*, refers to design features that (often unintentionally) enable a break with game rules and mechanics as well as to the practices of creating and exploiting such formal potentials. As such, ludic transgressivity relates to what Aarseth, drawing upon the work of literary scholar Wolfgang Iser (1974), terms the “implied player” of a game—“a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to ‘exercise its effects’” (2007, 132). Through design features or play practices or both, this type of transgressiveness challenges one or more of the three rule sets for gameplay identified by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman—operational, constitutive, and implicit rules (2004, 130)—and thus threatens to undermine the coherence and shared appreciation of play experiences.

Ludic transgressivity can also break a game by either altering its original design or playing against both formal and informal rules. Cheats, errors, bugs, mods, hacks, or imbalances often open up possibilities for play practices that transgress the boundaries set by game technology, rules, and mechanics. Aarseth provides the example of “warthog jumping”—a technique used in *Halo* (Bungie 2001) to reach supposedly inaccessible areas—to illustrate such practices of transgression. However, game features that make possible the breaking of informal rules constituted in and through player communities also fall within the category of ludic transgressivity. Examples of this type include the exploitation of game mechanics in the use of the much-derided tactic of “camping” in first-person shooter games’ multiplayer modes, wherein players can achieve an unfair advantage by hiding and sniping their opponents rather than engaging in open combat.

Table 3.1

Frames, Forms, and Practices of Transgressivity in Videogames and Play

Category of Transgressivity	Type of Frame	Game Form	Practice of Play
<b>Ludic</b>	Game technologies, rules, and mechanics	Design enabling both a breaking of rules and play that goes beyond the limits of mechanics	Play that appropriates or adapts in-game features to break rules or unhinge the limitations of mechanics or technologies
<b>Diegetic</b>	Laws, norms, and rules of gameworlds	Features enabling breaking of rules, norms, or laws of diegetic worlds	Play that breaks rules, norms, or laws of diegetic worlds
<b>Critical</b>	Extradiegetic political, cultural, and economic discourses and power relations	Features inviting counterhegemonic play and reception	Counterhegemonic play and reappropriation
<b>Hegemonic</b>	Extradiegetic political, cultural, and economic discourses and power relations	Features inviting transgression of received morals or tastes for hegemonic or economic purposes and fan services	Play that breaches received morals or tastes to reiterate or reinforce or capitalize on the status quo
<b>Juridical</b>	Systems of law	Mechanics and content deemed illegal for particular groups at particular times and places	Practices of play that are deemed illegal for particular groups at particular times and places
<b>Situational</b>	Conventions, norms, values, taste, or rules valid for particular settings	Mechanics and content breaching requirements of particular settings	Practices of play that breach requirements of particular settings
<b>Idiosyncratic</b>	Subjective attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and convictions	Features subjectively experienced as transgressive by specific individuals	Play that is subjectively experienced as transgressive by specific individuals

Other instances of ludic transgressivity are the use of testing halls in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), which provide illegitimate access to all available weapons and armors; the use of the Aimbot or No Recoil hacks in *Call of Duty: Black Ops 3* (Treyarch 2015); the attempt to kill your Sim in *The Sims 3* (Maxis 2009), detailed in chapter 6 in the present volume; or any other practice “of rebellion against the tyranny of the game” (Aarseth 2007, 133), such as boosting, hacking, modding, cheating, and more. At this point, it should be noted that practices of doping in eSports—when videogame players take certain drugs to enhance their performances in tournaments—and economically motivated uses of hacks or cheats do not fall under the category of ludic transgressivity. Even though these practices entail formal transgressions of ludic frames, they are ultimately motivated by extradiegetic economic or sociocultural gains. As such, they fall under the rubric of hegemonic transgressivity, introduced later in this chapter.

### Diegetic Transgressivity

*Diegetic transgressivity* is based on the idea of the fictional game universe as a diegesis that follows its own specific rules, laws, and conventions (Genette 1980). I refer here to game features that enable a breaking of the rules, laws, and conventions that are intrinsic to fictional gameworlds as well as to the practices of play that actively use and exploit such rule breaking. Examples of this category include using the design elements that enable the killing of nonhostile nonplayer characters in *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010); the possibility of stealing (and reselling) goods in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*; the option of mugging and murdering in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013); and the main character's ability to dismantle social norms in *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009), detailed in chapter 11 in the present volume. Diegetic transgressiveness can be sanctioned through diegetic jurisdiction—police chasing perpetrators in *Grand Theft Auto V*, hostility of formerly neutral or friendly communities in *Fallout: New Vegas*, the paying of fees or imprisonment in *Skyrim*, and the hostility of guards in *Assassin's Creed*.

One feature of diegetic transgressivity is that the in-game act has to be witnessed by the game system either through a diegetic character or otherwise by the triggering of negative consequences. The repercussions are directed solely at the diegetic perpetrator, who is sanctioned according to the laws and regulations of the respective gameworld, which remains entirely independent of existing real-world jurisdiction and responsibilities.

In multiplayer games, diegetic transgressivity also encompasses design features that enable players to rob, steal from, kill, or otherwise harm the characters or communities

of other players as well as to the play practices that use and exploit such features to achieve advantages for a player's character or community. Pirating in *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003) and stealing from or killing other players in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), detailed by Marcus Carter (2015b) and Tyler Nagata (2010), respectively, are viable examples of this category of transgressivity. Again, the legality of the acts is evaluated according to the diegetic laws and regulations of the game-world. As such, the acquisition of real-world wealth through the stealing of in-game goods would constitute an instance of hegemonic transgressivity, which I treat later.

### Critical and Hegemonic Transgressivity

The next two types, *critical transgressivity* and *hegemonic transgressivity*, are best treated in combination. Both cases refer to the attuned challenging and possible breaking of extradiegetic cultural, political, economic, or other norms, conventions, and rules in and through game form or practices of play or both. Critical transgressivity aims at questioning and possibly subverting prevailing discourses and power relations, and hegemonic transgressivity employs transgressions in a speculative or cushioned manner with the often implicit objective to stabilize, reinforce, or capitalize on dominant arrangements and structures.

Forms and practices of critical transgressivity have an oppositional political trajectory. Design features and play practices in this category are often driven by an awareness of injustice and oppression and aim at facilitating resistance and change. Therefore, this type directly speaks to Jacques Rancière's ideas about aesthetics as a field where the inclusion of new voices, perspectives, performances, and subject positions can question, challenge, and possibly subvert established "distributions of the sensible" (2004, 12)—temporary and ultimately contingent divisions between subjects with and without a voice, with and without a place in political discourse and practice. As such, critical cultural expressions facilitate subversive struggles in enforcing a recognition and inclusion of formerly confined identities, positions, and perspectives, thereby recalibrating established distributions of the sensible. Even though Rancière does not approach the issue of digital games, these aesthetic objects and the specific understandings and performances they invite, also matter for such processes.

Critical transgressivity aligns to a politically subversive understanding of aesthetics that enlists art and cultural production in politically progressive movements and initiatives. Games belonging to this category often exhibit features that invite challenges to and changes in established hegemonic orders. Critically transgressive games emerge in and through what Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford term "*dissonant*

*development*: the emergence of critical content in ... mainstream games” and “*tactical games* designed by activists to disseminate radical social critique” (2009, 191, italics in original).

An example of a formal game device used in dissonant development is loading-screen texts in the military shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), which with increasing urgency highlight the unintended consequences of violent player performances during the course of the game. In formally transgressing the dividing line between avatar and player, the game invites an unsettling of received subject positions (see also chapter 9 in the present volume). This unsettling enables a problematization of aspects of war and violence that are usually brushed over both in the military shooter genre and hegemonic war discourse (Pötzsch 2015). Short loading-screen messages such as “If you were a better person, you wouldn’t be here,” “Do you even remember why you came here?,” and “It’s time for you to wake up” invite a critical rethinking of military practices and mindsets and call attention to the necessary contradictions and omissions that often lead to blowbacks and other unintended consequences of war. In other words, the inclusion of formerly veiled subjectivities and issues directly in the audio-visual regime of military shooter games invites a wider redistribution of the sensible regarding the consequence, victims, and impacts of warfare as an approach to conflict resolution.

Examples of critically transgressive design in “tactical games” (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2009, 191) include the manner in which the independent title *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) invites a critical questioning of the received conventions of military entertainment products (see also chapter 10 in the present volume). By forcing attention to the fate of civilians, deliberately estranging the controls for in-game combat, and keeping necessary resources at a constant minimum, the game recalibrates key filters that are determinate of the presentation of war in generic game titles as well as in hegemonic war discourse (Pötzsch 2015). The design of the game *Phonestory*, developed by the developer collective Molleindustria (2011), invites critical perspectives on the exploitative and environmentally devastating underpinnings of apparently clean and inclusive digital technologies. In this way, the creators of the game playfully undercut business-inflected hegemonic discourses regarding the alleged benefits inherent in these tools and devices.

Besides game form, practices of gameplay can also challenge and undermine hegemonic distributions of the sensible in Rancière’s sense. For example, conventional and generic mainstream game mechanics can be creatively reappropriated for counterhegemonic purposes. Joseph DeLappe’s (2006–2011) project *Dead in Iraq* reapplies the chat function of the US Army recruitment game *America’s Army* (United States Army



2002) to distribute among his fellow players the names and military grades of actual US soldiers who were killed in Iraq. Through DeLappe's performative transgression of both player role and systemic affordances, a cultural device for military recruitment is transformed into a tool for the dissemination of an antiwar message that pushes previously excluded aspects of war into the discourse.

The formation of lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transsexual guilds in *World of Warcraft* is another example of critically transgressive play, detailed, for instance, by Jenny Sundén (2009). This transgression of gender-based conventions has the objective of increasing room in hegemonic gamer culture for players who "do not sit comfortably in [established] demographic categories" (Shaw 2014, 8). Critical transgressivity also occurs in instances of "counterhegemonic commemorative play," as detailed by Emil Hammar (2016, 17), and in various practices of queering games, described in chapter 7 in this volume.

In contrast to its critical counterpart, *hegemonic transgressivity* breaks certain rules and norms in a carefully attuned manner to achieve concrete economic or political gains *without* questioning established hegemonic frameworks and power relations. In the process, this form often stabilizes and reproduces a received status quo. Hegemonic transgressive acts or designs apparently threaten certain boundaries (speculative objectives) yet in reality always prevent truly controversial issues from emerging (cushioned effects). As such, the concept aligns to Jenks's (2003) understanding that transgression can function as an explicit or implicit mechanism of stabilization as well as an instrument of subversion and change. The function of hegemonic transgressivity is similar to that of Turner's liminal stage or Bakhtin's carnival in that this type of transgressivity opens a temporary and neatly delimited space for exclusion (Turner) and excess (Bakhtin), with the inherent possibility of ultimately reinforcing an established status quo.

In relation to digital games, one example of hegemonic transgressivity at the level of form is the alleged problematization of civilian deaths in the "No Russian" mission of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009). In this mission, the player participates in a massacre of civilians at an airport, as such transgressing several extradiegetic conventions and normative expectations. However, the game carefully frames the act as (1) ultimately necessary (the player-avatar believes he can avert an even greater atrocity by means of the massacre) and (2) planned and executed by what emerges as the main adversary of the diegetic universe. By these means, the mission does not first and foremost invite a problematization of the fate of civilians in war or the shooter genre but predominantly serves to charge the game narrative emotionally and ethically. The play sequence narrowly frames the enemy as monstrous in kind and provides

convenient moral disengagement cues (Hartmann and Vorderer 2010) that implicitly justify as righteous and necessary the subsequent killing sprees executed by players. As such, rather than highlighting the unintended costs of violence, the sequence reiterates received mantras of war as a necessity in the face of incomprehensibly evil, imminent threats. In addition, the mission can be skipped or aborted at any time without negative consequences for the player. This design feature reiterates the cushioned nature of this particular form of hegemonic transgressivity.

A second example of a hegemonic form of transgressivity—this time with an economic inflection—concerns the visual presentation and narrative framing of the character Quiet in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions 2015). Forced to walk around nearly naked because her body has been invaded by a parasite that makes her breathe through her skin and thus designed to appeal to a specific hegemonic masculinity's gaze, Quiet conveys an oversexualized image of female game characters. Given the controversy regarding her character and the significant attention it generated for the title, the design and marketing of Quiet can be seen as a successful fan service tying a specific target audience closer to a commercial product and increasing coverage in key media channels and forums.

In sum, it can be argued that the media attention created by such issues as the “No Russian” mission or the character of Quiet not only entails increased critical debate but also, and maybe primarily, provides additional free promotion for certain titles. The attuned creation of media panics, as such, emerges as a potential commercial instrument for developers and distributors. In its economically motivated inflection, hegemonic transgressivity plays on established media logics by apparently crossing certain red lines with the objective of creating increased attention to a specific product. (For an analysis of player responses to hegemonic transgressivity at the level of content, for instance, see chapter 9 in this volume.)

Besides game form, hegemonic transgressivity also fathoms particular quasi-transgressive practices of play that ultimately serve the stabilization of a preconceived hegemonic status quo or that aim at capitalizing on established power relations rather than at challenging and questioning them. Examples include the in-game harassing of female players and/or avatars in multiplayer games to confirm a received hyper-masculine identity of certain player communities; instances of doping in eSports that transgress established rules regulating the conduct of participants; the practice of economically motivated exploitative grief play; and the media-savvy Twitch practices of the female streamer Kaceytron detailed in chapter 5 in this volume.

### Juridical Transgressivity

The fifth type, *juridical transgressivity*, concerns design features or play practices that are deemed illegal at certain times and places. For example, there are games and play that break the law by treating certain key norms and values or particular social and cultural groups in a derogatory manner or that openly advocate unlawful acts. Specifically, there might be games whose content promotes terrorism, games with design or content that is abusive, or games that are deemed illegal by religious authorities in areas where religion is elevated to the status of law. Illicit practices of play include the stealing of in-game goods and valuables for real-world gains, which is increasingly being designated an unlawful act in legal codes, and in-game harassment of and abuse directed at players, the severity of which triggers juridical sanctions.

Forms and practices of juridical transgressivity include the breaking of end-user-license agreements and the acquisition and play of games that have been rated illegal (for certain groups) in particular countries. In Germany, for instance, titles such as *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops 3* are heavily censored in that key scenes are cut, violence is de-emphasized, and blood and gore are filtered out. Acquiring and playing uncensored versions of these games in Germany are acts of juridical transgressivity and can trigger economic and other sanctions against retailers and individual players. The same sanctions apply to the selling and playing of banned games such as *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015), which was blocked from the online store Steam in Germany and Austria.

Instances of doping in eSports constitutes an ambiguous case of juridical transgressivity because perpetrators are not held responsible in relation to national jurisdiction but in relation to the International e-Sports Federation's antidoping rules. These regulations were developed in concert with the World Anti-Doping Agency (which is responsible for nonelectronic sports) and detail procedures, sanctions, and due process to be followed by organizers and participants in eSports events (International e-Sports Federation 2014; Stockton 2015; Loria 2016). As such, doping in eSports constitutes a clear breach of established rule sets. However, it is not persecuted under national law and only leads to (temporary) exclusion from current or future eSports events or both.

Active harassment of players in multiplayer online games is another instance of juridical transgressivity. In general, long-term harassment of a player can be treated as a subcategory of cyberstalking—that is, “a repeated course of conduct that's aimed at a person and designed to cause emotional distress and fear of physical harm” (Danielle Citron, quoted in Silver Sweeny 2014). As such, in principle, the offense is open to both civil and criminal lawsuits in most places. However, as Marlis Silver Sweeny points

out, “the law is notoriously slow to adapt to technology” (2014), and the prospects of success of legal action in response to such harassment differ significantly across various states and nations.

### **Situational Transgressivity**

The observant reader will have noticed that this chapter employs the term *frame* in two different ways. First, it is used as a general metaphor and is somewhat synonymous with *boundary*. In this meaning, it refers to anything that borders and thereby orders a terrain or field and in this way predisposes certain practices and performances. In this sense, the formal properties of games can be seen to frame possible player engagement; a hegemonic discourse can be understood as framing possible articulations and performances of subjects; and individual experiences can be seen to frame practices of reception. Second, the use of the term *frame* here is also based on the specific meaning given to it in the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism, in particular the work of Erving Goffman (1967, 1974), which Gary Alan Fine (1983), for instance, has adapted to the analysis of games and play. This second, specific understanding is crucial for the category *situational transgressivity* discussed here.

According to Goffman (1967), social interaction is framed by shared understandings of the specific norms, rules, and conventions that are required for a given situation. Because different situations are contingent upon different frames, social life demands a constant and largely automatized adjusting of behaviors, manners, language, dress codes, and other aspects of that life. Knowledge of the requirements of various situations is acquired through socialization and remains largely implicit. In the context of social interactionism and frame theory, transgression means the breaching of situation-specific rules, conventions, and norms or the reframing of a given situation as something other than originally expected. As such, this form of transgressivity is contingent upon the shared social framework it operates within and is directed against. As seen earlier and in this case, the (repeated) transgression of certain frames inevitably implies the eventual normalization of the originally deviant behaviors or articulations, wherein gradual changes occur in what is intersubjectively accepted as suitable for a particular situation.

In the context of the present inquiry, *situational forms and practices of transgressivity* constitute a variable that is dependent on the specific frames that are accepted as valid for a particular situation. In contrast to *critical transgressivity*, this type is not directed at overarching hegemonic orders and power structures but is contingent upon the specific situational requirements at a microlevel of social interaction. In contrast to the idiosyncratic type of transgressivity introduced later, situated transgressivity is not limited to a

single individual's peculiar background but applies to groups of individuals combined in specific social settings through the adherence to intersubjectively accepted requirements of the situation's respective frames.

The contingency upon specific situational frames makes it difficult to find suitable illustrations of this type of transgressivity. Virtually any game and act of play can be treated as breaching the boundaries of a thinkable situation. The design of *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016) can be seen to afford rather uncontroversial acts of gameplay aimed at capturing virtual beings in real-world settings. However, across a variety of everyday situations both intended and unintended transgressions can frequently occur. For instance, playing *Pokémon Go* in a school class will in most cases constitute a breach of this particular setting's situational requirements and trigger certain sanctions by the teacher who maintains this frame. In a similar manner, Trine Skei Grande, leader of the Norwegian liberal party Venstre, playing *Pokémon Go* during a defense hearing in the Norwegian Parliament certainly signals a lack of her awareness of key premises of the social situation she is a part of. Interestingly, in both cases, the act of playing the game can be the result of mere thoughtlessness on the part of the player, or it can constitute a deliberate challenge of received situational frames and the authoritative structures maintaining these frames—in these two cases, the frames opposed are the established ways of leading school classes and the assumed significance of parliamentary hearings for defense-related policy decisions.

In certain situations, grief play can be seen as an accepted part of game sessions and part of the game experience expected by players, as Carter (2015b) details with reference to the design and play of *EVE Online*. In other situations, however, the intentional destruction of other players' in-game progress, possessions, and positions constitutes a breach of the implicit frame of the play situation. A viable example is the infamous funeral raid in *World of Warcraft* in which players of an opposing guild attacked a funeral procession and killed grieving player-characters (Nagata 2010). The interesting thing regarding this case is the tension between the game form affording this transgression of diegetic law and mores and the extradiegetic situational requirements of a funeral that demand entirely different actions and behavior.

### **Idiosyncratic Transgressivity**

The last category to be treated here, *idiosyncratic transgressivity*, concerns particular players' or play witnesses' subjective perception of certain design features and play practices as transgressive. This highly contingent type is the consequence of individual experiences, convictions, beliefs, or other contexts that charge apparently neutral game content and in-game performances with specific transgressive meaning. Examples include

in-game violent acts that trigger traumatic reactions in victims of actual violence, the reinforcement of negative self-ascriptions by means of perceived game content or play practices, and games that offend individual religious or other beliefs and sentiments. The highly contextual nature of forms and practices of idiosyncratic transgressivity makes it difficult to provide concrete illustrations because these forms and practices are necessarily dependent on the peculiarities of particular subjective backgrounds.

As a final issue, it has to be pointed out that many of the examples described in this chapter are multiply transgressive—that is, they breach multiple boundaries and either mutually reinforce or contradict one another. For instance, the way *Spec Ops: The Line* uses loading screens to address players as political subjects can be seen as both a ludic transgression of established conventions of the shooter genre and a critical transgression of hegemonic war culture. In a similar manner, illegal game content transgressing the boundaries of law can be a precondition for the critical transgression of political or religious hegemonies through game form and play. In the latter case, each successful critical transgression will necessarily participate in the incremental formation of a new norm. Or, in terms of Rancière's analysis (2004), every subversive redistribution of the sensible will by necessity be followed by a policing of an emergent new order.

As I have emphasized elsewhere in this chapter, transgression is also dependent on the context within which it is perceived. A game such as the first-person shooter *Special Forces 2: Tale of the Truthful Pledge* (Central Internet Bureau 2007) developed by Hezbollah in the aftermath of the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006 is a good example. When played and perceived in a Lebanese context, the game design plays into Hezbollah's hegemonic war discourse by enabling players to vicariously participate in what is framed as a heroic effort of resistance against external aggression. When played in generic Western contexts, however, the same game might invite counterperspectives that challenge hegemonic scopical regimes and medial frames of Middle Eastern politics. When played by Hezbollah veterans of the actual war, specific content might be perceived as transgressive due to idiosyncratic experiences or specific situational settings.

## Conclusion

The categories proposed in this chapter are well suited to account for and provide order to both my childhood frustrations with a primitive shooter in an Italian arcade as well as my adolescent adventures with Larry in the *City of Lost Wages*. Ludic, diegetic, critical, hegemonic, juridical, situational, and idiosyncratic forms and practices of transgressivity contribute to highlighting certain aspects of the inherently contextual

and contingent breaching of boundaries in these games and the play experiences they afford. At the same time, each category inevitably provides only a partial picture of what is going on and has to be properly situated and historicized to gain explanatory value. After all, Larry's transgressions have lost much of their offensive and challenging qualities over the past 30 years—but have gained others.

The typology proposed in this chapter is meant to facilitate an ordering of the highly complex and contingent terrain of games and transgressive aesthetics. In mapping various forms and practices of transgressivity onto such categories as (1) games' formal properties, (2) diegetic worlds, (3) extradiegetic discourses and power relations, (4) systems of law, (5) situational frames, and (6) subjective backgrounds, I have tried to make the ultimately "intangible" object of transgression describable and to open it up to piecemeal critical analysis. At the same time, however, I have maintained a certain humility in my outlook with reference to the inherent situatedness and inevitable limitations of the proposed framework. In the end, contingency stretches further than the issue of transgression in games and play alone.

#### Note

1. My gratitude to Kristine Jørgensen for identifying the proper title of this game on the basis of my faint memories.





## 4 The Bracketing of Moral Norms in Videogames

John R. Sageng

The appeal of videogames is often due to the fact that they invite their players to transgress norms that are held to be valid outside the game. A game can go beyond the bounds of different types of norms, such as those pertaining to etiquette, taste, storytelling, or social authority (cf. Jenks 2003, 2–3), but in this chapter I investigate how they allow or disallow their players to transgress limits of what is *morally right* (see also chapters 8 and 13 in this volume).

Videogames provide moral contexts for the player's actions that are different from those that hold outside the game. The actions performed are morally evaluated on the basis of how the player is permitted to *bracket* ethical norms in the course of gameplay. This bracketing is derived from complex relationships between the gameplay actions and the ethical norms in question.

I aim to work out a model for in-game action that offers a way to disentangle these relationships and lets us analyze the manner in which they give rise to a *moral world* for the videogame.

In the first part of this chapter, I frame the questions raised by the phenomenon of bracketing and comment on the notions that I put to use in order to answer them. I then discuss the moral framework needed to evaluate in-game actions and argue that we should adopt a deontological approach based on respect for the autonomy of persons. Next, I outline a model for the anatomy of the game action and argue that it gives rise to three sources of bracketing. Finally, I analyze how these three sources of bracketing give shape to a moral world that is inherently favorable to many forms of ethical transgression.

### The Moral World of Gameplay

AAA videogames such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) offer typical action settings for videogame players.

In *Call of Duty*, the player is supposed to adopt the role of a soldier taking part in military missions, and in *Grand Theft Auto V* the player is supposed to be a gang member pursuing a number of criminal tasks in an open and interactive gameworld. Using a “virtual” environment of dynamically depicted objects, settings, and events, such games allow the player to shoot, walk, steal, climb, drive, and perform many other kinds of actions within the game world.

We can say that such games are designed to let the users perform acts by generating depictions of these very acts in response to user input through the controls. These actions typically belong to the common activity of *play*, which is often conceived as a type of activity performed voluntarily for its own sake because it is inherently pleasurable (see chapter 1 for a discussion of characteristics commonly associated with play).

In such videogames, these actions specifically belong to the activities facilitated by the *gameplay*, which are the tasks and challenges implemented by *game mechanics* to create an experience for the user.

The fact that a user is performing actions as part of the *gameplay* of a game does not necessarily mean that the user is *playing* in the general sense of the word because it is possible for the user to perform actions facilitated by the game mechanics for reasons other than play—for example, if she uses the program just to make money or if she merely wants to investigate how the system works. Nevertheless, most commercial games have game mechanisms designed to facilitate “play” in the general sense of the word, so their gameplay actions are usually also play actions. Play in the general sense of the word, then, provides the moral context for typical videogames, and for this reason in this chapter I am concerned with gameplay actions insofar as they are play actions.

The reports that identify such gameplay actions have the following form:

(1) S performs a  $\phi$ -ing in game G.

Here, the variable  $\phi$ -ing denotes an action noun, such as *kill*ing, *ly*ing, *sho*oting, and the like. Because the user voluntarily chooses to perform these actions, she is also a candidate to be held morally responsible for them. In a multiplayer game, she is directly responsible for actions that affect other players. In single-player games, she is responsible for actions that affect herself as well as for actions that directly or indirectly affect ethical concerns that apply to nonparticipants outside the game.

It is not, however, easy to say *how* these actions are to be morally evaluated. An in-game act described as “shooting,” for example, is not the same as the corresponding act outside the game, and it seems that it should be evaluated differently. Yet in our

evaluations we often seem to have little else to go on than the moral considerations we apply to acts outside the game.

We can say that a moral evaluation of an action in general is governed by considerations about moral *norms* that apply to action types. Thus, in the game we seem to have two sets of norms, the *intraludic* norms  $N_i$ , which apply to context of gameplay, and the *extraludic* norms  $N_e$ , which are the ordinary norms that hold outside the game.

As is the case for actions outside the game world, our assessment of the moral status of in-game actions is provisionally aided by our *moral intuitions*. The moral intuitions about in-game actions by players and bystanders indicate that the in-game actions have a spectrum of relationships to the extraludic norms. To bake bread in *Cooking Mama* (Cooking Mama Ltd. 2006) or to build a house in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) is just as permissible as the corresponding action outside the game and is seemingly permissible for the same reasons. Hardly anyone would regard in-game acts of theft in the game *Thief* (Eidos Montreal 2014) as impermissible, but the corresponding act outside the game is certainly not permitted. Players engaging in a competitive *deathmatch* in *Unreal Tournament 3* (Epic Games 2007) are clearly permitted to deceive, obstruct the aims of others, and otherwise act in self-interested ways that would not be permitted in situations outside this game.

Intuitions diverge when it comes to murdering in games. A great many people will likely hold that in-game acts of sexism, torture, pedophilia, and sexual molestation are not permissible inside the game precisely because such acts are not permissible outside the game. Let me mention some standard contestable cases. In the “No Russian” scene of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, the player is required to shoot innocent civilians in an airport. In *Grand Theft Auto V*, the player is required to torture a character in order to proceed with a mission. In the game *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015), the player has to execute wounded civilians to get health points. Finally, a particularly notorious example is the game *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft 2006), in which the player is supposed to stalk and rape women.

We can call the phenomenon in which some gameplay actions that are not permitted by extraludic norms become permitted by intraludic norms as a *bracketing* of the extraludic moral norms (Goffman 1974; Bredemeier and Shields 1986). This bracketing of extraludic norms means that there are two forms of moral transgression for in-game actions, depending on the actions’ relationship to the extraludic norms. First, we have acts that constitute *permissible transgressions*. These acts in some sense offend extraludic norms that govern actions reported by the same action words but that nevertheless are permitted by the intraludic norms. Second, we have *impermissible transgressions*, which

are those acts that are not permitted by the intraludic norms because they offend the extraludic norms. (See Holger Pötzsch's differentiation of diegetic and juridical transgressivity in chapter 3 of this volume.)

The set of intraludic moral norms in part define the *moral world* of the videogame, as I use this notion here. The moral world of the videogame must not be confused with the *fictional moral code* in the fictional world of the videogame. To conflate these two notions would be to make a mistake similar to the conflation of René Magritte's painted pipe with the fictional pipe it depicts (Magritte 1928–1929). A fictional moral code governs what is fictionally represented in the game world, but the real moral code governs what you are actually doing with these fictional representations. The fictional moral code of videogames, as it is implemented in choices or motivational background in games such as *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000), *Civilization IV* (Firaxis Games 2016), and *Bioshock* (2K Games 2007), is a crucial element for understanding videogames as designed works but not as moral systems subject to *real* and *literal* moral norms (Sicart 2009). As with other moral norms, the moral code in games cannot be decided by anyone. The fictional moral code of *RapeLay* may well hold that it is permissible to rape women, but this fact does not mean that the player is morally permitted to engage in in-game rape. In the latter case, we would say that it is not permitted to perform acts of rape in the moral world of *RapeLay*, even though it is fictionally permitted inside the game.

A further aspect of the moral world of the videogame is that, by my stipulation here, it holds independently of how we morally evaluate the consequences of the actions *outside* the game. The reason for this stipulation is that I am interested in how real moral norms are constituted inside the “magic circle” (Huizinga [1955] 1971) of the videogame, in the same manner that nonmoral rules and conventions may have a local normative force without any regard to what is happening after the game has ended.

The moral world of the game is thus determined by the intraludic norms  $N_i$  and the extraludic norms  $N_e$  that still apply directly to gameplay at the time of playing. A picture may help clarify this understanding: the moral world of the videogame is determined by the norms that apply to the in-game actions when the player is playing the game as the last person on Earth.

### The Morality of In-Game Actions

What makes it the case that an action is morally right or wrong within a game? According to a traditional classification in moral theory, there are three types of theories about

what forms the basis for the moral “ought”: *consequentialism*, *virtue theory*, and *deontology*. All three have been applied to actions in videogames (McCormick 2001; Reynolds 2002). Consequentialism holds that the moral ought is derived from the value of the consequences that an action has; virtue theory holds that the moral ought is determined by what a person with a virtuous character would do under the relevant circumstances; and deontological theories hold that the moral ought derives from the attitude of adhering to moral norms.

I do not argue here for the exclusion of one or two of these approaches in favor of a particular approach to videogames. I think that all of these perspectives have their respective advantages in elucidating ethical aspects of videogames, but I do argue that the deontological perspective is of central importance in understanding the intraludic moral norms. The moral world of the videogame is by and large a *deontological world* constituted by the way in which the intraludic norms are *derived from* the extraludic norms.

The consequentialist perspective of counting harms and benefits of the consequences of the gameplay actions is most useful when considering the interface between the gameplay activity and the surrounding world, but it contributes little to our understanding of the game’s moral world. The reason for this is that what count as good or bad consequences are often *transformed* by the gameplay context. For example, a game may put a positive value on consequences that otherwise would count as harm outside the game. This means that we need a framework that *explains* these transformations to yield moral evaluations of in-game actions. For example, in a role-playing game, it is certainly often the point of the game that in-game actions have good or bad consequences for the players, but such consequences do not have an *independent value* that makes them suitable to determine whether such actions are right or wrong. Rather, such in-game consequences derive their value from the rules imposed by the game itself.

It is often held that virtue theory is the right approach to understand in-game normativity and its relationship to normativity outside the game (McCormick 2001). Thus, a virtue theorist could say that some cases of impermissible transgressive content, such as excessive violence, are not permissible within the game because these actions are in conflict with what the *character of a virtuous* person would do within the game. The virtue ethical approach might also, to some extent, be extended to the in-game norms as a special kind of “player virtue” (Sicart 2009).

There is no doubt that virtues relating to moral psychology inform our ethical choices, but this perspective is not likely to shed light on the phenomenon of bracketing. The reason for this is that what counts as virtuous outside or inside the game is

entirely dependent on what we ought to count as valid norms rather than the other way around. If it indeed is correct to bracket norms concerning violence within the game, then there is also little reason to hold that a virtuous person ought not perform such actions. More than likely, any confusion we are faced with about this issue is precisely due to the fact that we are unsure how to extend the norms that hold outside the game to those that hold inside it. From this perspective, virtue theory makes a virtue out of theoretical ignorance.

As an alternative to both the consequentialist approach and the virtue theoretical approach, I now outline the deontological premise, which I propose can explain the phenomenon of bracketing in a manner that connects it directly with the phenomenon of gameplay. The guiding conception I pursue here can be stated as follows: what makes an action moral is the fact that a person acts for the *right kinds of reasons*. The moral person acts out of respect for what is *right*, and what is right is ultimately determined by a respect for *autonomous individuals* as ends in themselves. This guiding conception corresponds to a major point in Immanuel Kant's version of deontology. As Kant writes, a person's good will "sparkle[s] like a jewel all by itself" as something that has "its full worth in itself" ([1785] 1998, 8).

This conception can be elaborated as a theory about the *origin of the moral ought*. We share with animals an active relationship to the world in the sense that we have desires and inclinations to act in certain ways in order to achieve certain things for ourselves. Even though such inclinations may be moderated by fear and prudential reasoning, they do not count as moral because they make no right-based distinction between what individuals are inclined to do and what they ought to do.

Now, a rational person has the capacity to *represent what ought to be done* and can as an act of autonomy self-author an "ought" that can counter the natural inclinations. According to Kant, the actual content of this "ought" is due to a generalization of a rule for action that is instantiated by the action in question, pointing to an ideal position in which the autonomy of every individual is taken into consideration. The fact that an individual can self-author an ought in this fashion constitutes the basis for moral interaction because any person who wants to make a claim against another must recognize the autonomy of that other as a being that must be treated as an end-in-itself. Thus, we can say that the morality of the action is due to the fact that the agent acts for reasons that exhibit *respect for* or *acknowledgment of* the autonomy of a rational individual. Of particular importance is the assessment of self-worth that comes from being acknowledged as having *human dignity*.

The Kantian version is widely regarded as being overly rationalistic because it attaches too much significance to the act of *representing* a moral ought. It is furthermore

infamously inflexible in how norms that follow from the generalization are supposed to hold without exception.

I propose that we can hold on to a moderate version of this compelling autonomy-based deontological conception. This moderate version more plausibly holds that the power to endow others with obligations simply comes from those others being sufficiently autonomous individuals. Consider, for example, the feeling of moral obligation that arises when we observe someone who is kicking a robotic dog that is trying to get up from the ground. Although the feeling in this case does not correspond to a rational obligation, because upon reflection we understand that the dog is not actually an autonomous being, it illustrates how the *correct detection of autonomy* is enough for us to be morally obliged. The experience of commitment one encounters when meeting autonomous individuals can be regarded as a rational cognition of moral obligation, much in the same way that understanding a language or encountering objects in perception present us with epistemic obligations for how we take things to be. Furthermore, we can loosen up the rigid premise that respect for the moral “ought” depends on exceptionless generalizations and instead regard the moral reason as a vector resulting from different considerations that apply to respect for autonomy as it falls out of particular cases of moral reasoning.

To see how this vectorization of moral reasons is effected and in particular to see the kind of forces effected by the gameplay situation, it is now necessary to connect the role of autonomy in play with the role of autonomy in moral reasoning.

Autonomy in a wider sense clearly has very primitive roots. Even the most primitive single-celled organisms exhibit autonomy because they can possess self-authorship over their own movements. Rather than being passively moved in certain directions, they can move in a direction that serves their feeding interests. The manifestation of autonomy gets more complex the more complex the organism is. Autonomy for a human is manifested in a variety of psychological phenomena, many of which take on strong nonmoral normative roles. An individual can exhibit a capacity for self-authorship in being *courageous* when overcoming fear, in being *creative* when transcending established ideas and aesthetic standards, by having *intellectual integrity* in overcoming nonepistemic inclinations, by possessing *power* when authoring the goals and plans for others, and in demonstrating *existential authenticity* by taking responsibility for his or her own reason for being.

Play is a poignant expression of autonomy because it involves being the author of one’s own valorizations (Caillois [1958] 2001b). The *moral value* of play from this perspective stems from the fact that the pleasure in playing consists in the pleasure one has of being the author of the preferences that guide one’s own actions in play. Play, as

found in videogame play and elsewhere, is in primary cases based on actions that are motivated by a delight in being an autonomous individual.

This observation allows us to forge a connection between the intraludic and extraludic norms found in the shared origin of morality and play. The extraludic norms are based on generalizations for conduct that arise from acknowledgment or respect for a *person*, whereas the game is based on the acknowledgment of a person as a *player*. A *player* is merely a *person* placed in the role of having certain permissions to suspend moral generalizations for ordinary conduct in the context of play.

Before we can apply this perspective to the bracketing of extraludic norms, we must know in detail what the player is doing when she is acting in a videogame as well as the reasons she typically has for playing.

### Acting with Game Mechanics

Part of the problem of evaluating the moral status of in-game acts is that they take on an intermediate status between being merely fictional and being real (cf. Aarseth 2005; Juul 2005). The most common way to account for this special way of being a  $\phi$ -ing is to grant that we are talking about a kind of  $\phi$ -ing but to qualify it with the modification that it is a “fictional,” “simulated,” or “virtual”  $\phi$ -ing.

Such characterizations are the first steps toward establishing the moral context for the actions because knowing that these actions are fictional, virtual, or simulated may tell us where to look when identifying typical motivations for doing them and how to investigate what norms may apply.

However, all of these characterizations have immediate shortcomings in understanding what kind of norms apply to actions performed within gameplay. First, shooting someone in a game is not merely a fictional shooting. Although it is true that the player is not actually shooting someone, something real is happening, and something real is actually achieved. Furthermore, the player applies real rather than fictional skills when doing so. So the in-game action is more than a fictional and nonexistent event, but it nevertheless is not the same as a real action of the kind described.

It is very common to address this half-position between real and fictional with talk about “virtual” objects. This notion is not necessarily a good fit when explaining the events in games because games are often much more concerned with effective gameplay than with faithfully replicating other objects. Most importantly, however, the notion of virtuality is of relatively little help in enlightening us about what norms apply. In the most straightforward understanding of the virtual, a virtual  $x$  is something that has the *same effects* as an  $x$ . This would normally give us a relatively straightforward answer



because the norms are likely to be the same for an  $x$  and for a virtual  $x$ . The same norms of etiquette that apply to a virtual meeting are the same as those that apply to a real meeting, and the same copyright laws apply to downloading files to a virtual hard disk as to downloading files to a real hard disk. However, a virtual rape or a virtual murder is not a real rape or a real murder. Although the latter may or may not be subject to moral norms, applying the modifier *virtual* tells us nothing about whether a virtual rape or a virtual murder offends the norms outside the game. The problem is that “virtual” here is used as an ontological category, a kind of existence, and we will not get any further without knowing what this virtual mode of existence amounts to.

What we need are accounts that in less-obscure terms tell us what is actually happening when the player performs an in-game  $\phi$ -ing. We find a solution to this problem in Jesper Juul’s influential model of videogames. According to Juul, playing a videogame is “to play by real rules while imagining a fictional world” (2005, 2). Although Juul’s distinction between the real and the fictional is quite basic, it contains the key elements needed to give an exact account of the moral context for in-game actions. To understand the nature of gameplay actions, we need to analyze the interrelation between a physical system with *real properties* that exist for the purpose of play in the duration of the game and a *fictional world* created with attitudes of imagination, pretense, and make-believe.

Compare the game system to the world outside the game. We categorize and perceive the ordinary world as elements in *goal-attainment structures*. These attainment structures arise from the fact that we are biologically adapted to perceive what is relevant to our biological capacities to identify objects, events, spatial relations, and causal connections, on the one hand, and what is relevant to our social, cultural, and idiosyncratic preferences, on the other (cf. Gibson 1986). The categorization of actions into different kinds, denoted by action verbs, serves to identify their contributions to the way we traverse these attainment structures.

Play creates islands in the sea of ordinary motivational structures. We rarely get to determine our own preferences in serious settings: we are just equipped with desires to satisfy hunger, to establish friendships, to drink coffee, and so on. We do get to determine our preferences in some cases—for instance, when some preferences are imposed on others, such as when we try to get ourselves to appreciate classical music or to improve our attitudes toward the reliability of plumbers. Play, in comparison, is based primarily on an instant capacity to adopt preferences for their own sake, such as when a child freely decides to find it valuable to run up and down the empty queue line barriers at the airport. In analogue games, this freedom is found primarily in the design of an arbitrary value system based on conditions for winning, point systems, and so on.

We can say that gameplay creates goal-attainment structures based on *intentional and arbitrary valorization* (Sageng 2015).

Fiction can be a frequent component in play in the following way. Human action requires rational deliberation, which in turn depends on the capacity to contemplate *hypothetical scenarios* (Nichols and Stich 2000). This corresponds to a capacity to double up the world in thought, in a manner that detaches it from cognitive attitudes that are *alethic*, or “truth directed.” A natural theoretical understanding of fiction is that it arises from the capacity to adopt attitudes that normally aid natural action, such as beliefs, but that are then given a *nonalethic form*. In other words, the attitudes that make fiction possible are those of imagination, pretense, and make-believe (cf. Walton 1993). Fiction is still not a play activity in the traditional sense because make-believe and imagination can take on any number of serious purposes, as in police reconstructions and other heuristic thinking about possible scenarios. Nevertheless, make-believe constitutes one way in which a person can voluntarily endorse goal-attainment structures and is therefore naturally married to much play activity.

With these observations in mind, let me return to the actions that are reported as performed by the player in the game. Something crucial happens when the player acts by producing a representation of an action, designed to aid make-believe, which is part of an actual goal-attainment structure (Sageng 2012). If, for example, the player produces a representation of himself shooting another player, and then if he hits that target, something is achieved, and he is subject to evaluative assessments that pertain to the action, such as whether he did it skillfully or clumsily or with sufficient care for coordination with fellow players.

Such characteristics do not apply to what is fictionally represented, but rather to the representations themselves, which in this case are the graphical shapes on the screen, which have the semantic function of depicting the fictional scenario in question. What we are witnessing in this situation is that the existence of successful goal attainment with regard to the report “S performed a  $\phi$ -ing,” effects a *reference shift* from the fictionally represented  $\phi$ -ing to an action that is performed with the actual representations.

I propose that this is the heart of the gameplay action: it is an action that is performed on graphical shapes in the game environment. These graphical shapes are not just lifeless patches of color; they are endowed with *agential properties* that guide action in virtue of their roles in gameplay, much in the same way that the properties imposed by the rules of chess turn uninteresting pieces of wood into components of position, threat, opportunity, and tactical alternative that emerge during gameplay.

We may call such actions “C-actions,” and I pursue the idea that they constitute the core of the videogame’s moral world. This analysis gives rise to the following model for analyzing the typical gameplay action, normally reported as

(1) S performed a  $\phi$ -ing in G.

The actual action performed by S then has two components. First, there is the action performed on graphical shapes:

(1a) S performed a C- $\phi$ -ing in G.

And, second, there is the fictional element of make-believe that these basic actions are made to represent:

(1b) S performs a C- $\phi$ -ing she pretends to be a  $\phi$ -ing in G.

This analysis now gives us the complete motivational context for typical gameplay action. As with action generally, a player S acts on a *motivational set of beliefs and pro-attitudes*, which form the basis for deliberation in a specific situation. Based on this set of beliefs and pro-attitudes, S forms an intention and carries it through by clicking the controls.

Corresponding to the dual-layer model, there are *three types* of motivational states that enter into the gameplay action: (1) those that pertain to the game-mechanical layer; (2) those that pertain to the represented layer; and (3) those that pertain to the semantic and motivational interaction between the first two layers.

With regard to the level of C-actions, the player will have ordinary truth-oriented beliefs about them. The pro-attitudes, however, are special in that they derive from the attitudes directed at game-specific goal-attainment structures.

In Juul’s classic model, these attitudes are derived from the kind of valorization that stems from a winning condition (2005, 25). Videogames are different because the game mechanics allow actions that are shaped so as to have intrinsic interest. Where traditional games tend to have abstract action types that exist only within the confinements of the game, the existence of computing power has created the possibility to *shape action types* that are performed for their own sake in the course of play.

The core of the motivations for performing C-actions is found in the *player’s enjoyment in adopting a valorization scheme for the purpose of the game*—those motivations that I have referred to as being intentionally determined and arbitrarily valorized pro-attitudes.

Next, we have the representational layer. Here the relevant attitude is the desire to make-believe that the  $\phi$ -ing is taking place, along with other fictional truths that are generated about the environment and narrative. Although make-believe and

imagination can be voluntary mental acts, as in daydreaming, they are mostly automatic in game mechanics, and the player's primary intention is to produce a C-action that triggers the make-believe.

Along with imagination and make-believe, we have corresponding mental states that emulate the fictional setting, such as quasi-emotions relating to fear, excitement, and pleasure over the imagined fact that a  $\phi$ -ing is taking place (cf. Walton 1978). It seems that we may also find *intentions* that also have this quasi-character—for example, the desire to kill an opponent or to offer help to a nonplaying character.

Finally, we have the interaction between C-actions and make-believe actions. Here, there is a crucial difference between game mechanics and traditional representational media. The C-actions are used as enhancers for the fictional layer. Good design will ensure that the mental attitudes associated with fictional representation and make-believe serve as enhancers or validators for the experiences that are created via make-believe and imagination. Thus, for example, a game mechanism should provide some contribution to the goal-attainment conditions for C-actions that feed into the experience of a fictional shooting and so on.

### The Bracketing of Norms in Play

With this sketch of the anatomy of gameplay actions, we can turn to the question of what norms apply to them and the manner in which these norms bracket the norms that apply to actions identified using the same descriptions outside the game. We want to know how the intraludic norms  $N_i$  are related to the extraludic norms  $N_e$ . According to the autonomy-based deontological premise, this relationship can be found by answering the following question: In what way do the reasons for in-game actions constitute respect for autonomous individuals as ends-in-themselves?

Note that transgression and bracketing here are defined in terms of a relationship between two similar *descriptions* of an action, meaning that I am comparing the norms that apply to actions as they are described in the context of gameplay versus actions as they are described in the same manner in the extraludic context. This often means that the actions are not the same, and indeed the bracketing that occurs is due to precisely this fact.

A further note is that bracketing is discussed here in relation to the *typical gameplay situation* in which the user is engaged. The videogame is an artifact with an intended “proper function” (cf. Millikan 1984), and this function is to create an interactive display that *prescribes* that the user uses the game mechanism in a certain way (Lopes 2009). Thus, the game is typically used as a work of fiction, with a goal-attainment

structure intended to facilitate play. As with any other artifacts, they can also be appropriated for other purposes, such as for simulation or extraludic work, but this is not my concern here.

My analysis in the previous section reveals that the game act and the player's intentions and reasons have *three sources of bracketing*. The first is found in the permissions that arise from the *transformation* of representational properties into properties that *directly guide action* in the graphical environment. The second source is found in the permissions that concern the mandate of gameplay to perform *revalorizations* of preferences that apply to goal-attainment structures. The final source is found in the permissions that stem from the *nonalethic nature* of the attitudes relating to the make-believe, pretense, and imagination connected to fictional representation. Let me comment on each of these three sources in turn.

First, when a person is performing an act reported as a  $\phi$ -ing, the real action reported is actually a C- $\phi$ -ing. For example, when a player in a game kills, rapes, mutilates, stabs, shoots, and the like, what is actually performed are corresponding graphical actions that, prior to the action, were merely *representations* of states of affairs or actions. These objects are now endowed with real agential properties that play a role in guiding the actions of the user in response to the counterfactual behavior of the game mechanism.

However, this transformation yields different results depending on the properties originally represented. Thus, the in-game act of "shooting" is not an actual shooting but something else and is therefore no longer subject to the norms that apply to using a gun in the real world. This transformation is a source of bracketing that arises from the "virtuality" of the actions.

Many of these transformations are due to the fact that the environmental agential properties do not depend on a body in the same fashion as in the case with shooting, running, and the like. However, some of the nominally denoted properties can indeed be the same, including those that carry social properties, such as status functions (Searle 1995; Brey 1999), and those that can have the same causal roles as graphical shapes, such as scaring, threatening, calculating, showing, and the like. This shift from the ordinary referents of representations to the agential properties of the representations themselves causes a systematic source of bracketing due to the *difference in individuation criteria* for in-game actions versus out-of-game actions.

This brings us to the next source of bracketing, which is derived from those real properties that are bracketed because of the fact that they are *game properties* based on *arbitrary valorization*. Game properties are the same types of agential properties as those found in sports or nondigital games with the application of rules; in videogames,

however, they are supported directly by the counterfactual behavior of the game mechanism.

Thus, the applications of agential features of C-harm, C-deception, C-lying, C-theft, and the like are dependent on arbitrary valorization. This is analogous to the way violence in sports such as martial arts and American football is transformed from being impermissible by extraludic norms to being permissible intraludically (Nguyen and Zagal 2016). Likewise, in many contexts deception is not allowed by extraludic norms but is permitted and encouraged by intraludic norms in many card games.

What, then, are the limits of the bracketing of these types of properties? From the deontological position I have outlined, the source of the revalorization is found in the mandate to play. Thus, insofar as we accept that an individual is an autonomous being sufficiently advanced to set goals for actions, that individual is also permitted to use this autonomy to valorize his or her own reactions, as might be the case with the child finding it intrinsically valuable to run up and down the line barriers at an airport. Nevertheless, this acknowledgment has a relatively low value, as indicated by the fact we typically do not allow play to take priority over nonludic achievements. Furthermore, the bracketing that takes place due to arbitrary valorization is limited in two ways.

First, the valorization must be a *qualified* expression of autonomy in that the individual must be mature enough to make the decisions. Thus, a child, alone or with a friend, might decide to play with a loaded gun, but that would not be a permissible valorization because the child does not understand the consequences of this play.

Likewise, sports can allow harm, but not to the extent that it causes serious damage or demeans the player. In a game, whether football or a multiplayer videogame, any transgressive emphasis on harm, theft, or self-interest depends on the qualified consent from other players or from nonplaying bystanders affected by the play (see also the discussion of one-sided play in chapter 1).

We now get to the most contentious components of transgressive content in videogames: the in-game acts directed at representing the player as doing acts of violence and sexual molestation as well as acts that are considered sexist or racist. When a player performs an act reported as a  $\phi$ -ing, such as a killing or molesting, the player is make-believing that she is performing the  $\phi$ -ing in question. This make-believe relating to the gameplay action is also an integral part of the activity of play, which means to act on underlying agential properties prescribed by the game mechanism. Thus, when the player makes-believe that she is  $\phi$ -ing, she is also prescribed by the game mechanism to overcome challenges, to score points, to execute action types because they are intrinsically interesting, and generally to traverse various goal-attainment structures in the game.

The relationship between the in-game act and the extraludic norm in the case of make-believe is puzzling. The act of an imagined  $\phi$ -ing is not an actual  $\phi$ -ing, so in what way does it offend the extraludic norm in question? A traditional answer to this question is found in the virtue theoretical approaches, according to which the relationship is indirect: a virtuous character ought not to engage in make-believe conduct that emulates desires that are immoral because doing so may hurt one's virtuous character (Aristotle 1999; McCormick 2001). As I argued earlier, this sort of answer does not address the constitutive question of what it is about the transgressive act that makes it immoral. Furthermore, the suggestion has no apparent answer to the question of why there should be a *difference* between permissible and impermissible transgressive acts in the game.

If we approach this question from the autonomy-based deontological perspective, however, we must again look at the *reasons* that the player has for performing the player actions. A player performs an in-game  $\phi$ -ing for a variety of reasons compatible with proper function of the game mechanism. Most directly, the player performs a C-action in accordance with the motivations created by arbitrary valorization, but she also performs the mental act of imagining that a  $\phi$ -ing is taking place, and she is culpable for the moral justifications for both of these actions.

In what might be labeled the "player's defense," a player may hold that transgressive make-believe actions within the game are permitted because the activity in general is "just a game," which implies that there is something about the activity of play that makes such imaginings permissible. The problem with this defense is that it, at least in the case of strongly transgressive content such as sexual molestation, does not seem to accord with intuitions. If it is wrong to make-believe that you are raping someone, as is the case in *RapeLay*, then it seems to be an insufficient defense that this action is done "only" to score points, for example (cf. Luck 2009).

I think the importance of the "player's defense" does not consist in the notion that the C-based motivations *outcompete* the acts of make-believe but rather that they provide a *different moral context* for the acts of make-believe.

We can say that the main force of bracketing present in acts of make-believe is found in *the attitude toward the truth* of what is imagined. When the player is intending to make-believe that she is shooting or killing, she is ipso facto not actually intending to shoot or kill an actual person. Make-believe *can* aid alethic roles, such as contemplating possible epistemic scenarios, but the typical reason for performing make-believe in a videogame is that the player derives some pleasure from doing it.

We need to consider in more detail in what sense intending to imagine and make-believe expresses respect for autonomous individuals as an end in itself. I want to

claim that engaging in an act of make-believe that offends some extraludic norm does *offend* this norm but does not necessarily *violate* it. We can look to other examples of respect and acknowledgment to make this point. For example, a person can make a joke about an authority figure, and even though he successfully brackets a norm that prohibits disparaging remarks about authorities by making his comment a joke, the joke nevertheless constitutes a *lack of respect* for the authority figure in question. Indeed, it is likely that this is what makes the joke funny. The same holds true for imagination and make-believe, and it also explains why videogame players find many transgressive acts desirable. I propose that the mandate to play enters into the moral reasons for make-believe in the following way: the individual is permitted to imagine  $\phi$ -ings that offend some external norm if the aim is to take pleasure in her freedom to do so. I think this mandate carries permissible make-believe a long way. To perform such an act of imagination is indeed to disrespect the moral "ought" in question because inherent in the playful imagination to steal, maim, or kill is precisely a desire to *break the norm* and to take pleasure in doing it for just this reason. If make-believe transgressive acts were not to hold this element of transgression, they might well lose their interest to the player.

This line of thought can contribute to explaining how the moral world of the videogame is constituted. To capture the importance of this point, I distinguish between permissible *play-motivated intentions* to transgress norms and impermissible *vicarious intentions* to break norms. These two types of intentions are morally different because they disrespect the moral ought in different ways.

An example of vicarious intention is probably found in pornographic games because in this case the in-game acts are supposed to stand-in for real sex acts. This type of play intention is not a part of the proper function of the large majority of videogames, and it makes for a dramatic difference. The regular player would regard as a "sick" individual a player who kills a character in a game because he *actually desires to kill people*. Likewise, we see the moral difference if we imagine a player who misappropriates the game mechanics to create a nonplaying character that looks like his former girlfriend in order to vicariously maim her in the game. If a player acts on a vicarious intention, it does not really matter how morally serious it is to break the extraludic norm. If a player manages to make-believe that he is stealing in a game for the vicarious desire to steal, this would also count as intraludic impermissible make-believe.

This line of thought indicates that many of the classic cases of representational transgression in videogames are in fact permitted. It is permitted for the player to execute innocents in order to get health points in *Hatred* because it follows from the mandate to play that the player is free to try out what it feels like to break such norms.



Undoubtedly, many may feel it to be repulsive to do such things, but this is likely to be a case of where intuitions about norms of what is *agreeable* interfere with the intuitions about what is *right*.

Nevertheless, this leaves us with the problem of accounting for cases of seemingly impermissible transgressions of make-believe. If make-believe of murder is permitted for this reason, should we not also say that the make-believe of acts of sexism, racism, and pedophilia should be permitted (Luck 2009)? The answer to this question is that respect for autonomy in make-believe is a multifaceted phenomenon and that there are still further considerations about the relationship between the mandate to play and permissible make-believe that determine the vector of acknowledgment for autonomy in the gameplay action.

In order to state this point, I must first make some further observations about the requirement that a gameplay action must be based on respect for an individual as an end-in-itself. No one has a duty to treat a *nonexisting* individual as an end-in-itself. If an individual were to perform acts of in-game pedophilia, sexism, or racism, she would be motivated by a lack of respect for actually existing people in virtue of the fact that they belong to a *class of individuals*. A sexist act toward a fictional woman in a game constitutes a lack of respect for other actually existing women. In comparison, acts of racism toward a class of beings that the player does not believe to exist would not constitute immoral acts. For example, using the racial slur *toaster* to refer to fictional sentient robots would not carry any lack of acknowledgment of robots as persons.

I suggest that the difference between cases of murder and cases of sexual molestation is found in the fact that the latter constitute a different kind of disrespect than the former. Many immoral acts merely frustrate the aims of an individual, such as is the case of theft or even murder, but cases of sexual molestation or racism are offenses against the dignity of an individual—that is, the feeling of self-worth that comes with being capable of thinking of him or herself as an “I.” In these cases, the mandate that comes from play does not have the power to *outstrip* respect for dignity. The mandate to play originates in an acknowledgment of an individual’s right to take pleasure in her own self-worth. Granting this right irrevocably involves acknowledging the same right in others. The joke analogy helps here again: in many settings, a funny story can successfully bracket the norm to show respect for the dead, but in certain settings, such as when the joke is told in front of an actually dying individual, this permission is canceled. Respect for dignity has just this effect on bracketing in games as well. Furthermore, the extremely common preoccupation with killings and murder in videogames seems to me to stem from different sorts of reasons. Those kinds of make-believe are likely an expression of the player’s ever-present anxiety about the precariousness of

her own existence, which constitutes a morally valid reason to engage in imagination about killing and murder.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

My primary assumption in this chapter has been that the morality of an action can be found in respect for the autonomy of an individual. I have evaluated how this respect is manifested in three sources of bracketing of in-game actions: in the transformation from normal properties to properties of graphical objects and events, in the properties that arise from arbitrary valorization, and in the nonalethic nature of imagination and make-believe.

In doing so, I have abstracted away a great deal of the morally complex connections that computer games enter into, such as their societal role or how they psychologically affect a player. It is not to be expected that this premise will give clear answers to all the ethical issues we can raise about player actions. Nevertheless, I hope I have indicated how the moral world of the videogame takes shape and how it can be used to distinguish between permissible and impermissible forms of transgressive content. Most importantly, I contend that this perspective shows how much transgressive play does not in any way consist in a suspension from morality, but rather that morality and permissible play have the same source: respect for individuals as ends-in-themselves.

## II Practices

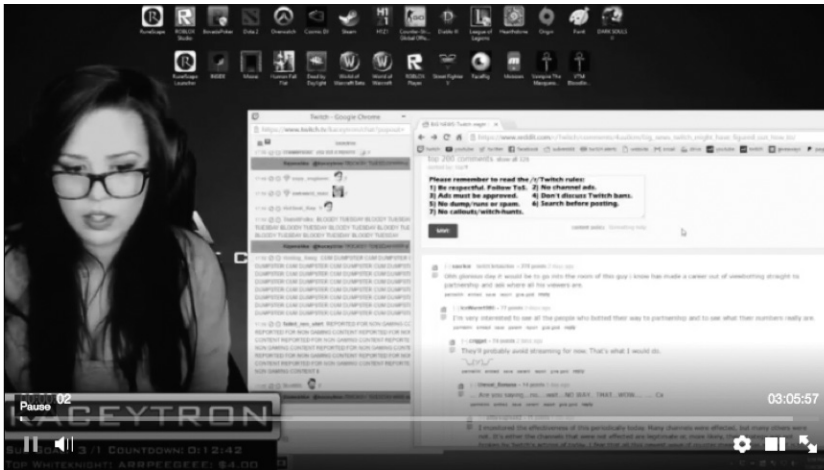


## 5 Kaceytron and Transgressive Play on Twitch.tv

Mia Consalvo

“Fucking 4chan!” the woman on the Twitch stream exclaims in disgust. “Is that how you found my stream?!?! Were they posting fake nudes of me on 4chan?!” The Twitch stream shows an attractive young woman with glasses and a low-cut shirt on the left side of the frame; behind her and taking up the rest of the stream is her computer monitor’s screen—showing at center a long and narrow, blurry but rapidly scrolling text chat window that features the term *CUM DUMPSTER* spammed over and over again. To the right of the text barrage, a browser window is opened to a page that is difficult to read but shows some Twitch interaction rules at the top and comments below. To the right of the streaming window (not pictured in figure 5.1), the overflowing chat channel crawls ever upward rapidly, making some comments difficult to read unless they are repeated (as many of them are) and in all caps. Someone has copy-pasted “KaceyPls THIS IS A KACEYTRON WAITING ROOM” multiple times into one comment that is nine lines long, and other chatters are rapidly posting “4chin,” echoing (and mocking) Kaceytron as she shifts from pronouncing the infamous hate-filled site “4chan” into “4chin” in her rant. After 20 seconds, the scene jumps to Kaceytron announcing, “I’m one of the best streamers on Twitch.tv but sexists won’t admit it because they’re sexist.” After a short rant, the stream cuts to Kaceytron playing a game; Kaceytron ranting about a news article displayed on a website; Kaceytron proclaiming about someone in the chat, “Look at this white fucking knight! Do you think that I’m gonna fuck you if you help me in *Runescape*?” After a few more seconds and images comes a static graphic informing the viewer that the live Kaceytron stream will be starting momentarily—what we have just seen has amounted to a highlight reel of past Twitch moments chosen by Kaceytron for her viewers’ amusement.

As part of a larger project investigating Twitch and live streaming, I first began watching Kaceytron’s stream in early 2016 to understand more about women who stream gameplay on sites such as Twitch.tv. Twitch is a relatively new platform for individuals who want to live-stream themselves as they play videogames—showing their



**Figure 5.1**

A recording of Kaceytron’s Twitch stream from August 2016.

gameplay (via personal computer or console system) as well as audio and/or video of themselves as they play on a dedicated channel, where viewers can chat with them in real time. Twitch began as Justin.tv in 2007, a round-the-clock, life-streaming channel devoted to founder Justin Kan. The channel quickly expanded its service to multiple channels and allowed individuals to create accounts and stream for free—with the most popular gaming section branching off in 2011 and being rebranded as Twitch.tv. In 2014, the nongaming segments of Justin.tv ceased operations, and the creators sold Twitch to Amazon for \$970 million (Amadeo 2014). By the end of 2014, Twitch claimed 100 million unique monthly visitors, who were watching 1.5 million different broadcasters (Leslie 2015). The overwhelming majority of those Twitch streams focus on eSports titles such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Hidden Path Entertainment 2012), and the predominant demographic attracted to Twitch is young, white, and male, primarily from North America (Leslie 2015; Quantcast 2016).

Despite the predominance of young men playing eSports titles, there has been an increasing number of other types of streamers (women streamers, queer streamers, streamers of color) as well as academic attention to those who are “variety streamers”—those who play a wide variety of videogames that are not necessarily competitive (Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne 2014). Within that group, I became particularly interested in women streamers who received large amounts of online abuse on their streams. Yet I was hesitant to watch Kaceytron at first, for fear that her stream would

confirm the worst stereotypes about Twitch and its viewers and would provide nothing new for our understanding of women, harassment, and online games. Adding to that hesitancy was the popular reaction to Kaceytron in the world of live streaming, where her reputation precedes her (MostlyBiscuit 2015). Kaceytron has been called many things, most of them not very polite. In terms of categorizing her, other streamers and YouTube viewers would probably refer to her as a “boobie streamer” or more charitably as a “girl streamer.” It is difficult to find accurate information about her history, but according to her now defunct wiki site, she started streaming “World of Warcrafts” (as she calls her streams of playing *World of Warcraft* [Blizzard Entertainment 2004]) on Twitch in 2013, then switched to “League of Legions” (her term for her streams of playing *League of Legends*) later that year, and now works mainly as a variety streamer, meaning she plays many different games on her stream and hosts chat shows and news reports. Kaceytron lists her streaming schedule on her Twitch page: Wednesday through Sunday, starting at 5:00 p.m. CST and usually continuing for two to five hours. As of this writing, Kaceytron’s streams have been viewed more than 29 million times; she has more than 472,000 followers (followers are free—anyone who wants to follow a streamer will be notified when she goes online), a YouTube channel with more than 67,000 subscribers, a subreddit with 1,487 readers, a Snapchat account, a Facebook page with more than 43,000 likes, and a Twitter feed with another 72,800 followers. Due to her success in attracting concurrent viewers, Kaceytron has achieved Partner status with Twitch, meaning followers can subscribe to her channel for \$4.99 per month (or more for premium subscriptions), which comes with such perks as being able to chat on “sub-only Sunday” streams, having access to subscriber-only emotes for chat, receiving a periodic newsletter from Kaceytron, and being eligible for periodic contests she puts together for subscribers. Likewise, viewers can send her one-time tips or donations while she is streaming, and she can also garner “cheers” from appreciative viewers—another of Twitch’s revenue systems for streamers.

Two questions I asked in my project were, “Why would players put themselves in distress, and how does such content affect the playful attitude?” Based on my preliminary viewing of several different women streamers on Twitch as well as past views of eSports events and TwitchCon discussions about women and gaming, I thought I could investigate how and why women would voluntarily subject themselves to such online harassment, albeit to different degrees and in a variety of forms. When I first considered this question, I thought of comparing how Kaceytron manages the toxic atmosphere of Twitch (and of being a woman gamer online in general) and how other women streamers who do not seem to attract as much abuse (such as Annemunition and TheSpazzyProf) manage the responses to their streams. But in closely studying

Kaceytron's streams in the context of her larger media presence—and especially her performance as Kaceytron—I concluded that her performance is complex enough that she deserves an entire chapter to herself. Kaceytron is an enigma—many viewers have asked in her stream and elsewhere if her performance is authentically her or if the onscreen presence we witness is simply a persona, a troll that is playing her audience. Digging around online provides only a few answers to these questions, but, ultimately, the Kaceytron performance *is* what matters—the simulation, if it is one, is the thing that counts. To investigate this performance, I regularly viewed Kaceytron's live streams during July and August 2016, taking detailed notes on five of those streams. I have also followed her Twitter stream and watched additional older videos she and others have posted about her on YouTube as well as on other sites online. I have read through her /r subreddit forum, searched the Internet for interviews and discussions about and with her, and examined her Facebook page. This has given me a deep view of the current incarnation of Kaceytron as well as some understanding of her past performance, but I cannot claim comprehensive knowledge of her entire streaming career because it started several years ago, and her practices have changed quite a bit from what it was before I began viewing and studying her performance. From this limited sampling, however, we can still ask how Kaceytron's performance is transgressive and specifically how it can be both toxic and playful at the same time. Following Chris Jenks, I define transgression as that which goes “beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, to violate or infringe.” Yet transgression is also “a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (2003, 2). It does double duty—at the same time that it violates a boundary (or convention), it affirms that same line. How do Kaceytron's transgressions operate? In this chapter, I discuss Kaceytron as a transgressive persona or performance and as a social media presence that is deeply tied to the contemporary gaming scene in the West and that implicates gender and gameplay in important ways.

### **Women and Online Gaming: A Fraught History**

Although toxic gamer culture may seem a recent phenomenon to those who do not play games, it has deep and sustained roots and arguably goes back to the advent of digital games, when girls and women were marginalized as potential players in both arcades and in the home (Kocurek 2015). Writing in 2002 about the “gendered aspects of contemporary computer gaming,” Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter point to how games in the home were not considered a girl's domain because “the technology and the gaming [were] controlled by the male player who assume[d] the role of expert by interpolating



the female gamer into a subordinate role” (2002, 244, 252). From there, it was a short step to discounting girls as players in public settings and then to actively denigrating them.

Illustrating this history, Fern Delamere and Susan Shaw write about *Counter-Strike* (Valve 2000), documenting the abuse that women faced while playing on public servers, explaining that, “unlike the male players, female gamers were frequent targets of abusive behaviours and discriminatory actions during game play” (2008, 290). Those actions included not just verbal abuse but also acts of sabotage against the female gamers’ computers while at LAN events, such as hacking them to shut them down just before tournament play started and scrawling sexist messages on their computer screens (291). Yet the female participants Delamere and Shaw talked with were determined to persevere in their gameplay, often working to become even better players as well as setting up private servers where they could compete without experiencing abuse. It would be nice—but inaccurate—to say that this harassment has waned over time. Indeed, the activities surrounding the Gamergate controversy that began in 2014 simply shone a brighter, more public spotlight on what most gamers already knew—even as more girls and women were playing games, they were continually being insulted, trolled, harassed, threatened, bullied, and shamed for the simple act of playing (Consalvo 2012). In such a climate, the act of publicly playing a game as a girl or woman is not just a leisure activity but also a political act—a statement that gameplay is the

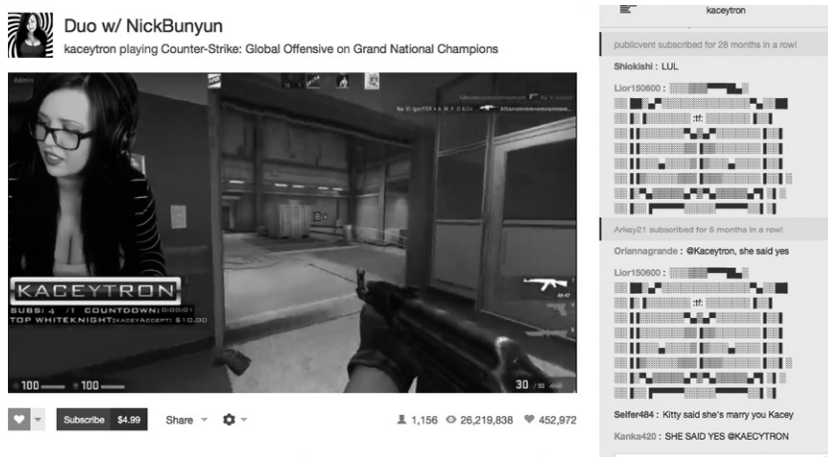


Figure 5.2

Kaceytron playing *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Hidden Path Entertainment 2012) and the ASCII text spam sent to her by a viewer.

domain of more than just boys and men. In that domain, I now focus on Kaceytron, who embodies and performs as “girl gamer” in multiple, contradictory ways.

### Watching Kaceytron

Although past research has studied what happens to women players online and how those women respond, Twitch and its live-streaming capacity reconfigure the gameplay situation significantly, making it necessary to reconceptualize Kaceytron and her performance of play. Key to this reconceptualization is the recognition of a shift in focus—from an act of play in a multiplayer (online or offline) situation to a display of single or multiplayer gameplay that is being performed primarily for an external audience. That performance is also mediated through the Twitch platform, which brings with it a unique set of limitations and affordances. Thus, Twitch itself becomes complicit in how Kaceytron performs (gendered) gameplay, in how her viewers respond to her and shape the stream, as well as in what type of community she and they are actively producing.

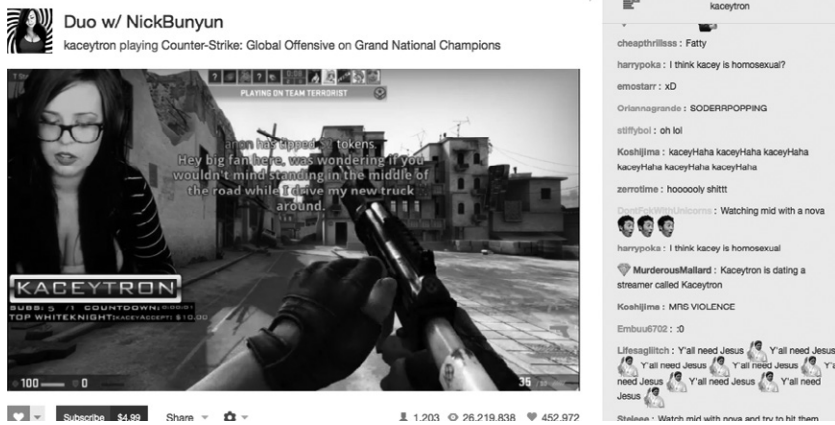
### Kaceytron Is Now Live ...

Viewing a Kaceytron live stream is not for the faint of heart. A riot of manically scrolling text chat replete with semipornographic ASCII art and caps-locked insults moves on the right side of the screen; in the center of the streaming screen is gameplay, with animated and still graphics featuring sound periodically superimposed over the screen; and Kaceytron herself is positioned on the left. This layout is occasionally disrupted for the needs of a particular stream. During one stream in early July 2016, the screen was split into thirds, with Kaceytron in the left third, the game screen for *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016) in the middle third (played by Catcam, a regular stream participant and live streamer on his own channel), and the camera view for the game in the right third of the screen space. It was shortly after the launch of *Pokémon Go* in the United States, and Kaceytron was giving her audience access to a new game live, played “out in the wild” while she remained ensconced at her computer, actively commenting on the experience. Even though Kaceytron was not playing the game, she appeared resolutely in charge, directing Catcam—often bullying him—to do exactly as she wanted: “Look to the left! Look to the left! Look to the left! Now look forward. You should turn around. See? This is how people get hurt.” Even though he complied with her orders, she continued to harangue him: “Don’t get hit by a car—I’d be fucking banned from Twitch,” she warned him as he wandered near a street. Shortly after that, she demanded, “Show me something impressive. Everybody already has that one [Pokémon].” While directing

Catcam on his mission, Kaceytron was also reacting to the chatter that defines her stream. In response to a comment that she was lazy and having someone else do the work of catching Pokémon for her, she retorted, “I was catching Pokémon all fucking day, motherfucker.” Later in the stream, as the chat got more abusive, she responded, “ok, chat’s not fucking funny,” and later told another chatter to “fuck off” in response to an insult. It is clear from watching even a short segment of a Kaceytron stream that Kaceytron meets viewer harassment with language in kind. In that way, Kaceytron performs “talking back” to her audience, refusing (mostly) to let them see that she is bothered by such abuse, even if it is directed at her in a perpetual stream. Although her chat “community” may be more voluminous in their ability to direct toxic language at her, Kaceytron retains the last word via her ability to verbalize her own retorts, giving her some authority over which voice is privileged (hers).

Layering on top of Kaceytron’s own verbal commentary and the chat’s textual assaults, the stream also features regular graphics (both static and gifs, all with accompanying sound effects) that appear over the screen’s action in response to specific events. When someone renews their subscription, a graphic of Kaceytron in a hoodie with “Oh WOW” above it appears, accompanied by a sound file remarking “oh wow!” that employs Kaceytron’s own voice. When the graphic appears, Kaceytron will announce that subscriber X has subscribed for “x years in a row! Thank you!” Interspersed with news of subscription renewals, which can become formulaic, are other graphics that announce donations. Any viewer (whether subscriber or viewer) can donate any amount of money to Kaceytron and include a message with it that will also appear on her stream’s screen. She reads these out, too, usually verbatim. The vast majority of these donations are ways to further insult Kaceytron, such as “Kacey I’m so close please give me permission to cum. Thanks, Daddy.” Very occasionally—as in this case—Kaceytron refuses to read them aloud and will simply respond to the donor, “Go fuck yourself,” even as the donation and text appear on screen for all to see. This is one way for audience members to gain a more prominent “voice” in her stream, vaulting their commentary out of the rapidly scrolling chat window and overlaying her gameplay, briefly placing their speech on a level equal to Kaceytron’s. There’s even the promise that Kaceytron will read aloud the missive (provided it is not too offensive even for Kaceytron), granting it further legitimacy. Yet such speech comes at a literal price—audience members must pay a donation to have their words appear in this prime position. Whereas Kaceytron can chatter on unheeded, her audience members must pay if they want to be heard, even if it is to insult or mock what is going on.

Last—but definitely not least—below Kaceytron is a counter of new subscribers as well as a space to list the “TOP WHITEKNIGHT” of the stream. This space is reserved



**Figure 5.3**

Donation texts appear on screen.

for a chatter (or donor) who appears to defend Kaceytron excessively from those who are harassing her or for someone who is too grandiose in their praise of Kaceytron. When that happens, Kaceytron calls the offender out, directing the chat: “Can I get a no WhiteKnight in the chat?” Upon hearing this, subscribers, who have access to special chat icons, will spam an icon of a “banned” white knight chess piece that they have access to for just such occasions. The banned white knight is a particularly interesting feature because it is a material instance of Kaceytron’s dissatisfaction with any rhetoric that she must be protected or defended by men—that she is unable to take care of herself or believe in her own ability to play. Echoing findings from Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson (2012) about female *World of Warcraft* players, Kaceytron asserts her own agency as a player and a streamer, refusing even the more benevolent forms of sexism in games, such as the belief that women in such spaces are in need of male protection.

Yet Kaceytron also either welcomes or allows quite a bit of disturbing content in her stream. Based on my notes on past streams and recordings of other streams, it is easy to see why Twitch has been labeled as toxic soup for female streamers. The chat and donation comments that appear in one 3-hour stream are a barrage of offense—mixing copy-pasted ASCII art of boobs and dicks with repetitions of insults in all-caps, the occasional <message deleted> for a message that was too foul even for Twitch’s permissive chat filters, and the random other slights and comments that make up her stream. Yet other than telling the particularly obnoxious ones to “fuck off,” Kaceytron does little to staunch the flow. Raunch and abuse are instead allowed, normalized, and then capitalized on as they become signature elements of the Kaceytron brand.

We can see this logic at work in how Kaceytron sets up the rules for engagement in her space. Many streamers have a list of “chat rules” for their channel, which typically include types of speech or behavior that they do not allow. For example, Annemunition’s site (with more than 175,000 followers) lists her chat rules as “Don’t spam, fight with others, or use hate speech. Be courteous, respectful, and play nice with the other viewers.” Likewise, TheSpazzyProf (with about 20,000 followers) has an extensive list of “rules” that include “Don’t be rude to me, my mods or each other” “English only!!” “Profanity is allowed, but hate speak is not. No racist, homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, sexually graphic, or otherwise ignorant speech,” and “If someone is trolling, do not engage them or acknowledge their existence. Allow the streamer or mods to take care of business. Just sit back and watch the ban-hammer swing!” In contrast, Kaceytron lists only three rules at the time of this study: “1. Freedom of Speech for everyone! 2. Do not advertise other streams. 3. Do not link pornographic images.” In Kaceytron’s streams, trolls are allowed to speak, and the abuse runs wild—on both sides. On another night in July 2016, Kaceytron was setting up a game of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* with a well-known player, and the chat was typical for one of her streams. Comments included “she has an ugly face,” “CAN I SEE YOUR BOOBS” repeated over and over, “show tits bitch,” “where’s the ugly cunt,” and “FUCKING READ MY COMMENT YOU CUM DUMPSTER.” In this situation, Kaceytron directed blame to the visiting player—suggesting that it was *his* viewers who were clogging up her chat with out-of-control remarks—rather than acknowledge the toxicity of her own stream. But even in that case she did not appear offended by the noxious material—she was simply intent on pointing out “who” was to blame for it.

Toxicity has become the element that defines Kaceytron’s stream, far more than her low-cut shirts or her inability to play very well. Or, rather, her cleavage and play style are props that prompt the toxicity that ensues. Other researchers have investigated how online harassers have monetized hate via systems that encourage viewers to donate money to see more abuse and harassment (Mortensen 2016). Kaceytron’s stream is not of the same order—she does not attack viewers or others who offer no provocation; rather, she has built a system where viewers pay her to direct abuse toward her via multiple formats. They can subscribe monthly; they can give one-time donations; or they can *cheer* her (although this system is not really useful for insults or harassment). Likewise, other viewers can watch the ensuing toxicity—for free—as well as participate in it, adding to and becoming the “free to play” toxic content that provides further enjoyment for those who do pay and that helps to continue defining the Kaceytron brand as a toxic “shit show.”

## Gaming Capital, Gender, and Kaceytron

One of the ways Kaceytron actively transgresses is in her performance as a “girl gamer.” A perpetual issue for girls and women who play is that they are not recognized as legitimate players or gamers—they are thought of as faking interest for attention or money or both, or they are dismissed as being bad at actually playing the games (Sundén and Sveningsson 2012). Over and above how Kaceytron interacts with her viewers generally, her actual gameplay complicates her persona. During many streams that I viewed of Kaceytron during the summer of 2016, she played badly, dying repeatedly in *Counter-Strike*; skipping important cutscenes in *This Is the Police* (Weappy Studio 2016), which made later sections difficult to play; and reading the introductory text in another game so slowly that it disappeared and she had to relaunch the game to finish reading it.

Kaceytron’s actions undermine her continual proclamations that she is an excellent player. She will regularly tell viewers that she is a pro and that she excels in multiple types of gameplay. Yet coupled with her proclamations of talent are statements that support her seemingly poor gameplay. Those statements are often willful dismissals of certain forms of gaming knowledge—gaming capital—and especially common knowledge that anyone tuning in to her stream should easily know and recognize (Consalvo 2007). So, for example, she refers to the “meta” of the game *League of Legends* as “the meet-a,” and she also talks about “beta” versions of games as “beet-a” versions, willfully mispronouncing each term. Such actions would seem to present a surface reading of Kaceytron as a bad player with delusions of grandiosity.

Yet when Kaceytron did play *League of Legends* early in her streaming career, she participated in ranked play over multiple seasons. To participate in ranked play, players have to attain level 30 in the game (which can take a significant period of time) and must own a set number of champions—the avatars that the game employs. Kaceytron’s website includes many guides to playing different champions, with videos that show her achieving 26 kills (an impressive amount) with one champion in particular—Jinx—yet advice such as “IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A CHAMPION THAT HAS CUTE SKINS THIS IS NOT THE CHAMPION FOR YOU” and “I HAVE RECEIVED A LOT OF CRITICISM FOR NOT USING THE ‘PROPER’ ABILITY NAMES. I DO THIS INTENTIONALLY, AND I THINK THAT IT IS A GREAT PRACTICE FOR LEARNING A CHAMPIONS [sic] ABILITIES BY RELATING IT TO SOMETHING YOU ARE MORE FAMILIAR WITH.” Although her recent ranking has been lower, she also has videos showing that she attained Gold V status, which is in the top 10 percent of ranked *League of Legends* players. Kaceytron therefore poses a dilemma for the persona of the girl gamer—Is she good

at games or bad at games, and does it matter? Many of the more recent games that she plays are considered significantly less challenging than *League of Legends*, yet she still performs badly in all of them. Her rhetoric proclaims her superior ability, which is (most often) belied by actual displays of her gameplay efforts, often featuring failure. Kaceytron refuses to consent to the pigeonholing of her as a “bad” girl gamer, though, but that refusal then further feeds the toxicity of her stream: viewers regularly tell her to delete her account, to stop playing games, and so on. Her seemingly off-the-cuff references to the context surrounding games shows knowledge of that complexity to a degree—she is aware of the meta, aware of class strategies to follow when playing *World of Warcraft*. But her performance of gaming-capital knowledge appears fragmented or just plain wrong. If she knows these things, why does she not get them right? Rather, a more appropriate description would be that she screws up, she fails, but she is still successful in performing play—merely a different form of play: playing with her viewer’s expectations.

### **Kaceytron, Griefing, and the Twitch Community**

Another way of understanding Kaceytron’s transgressive play practices would be to see them as a form of *griefing*—albeit of a different sort than is written about in traditional studies of player culture (Foo and Koivisto 2004; Lin and Sun 2005). According to Chek Yang Foo and Elina Koivisto, the goal of griefing in playing a videogame is to antagonize other players or destroy their progress or both rather than to get ahead or advance one’s position in the game. In studying massively multiplayer online role-playing game players and particular activities that may or may not be considered griefing by the community, they conclude that for players “an activity is clearly griefing if the actor has little direct gains from the act, or if the act is repeated, or if another griefing type accompanies the act” (2004, 250). Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun investigate “white-eyed” players in Taiwan, who act in ways similar to griefers. They concur that “grief players are generally considered the deviants in gaming societies; they break the laws (codes and rules of conduct) of their game worlds, violate the norms and etiquettes of their communities” (2005, 2). Yet in their investigation of problematic play activities, Lin and Sun discovered that there is a difference between who the imagined griefers are and who actually indulges in grief play. They point out that “the only way to identify a griefer is when he or she comes out” and that the labeling of griefers is ultimately about naming those “outside” the game so that “[adult] players can redefine gaming in their own way” (2005, 11).

Kaceytron both fits and does not fit descriptions of griefers. Importantly, past theorizations have defined griefers as players griefing other players who are playing *within the same game*. Many of Kaceytron's recent streams have featured single-player games, where no griefing can really happen. Past videos that show her playing *League of Legends* demonstrate that her in-game gameplay may or may not have been optimal, depending on the match, but she did not go out of her way to make other players suffer—she performed “playing the game” with the intent to win, although whether she was really playing poorly on purpose is unknown. Unintentional griefing as described by Lin and Sun was a possibility in this case—if we acknowledge that Kaceytron's performance as a poor player who thinks she is excellent (by choosing suboptimal strategies and actions) was designed to enrage her teammates during a competitive event. But as Lin and Sun point out, we cannot know someone is really griefing unless the player self-announces their role as such, and Kaceytron resolutely refuses to do so both during and outside of her play sessions.

More importantly and interestingly, Kaceytron's potential griefer status arises from how she communicates with and performs for her *viewers*, many of whom behave like trolls and whom she often “trolls back.” For example, in a stream on July 15, 2016, Kaceytron joined up with Nick Bunyun, another popular streamer and *Counter-Strike* player, to play the game. Although the majority of her stream time was not really focused on the gameplay—even when she and Nick were actively playing—it is useful to highlight a few moments to see how Kaceytron operates. When they were finally starting the game, after almost an hour of setup and chat, Kaceytron announced, “I'm really good at the hostage maps.” This was still during the warm-up phase, but her statement put Nick and the stream on notice that she (presumably) both knows something about the game (what kinds of maps are available) and has preferences and expertise relative to them. However, shortly after a match began, Kacey's avatar was shot and she died. She commented, “Not sure where that came from.” She respawned and then quickly died again, announcing, “Okay we need to turn this game around,” as if the rest of the team were at fault. After dying yet another time, she responded, “I think that person is using aimbots”—a type of cheat that lets players automatically aim their guns.

The chat in reaction to Kaceytron's performance on this occasion was predictable for her stream. Numerous chatters told her that she was a terrible player, that she sucked, that she should uninstall the game and kill herself, and that “they're good, you're not.” Yet Kaceytron was undeterred, telling Nick that *his* viewers were going into her chat to abuse her, that they did not know her, and that “you need to get your viewers in line.” She concluded all this was happening because “they don't like to see girls who



are better than them.” At this point, it was difficult to know if Kaceytron was indeed a poor player with delusions of grandeur or possibly someone with a run of bad luck at the start of the game. Even her guest partner, Nick, at one point said, “You’re going the wrong way,” to which she replied, “I’m taking a short cut.” After a period of time, she either started to improve or caught a break and was dying less often. At that point, the focus of the stream shifted back away from the game itself and onto the conversation between Kaceytron and Nick, both of whom seemed intent on asking each other absurd questions and replying in as obtuse a way possible.

In this segment, a few things are going on. Almost as a given are streams of borderline (and not so borderline) obscene insults continuously scrawling up the chat screen; such insults were omnipresent during this exchange. But rather than acknowledge as legitimate the grief and trolling sent her way, Kaceytron instead hurls it back, denying its relevance and refusing to acknowledge that she herself is a griever. *She* is not a poor player, and her viewers are not the problem—she is only there to play and have a good time. The abuse is therefore—according to Kaceytron—coming from someone else’s fans, who are “obviously” hostile to a woman who is better than they at a particular game. This statement can be hard to deny—research has found that women gamers do in fact face abuse, particularly when they beat male gamers in competitive games (Delamere and Shaw 2008). Kaceytron, rather than flee from abuse, discredits its source. She further refuses the terms of engagement—that she is a poor player. She instead confidently asserts that she is a superior player. However, the audience *knows*—or thinks they know—that she is not as good as she believes. Is she really bad and thus lying to herself? Is she a good player but deliberately messing up? Is she trolling the trolls? It is impossible to tell, which makes the performance so multilayered and tantalizing. Who is winking at whom?

### Trolling Twitch’s Streamer Culture

There is a constant back and forth with Kaceytron, some of her actions signaling she knows nothing, yet others suggesting she might just be playing around. It would be easy at this point to dismiss Kaceytron as someone who does indeed make money by being a girl in a low-cut shirt who is (possibly) decent at games but vastly inflates her skill through her rhetorical performances and flourishes. But alongside Kaceytron’s mispronunciations and mistakes are savvy and incisive critiques of the very performance she is enacting. She regularly calls out disingenuous activities that occur in the Twitch live-streaming community—in her gaming streams, in “news updates,” on Twitter, and elsewhere. In early August 2016, she tweeted about how “being a girl is

so hard,” a tweet that featured what her critics would suggest is her normal persona at work.

Such tweets easily support the “Kaceytron as troll” and “Kaceytron as boob streamer” narratives. Yet I believe Kaceytron also engages in what Kishonna Gray calls “resistance grieving,” defined as using the resources available to oneself to derail “negative experiences and fight back against the dominant structures within the [game] space” (2013). So, for example, Kaceytron also ranted on Twitter a few days after the stream on July 15 about Twitch streamers who engage in ethically (and legally) questionable practices (as shown in figure 5.5).



**Figure 5.4**

Tweet from August 6, 2016.



**Figure 5.5**

Kaceytron reacts to Twitch streamers’ practices.

Kaceytron's rant about "scam artists" on Twitch exposes the double standard she is accused of—that by "showing off her tits," she is the supposed scam artist rather than those who engage in practices that are much more directly about getting money out of one's viewers, such as actively soliciting donations on screen, promising perks for cash, and so on. During her streams as well as on Twitter, viewers and followers regularly excoriate her for a lack of skill and for "taking views away" from more "legitimate" streamers—both female and male—a claim made against many female streamers who are conventionally attractive (Hernandez 2016). In addition to taking views "away" from other streamers, "boobie streamers" can also be blamed for normalizing the toxic attitude toward women streamers on Twitch. Perhaps the best example of this argument can be found in the YouTube video *Dear Female Streamers* made by popular Twitch streamer Sky Williams. The video, which has more than 1.3 million views as of this writing, is a four-plus minute long rant by Sky (a black gay man) about how female streamers who show their boobs are now the "standard" by which all female streamers are judged and how the bad behavior they engender in male viewers is transferred to *all* female streamers as a result (S. Williams 2015). In a later Twitch stream, however, Sky clarified that Kaceytron is *not* one of the streamers he is targeting because "she is doing it for satire. Obviously" (Generation Blue 2015).

What is also key to point out and perhaps lends credence to the idea that Kaceytron is a resistance griever who knows exactly what she is doing is that even as she mispronounces key gaming terms that any "core" gamer should know, she is at the same time adept at using the lingo of monetized Twitch streamers in her tweets. The acronym TTS stands for the "text-to-speech" function that computer users can engage to have typed text read aloud. In the Twitch community, TTS has become an entertaining promotional tool when it is turned on by some streamers to read out donation messages coming in from viewers. The results can be both funny as well as obscene, but Kaceytron points out that they also serve as an easy way to gain donations for the streamer in charge. She likewise points to the use of "subtrains," which occur when viewers of a particular stream start subscribing every five minutes and a count is kept to see how high the "subtrain" can go. Finally, Kaceytron mentions the g2a website, which offers to sponsor certain Twitch streamers to promote the site, where players can buy and sell game keys that have questionable origins. (She also posts an email allegedly showing g2a asking her to become a sponsor of the site, which she refused.) Kaceytron's succinct use of all these terms in one tweet demonstrates that she does possess gaming capital of a key sort—the capital related to the world of professional Twitch streamers.

## Conclusions

Returning to the question of how Kaceytron's stream and performance can be considered transgressive, we can see how she violates multiple boundaries—what “girl gamers” should look and act like, how a stream's chat should be managed, and what a “successful” stream should be. In one of the few interviews with Kaceytron that I could find, she explains that although part of what she is doing online is based on her own personality and interests, she views her stream mostly as “long-form improv” (MostlyBiscuit 2015). Such a categorization makes sense—the persona she has created is so over the top that it begs not to be taken seriously, even as it contains dashes of truth and incisive critique. Viewers seem to recognize this—constantly talking online about how she is a troll and not to fall for her act—even as they end up viewing and falling into the trap of hectoring her for that very performance. The Kaceytron that we watch—looking young and attractive, showing cleavage, burping, swearing, and playing videogames well or poorly—is a perpetual work in progress that challenges our ideas about what women streamers should be. She says being a girl gamer is hard, but she is awesome at it, even as she dies multiple times. Her spectators subscribe for months on end and offer unending streams of donations simply to share her screen space and talk back to her in some way. She refuses to be silenced by abuse or even to hide the abuse—embodying a form of the resistance griefer that Gray (2013) has written about. And when the act becomes too consistently one-sided, ultimately reifying the normative boundaries for proper streaming behavior, Kaceytron slides into an incisive critique of the Twitch community, calling to task those who employ viewbots or promote gambling sites or other practices that are either ethically or legally questionable. Her words and her actions transgress in multiple ways, even as they are cloaked in the everydayness of a girl gamer in a low-cut shirt who is not afraid to swear back at those who insult her.

## 6 Let's Play Performance as Transgressive Play

Hanna Wirman and Rhys Jones

As a sandbox game, *The Sims 3* (Maxis 2009, hereafter given as *TS3*) provides players with numerous tools to create avatars, or “Sims,” and actively manage or merely observe their lives in player-set or precreated environments. Considering *transgression* in such an open world is best based on the game’s theme and everyday settings. Everyday settings not only allow for easy adoption of the mechanics of the game but also imply the significance of applying specific values, norms, and rules from the largely North American cultural context that is represented in the game. As such, *TS3* offers the possibility to explore and experience lives not available for the player elsewhere, while revisiting and challenging the known ideological structures absent in the otherwise familiar environment. The freedom and safety to explore *forbidden play* (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) or *brink play* (Poremba 2007; chapter 1 in this volume) allow for a variety of socially or morally unacceptable activities to be exercised in the game. Drawing on Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman note that this is not unique to *TS3* but also concerns games more generally because they “permit and often encourage normally taboo behavior, or forbidden play” (2003, 478).

Although such transgressions—violations to the conventions and socially acceptable behaviors of the outside world (Jenks 2003, 2–3)—may be inherent to the game form itself, this chapter looks at how Let’s Play—a service for fan-made gameplay videos accompanied with player voice-over—presents norm-breaking and often politically incorrect characters, events, and storylines to nonplayers and renders play itself a performance that serves to entertain beyond the player. Taboo topics no longer exist in the “safety” of (solitary) play and the game but appear in semi-independent derivative works that are shared, cocreated, and actively discussed online. The humor in question is similar to “transgressive humor,” such as sexist or racist humor, which ridicules groups of people. Yet the purpose of such humor is not necessarily to target those groups but exists, rather, to maintain larger discourses of interconnected values serving to support the coherence of a specific social group (Kuipers 2008). Such performances

resemble theater acts that concern sensitive topics, but it is the contribution and influence of dispersed and heterogeneous audiences and the Let's Play videos' dependence on the original commercial game that set Let's Plays aside as a unique example of such transgression. This is the first type of transgressive play explored in this chapter.

*TS3* Let's Players suggest a second form of transgressive play that violates the rules of the game itself. This *bad play* (Myers 2005) results from the Let's Players' interest in prioritizing the entertainment of others over their own success in the game. Namely, exciting and comical events often emerge as a result of deliberately reckless play that disrespects any sensible planning in terms of keeping the simulation—and the game—going. This kind of transgressive play obscures the assumed game genre of *TS3* as an everyday-life simulation and suggests that the player's actions are “wrong” with respect to the expectations of an “implied player” (cf. Aarseth 2007). The resulting humorous game events combine elements of slapstick with improv comedy—computational-character movements with human-narrator commentary—further adding to the ambiguity of both the source of humor and the potential intent behind the humor.

We approach these two types of transgressive *TS3* play through the analysis of two Let's Play video series in which players record and comment on their own gameplay. Let's Plays are some of the most popular content on YouTube, with some of the top Let's Players having millions of subscribers and even billions of views on their channels. The first Let's Play originated from user slowbeef on the Something Awful forum in 2005 (Klepek 2015) but reached a mass audience only with the wide adoption of online video-playing services (such as YouTube) around 2011. Today, Let's Play remains one of the most viewed categories on YouTube (Google 2017).

Our first case, *The Cunt Life/The Tunt Life* (Inside Gaming 2013a), is a Let's Play series that follows the fictional characters Cunt Cunt and his son, Tunt Cunt, created by Adam Kovic, Bruce Greene, and James Willems while they worked at the YouTube channel Inside Gaming. The series started life on the show *Steam Roulette* (Inside Gaming 2013b), in which a website attached to the creators' Steam account randomly selected a game they did not own for them to play. The first episode of *The Cunt Life* series was published on September 14, 2013, in response to the success of the earlier *Steam Roulette TS3* episode. There were 22 episodes in total (including the initial *Steam Roulette* episode) and a final live gameplay performed at the Inside Gaming panel at the convention RTX 2014; the final video of the series was published on YouTube on July 15, 2014, when the series discontinued. Each episode is from 5 to 10 minutes long.

*Redneck Brothers* (Robbaz 2014) is a Let's Play series created by Swedish Let's Player Robert Öberg, a.k.a. Robbaz. It documents the misadventures of a family of “rednecks”

in *TS3* and makes extensive use of expansion packs and game modifications (mods) to deliver funny gameplay footage. The first episode was published on YouTube on February 27, 2014. There are 38 episodes in the series, and, as of September 2017, it was still running. Episodes of this series are on average 10 to 15 minutes long.

These two Let's Play series feature stories that extend from one episode to another and contextualize individual events as the characters' lives are introduced in detail. The in-game footage is further framed by voice-over explanations. Given that the two series have a total of 60 episodes to date, they offer a wide range of play examples. Both *The Cunt Life* and *Redneck Brothers* have had hundreds of thousands of views per episode. Although it is difficult to study who the audiences of Let's Play video series are, we can generally characterize these particular videos as *TS3* fan texts and their viewers as fans of those fan texts, with the concept of fandom being stretched to cover those who find pleasure in playing against the grain. Viewers of Let's Play videos are typically knowledgeable of videogames in general and are insiders to gaming cultures. *The Cunt Life* is in a unique position in that it is almost an *TS3* antifan text. The Let's Players at Inside Gaming actively lament playing the game and continue to play only for the entertainment of their viewers, as indicated in part 20 of the series (Inside Gaming 2014). The fan audience of the Let's Play series concurs: "Never liked the Sims games, but Robbaz makes it look so entertaining. ... I swear he could make a paint drying simulator look like fun" (MeetMyMeat 2014). By playing a game they suggest they actually dislike, the Inside Gaming panel players set up their series as a violation not only of how the game is typically played but also of the established *TS3* fan norms.

### Character Stereotypes

As a simulation, *TS3*—just like any game—can provide only a limited number of available actions and is far from a complete reconstruction of a physical world (cf. Frasca 2003). The playing out of what the player considers taboo or an ethically questionable act, based on his or her culture, can be either available or absent in the game simulation. Although killing one's character may be possible in *TS3*, it is not possible to lead one's Sim to cause bodily harm to another Sim, for example. With respect to character creation in *TS3*, one cannot equip one's character with racist or violent tendencies. However, it is possible for a Sim to be configured as a "hot-head," a "snob," a "mean person," a "kleptomaniac," or a "disliker of children." We may further consider the selections one is able to make with respect to the physical appearance of the character as a baseline for other taboo or negative transgressions because one is able to choose, among many other things, the character's skin tone, clothes, body shape, and hairstyle.

As a result, the player is capable of creating, for example, a hot-headed and mean white man in a wife-beater shirt or one that follows another racist stereotype. According to game developer Maxis's public-relations manager Charlie Sinhaseni, offering players such freedom to choose can result in the creation of intolerant and discriminating characters: "If someone wants to be intolerant, they can play that way. We don't say yes or no, we just give players the tools to make the game they want to make" (quoted in Thomsen 2014). The game also practices a form of discrimination in that it provides a rather limited range of bodily abilities and ethnic and religious accessories and symbols, though this lack can be successfully compensated by "skins" created by players (Wirman 2009).

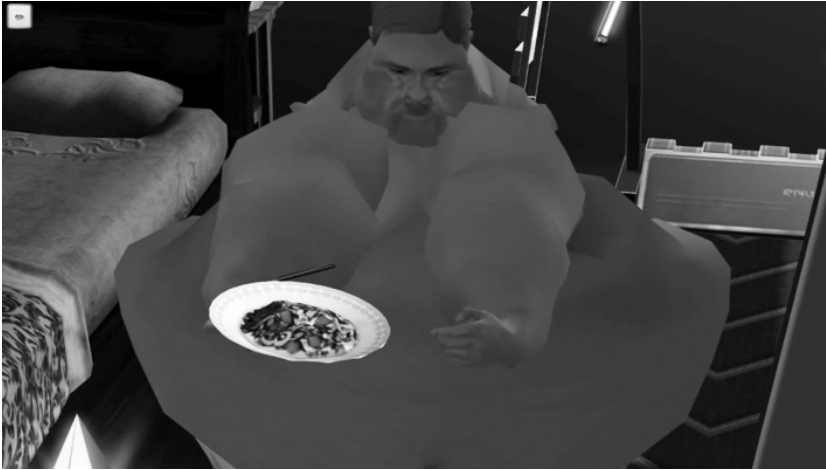
The players' ability to create stereotyped characters with the existing character-creation tools of *TS3* is very prevalent in the Let's Play videos we analyze. The creators of *The Cunt Life/The Tunt Life* make their Sim overweight and bald, cover him in tattoos, and give him mismatched clothing. In trying to create an ugly, unappealing character—according to the video commentary and accompanied with laughter (see figure 6.1)—they are not playing against the game logic but rather committing transgressions against social norms of beauty. Under the banner of personal freedom and creativity, they are also able to name their character Cunt Cunt, thus linguistically transgressing (Kristeva 1980; Lombardi 2011) not only against *TS3* naming conventions but also against conventions with respect to sexual slurs.



**Figure 6.1**

The creation of Cunt Cunt. From *The Cunt Life/The Tunt Life* (Inside Gaming 2013a).





**Figure 6.2**

"The perfect Murican." From *Redneck Brothers* (Robbaz 2014).

Most of the potentially negative and transgressive performances in *The Cunt Life* take place during actual gameplay, which is accompanied by the Let's Players' commentary. *The Cunt Life* crew manage to create stereotyped characters using the provided tools and their own moral transgressions. Robbaz creates transgressive characters via skilled playerhood and game mods in *Redneck Brothers*. Mods and skins are often created and utilized in order to surpass the limits of existing simulations and to transgress *TS3*'s internal mechanics or ideology (Sihvonen 2011; Wirman 2011). In the episode "*Sims 3—Redneck Brothers #6—The Perfect Murican*," Robbaz uses a mod to remove the limit of how fat a Sim can get. He traps a child Sim in a room with only food and forces it to eat constantly until it reaches adulthood (see figure 6.2). As a result, the Sim character keeps expanding beyond its original limit, severely distorting the texture and causing performance issues in the game. When the child grows up, Robbaz exclaims that he has finally created the "perfect Murican," having used a mod specifically to create a character representing the offensive fat American stereotype. Robbaz is eventually forced to reduce the character's weight because the fat limit keeps crashing his game, preventing him from playing it exactly as he wants.

### Sharing Brink Play

By performing stereotypical and often taboo characters in Let's Play settings, the creators of these videos often act against social norms through the character within the

gameworld. The use of characters and the playful situation that allows brink play removes the responsibility of these potentially subversive acts from the players. Notably, the original context of play also seems to detach any such responsibility from the resulting Let's Play videos and the stories. Taboo and sensitive subjects such as pedophilia and mental illness then become acceptable topics for entertainment. Game characters are so exaggerated that their otherwise unacceptable behavior can be laughed at, thus making the Let's Play video a safe arena to explore boundary-crossing dark humor. Watching these transgressions take place through the performativity of a Let's Play video adds a layer that shields the viewer from actively participating in the questionable in-game acts, thus making it "acceptable" to laugh at these acts. It may also be the case that the very absurdity of the events shown mitigates their resemblance to events in the real world and thus the responsibility for any related transgression (see chapter 9 in this volume).

Although *TS3* allows the players a great deal of freedom, certain transgressive actions are prohibited by the code, such as Sims directly killing other Sims. In many other games, killing is possible, although not the preferable course of action, but *TS3* and its predecessors feature nonviolent suburban lifestyles and target young players. In order to carry out the act of killing other Sims, Robbaz uses mods to include guns in the game. When players use guns, they aim using the first-person perspective and the camera overlay as a scope and are then able to fire at a Sim or an object. Robbaz's "American redneck" kills other Sims who are interfering with his plans or even just walking by his property. Because the mods also allow players to shoot children and kill them, this ability has led to an ongoing motif in *Redneck Brothers*: the character Clyde is always trying to kill the paperboy or girl. Robbaz even builds a watchtower where Clyde can campout to kill the paperboy. In the episode *Sims 3—Redneck Brothers #36—Keycino Royal*, Robbaz says, "The war begins; I will kill the fucking paperboy, no matter the money I will waste on this, we're building a watch tower." Killing children remains one of the taboos of digital game design, as Björn Sjöblom (2015) notes, yet mods—just like Robbaz's mods of *TS3*—often transgress this taboo.

In the exploratory sandbox worlds of the *Sims* series, players are not even allowed to directly harm children. The use of mods to negate the in-game mechanics is an act of transgression both against the game logic and against moral values. That said, Robbaz has never avoided using more "traditional" Sims methods for killing characters, including the classic scenario of surrounding a Sim with furniture and deliberately starting a fire. As Robbaz says in the video titled "*Sims 3—Redneck Brothers #7—The Alien Abduction*," "I like how they mispronounced the name of this game, this isn't *Sims 3*. This is serial killer simulator 3." The game offers methods for players to kill other Sims, yet

when these methods are not sufficient to satisfy player imagination, expert players can resort to modding and *diegetically transgressing* the game's virtual world by making the killing acknowledged by the fictional universe (see chapter 3 in this volume for more on this type of transgressivity).

The interactivity and storytelling model of Let's Plays also result in implied transgressive behavior or *transgressive realism* (see chapter 10 in this volume), which may not be acknowledged by the game logic. As an example, the Inside Gaming players suggest they want Tunt's adult guardian, Jannis, to be an alcoholic, and in order to make her so they purchase a "bar" where she constantly goes to drink, thus neglecting the child. Jannis becoming an alcoholic just to endure living with Tunt turns into a running joke for a few episodes. However, the "bar" the creators purchase is actually a nonalcoholic juice bar according to the game's available features. Although earlier instances of *The Sims* afforded an interpretation of creating alcoholic drinks, the bar in *TS3* is explicitly for making nonalcoholic juice only. There is therefore a conflict between the story being told by Inside Gaming and the actual in-game actions. Similarly, Robbaz has his redneck brothers create "moonshine" to sell, yet he is simply using the game's "Nectar Maker" item, which makes nonalcoholic nectar. The performativity of Let's Plays sometimes demands that the Let's Player be at odds with the in-game mechanics in order to tell the story they want to tell.

### Characters with a Following

As Rune Klevjer has noted, there is a difference between avatars and characters, whereby players merely have "a relationship of identification" within a diegetic world with characters but create "a prosthetic extension of agency and perception" through an avatar (2006, 116). Although the Sim characters in both *The Cunt Life* and *Redneck Brothers* started off as avatars, they turn into characters through gameplay as their Let's Play series progress. From one episode to another, the characters' personalities become more complete and fully rounded based on performed player preferences and choices. In *The Cunt Life*, James Willems, one of the creators, provides more of Cunt and Tunt's internal thoughts as voice-over. These thoughts are not James's or the Inside Gaming crew's self-representation but rather Cunt's and Tunt's as they have evolved from being simply avatars to being characters during the course of the Let's Play series and in negotiation between the creators, the game's affordances, and the audience members, who offer their views through YouTube comments.

Further evidence of the evolution of the series' avatars into characters is found in the fandom surrounding the characters. Fans of both series started creating fan art of

the characters early on, and there was so much demand for it that Cunt T-shirts were made available on the Inside Gaming shirt store, featuring an image of Cunt in the style of the Barack Obama “Hope” poster, with text underneath him reading “Actor” (see figure 6.3). Furthermore, when the Inside Gaming crew introduced their *Sims 4* series *The Munt Life*, they started the video by stating: “Your favourite characters Cunt and Tunt will not be in this new series of the Inside Gaming Life. What we’re going to do, though, is ... those characters have been made, I’m gonna upload those, they’ll be public for people to download. ... We’d like to see your adventures of the characters we created.”

Cunt and Tunt are derivative fan works of *TS3* and therefore have a significant fan base of their own. Importantly, the fans of *The Cunt Life* are not necessarily fans of *TS3* but rather fans of the content the Inside Gaming crew have produced based on *TS3*. Even now, years after the series has ended, people post threads in tribute to *The Cunt Life* on the Inside Gaming crew’s subreddit for their new YouTube channel Funhaus.



**Figure 6.3**

“Actor” T-shirt image made available after *The Cunt Life* (Inside Gaming 2013a) gained popularity.

A post upvoted more than 300 times and created by Reddit user Zero\_ms on July 16, 2016, was entitled "3 Days Ago Cunt Became a 3 Years Old [sic]" and had a simple message: "Rest in peace sweet prince. I wish they could bring you back to life." The post was followed by user replies fondly remembering the series and explaining it to fans of the new channel Funhaus who were unaware of Inside Gaming's previous work.

The Let's Play series treats the lives of the Inside Gaming characters as a traditional television show would, with each episode beginning with a quick montage recap of the previous episode's main comedic beats: "Previously on *The Cunt/Tunt Life* ..." The show then opens with a title graphic of the characters accompanied by the series name, *The Cunt Life*, and subsequently *The Tunt Life*. The series features two characters with cheeky names, Cunt and Tunt, to signify the Inside Gaming team's satirical take on playing through the characters' lives. Tunt was created after Cunt died due to poor management. Inside Gaming member Willems voiced over one line of dialogue on the opening title screen, "I wanna be an actor," for episodes of *The Cunt Life* and then "I miss my dad" for early episodes of *The Tunt Life*, later replaced by "I want to be the president" when Tunt has reached adulthood and chosen his life goal to be the leader of the free world. As a result of the Let's Play series being treated like a real TV show, Inside Gaming challenged the generational feature of the *Sims* games in the interest of continuing the series. According to series lore, Tunt is the son of Cunt, yet the series dismisses (or, better, transgresses) the game logic's perception of generations by simply giving Tunt the last name "Cunt." Tunt is not perceived as the "true" son of Cunt because the Inside Gaming crew were never able (despite their best efforts) to get Cunt to have sex with another Sim and bring a son organically into the game using preexisting game mechanics. In a time-travel episode, however, Cunt's descendants are located in the future world, implying that an in-game lineage exists. Although the in-game logic compromises the lore of the Inside Gaming-created character, there is no reason for the creators to point out this discrepancy within the Let's Play series. If we assume that the intended goal of the show is to be entertaining, the idea that Cunt has a strange family in the future is simply more entertaining than picking apart the mechanical inconsistencies of the story. The logic of the story and the imaginary characters are considered more important than specific details of the game system's functions. The performative nature of the Let's Play genre inherently lends itself to exaggerated personas or characters of the Let's Players themselves. The link between game spectatorship and transgressive play has already been observed in the case of the game *Johann Sebastian Joust* (Wilson 2012, 158). The player that a Let's Player portrays in his video is not a true representation of the type of person he is in real life; rather, the portrayal is a performative act that focuses on entertaining a very particular audience.

## Being a Bad Player

A player may be perceived to play badly if a game does not offer a meaningful response to specific actions—that is, if the player attempts to play in a way that differs from how the game was intended to be played and the player does not fit the expectations of an implied player (Aarseth 2007). For example, players who deliberately kill their teammates instead of their enemies in a shooting game would certainly be deemed “bad players” because their gameplay does not help them to reach the goal or winning state of the game. In his seminal treatment of *bad play*, David Myers refers to this specific type of bad play as “rule-breaking play” (2005).

Sandbox games such as *TS3* have no specific goals or winning states. Because we cannot define “bad” play based on skillfully maneuvering one’s way toward a victory in *TS3*, the way in which we define good and bad play needs to be revisited for this type of game. Although it is possible to consider good play as that which simply continues the game instead of leads to the end of the game, Let’s Plays offer an alternative way of approaching good and bad play.

The best-known examples of the suggested kind of transgressive play within the *Sims* series is probably when players deliberately attempt to kill their Sims. Presented as humorous clips of gameplay videos or detailed in forum writings, individual instances of killing one’s character have been discussed online since the first version of *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) (e.g., “Cutu Puss” 2015) and recognized in scholarly accounts of the game (e.g., Nutt and Railton 2003; Kim 2005).

In *The Cunt Life*, Inside Gaming filled Cunt’s apartment with fridges. Although doing so is not a transgressive act in itself—the game allows you to have twelve or more fridges in your apartment—it is transgressive on a gameplay level because it is improper financial management to buy 12 fridges for one Sim when the Sim can ever use only one at a time. There is no benefit from having more than one fridge in the game. As an example of performative play targeted at creating amusing video content, the Inside Gaming team’s aim was not to play the game in a successful way but rather to play the game in a way that would create successful YouTube content. Where the Let’s Play series narrative works against the mechanics and meaningful gameplay, the story goes first.

Similarly, in *Redneck Brothers*, the YouTuber begins the series by constructing several small buildings on one lot to re-create a trailer park to facilitate the lives of stereotypical “rednecks.” The game does not forbid putting up several small buildings, yet it is an unusual use of the build tool, which would usually be utilized to create one home or dwelling per lot. In terms of successful or efficient resource management, it is a

great disadvantage in terms of available space to build several small buildings instead of a single larger one. Furthermore, each building needs to be individually equipped, which makes multiple houses a costly decision. And although the game allows players to create small buildings, doing so does not follow on a narrative level with respect to character movement. People living on one specific lot belong to one household and move around the lot space—which may or may not have several buildings built on it—regardless of whom the player has intended to occupy individual units.

The inept playerhood of Let's Players often leads to absurd and weird gameplay moments in which strange things happen that would not normally occur during regular play. What emerges from the amusement in response to these moments is that inept playerhood as entertainment becomes a transgressive concept unique to the act of watching videogames. Watching a player who does not understand the rules, mechanics, controls, or other features of a given game play that game can be a frustrating experience. Yet some Let's Players will deliberately not learn how to play the game properly before filming in order to create these transgressive moments of not knowing how to play the game.

The openness of *TS3* allows for “bad” gameplay by players who do not understand or bother to learn the controls and mechanics in place within the game. It is thus important that the Inside Gaming Let's Players are *TS3* antifans who do not know how to use every function of the game yet continue to play: this situation creates humorous content for their viewers, thereby contributing to the fan cultures surrounding *TS3*.

Although inept playerhood is undoubtedly negative in professional settings (in eSports, for example), poor performance during Let's Plays is tolerated because of the amusing situations that arise as a result. Furthermore, viewers are not necessarily watching Let's Players for their skills in gaming but rather because they like a particular Let's Player's style or humor.

Transgressive acts can also be blocked by inept playerhood. If players do not understand the game mechanics and tools necessary to play the game, it can impede their ability to create the gameplay footage they want. During *The Cunt Life*, one of the creators states: “The ultimate goal in life, as we all know, is to get laid. So I think we should get Cunt laid. Can we try and get him laid?” This comment sets up the task for Cunt to go and have sex with as many women as he can. However, the inept playerhood of the Inside Gaming team means they do not understand the game's social and relationship mechanics and so are unable to get Cunt “laid.” Turning Cunt into a sexual deviant is blocked by their (performed) inability to comprehend the game mechanics.

In another example, an obscure intermingling of game logic and bad play result in a unique plot twist involving the “poor” placement of furniture. As the Inside Gaming

team play *TS3*, they usually buy multiple versions of the same object or class of object and throw them into the same space or room (see figure 6.4). This causes conflicts with the characters' internal pathfinding and logic, causing random and unusual strings of events to take place. For example, in Cunt's apartment, items are placed along a wall in the following order: double bed, oven, single bed, toilet, urinal, toilet. So many items placed so close to each other result in a strange series of events:

- Cunt relaxes on the single bed.
- Cunt gets up from the single bed.
- Cunt walks around to a double bed to sleep.
- Cunt sleeps for a couple of seconds.
- Cunt wakes up.
- Cunt walks around the single bed to use the toilet and goes back next to the single bed.
- Cunt gets into the single bed to sleep again.
- Cunt wakes up several seconds later and urinates into the toilet the farthest to the right.

These events can be seen in the first episode of the *TS3* series, titled "WE ARE GOD! (Pervert Edition)—*Steam Roulette!*" at 4 minutes 20 seconds. The random placement of similar classes of object causes problems for the game logic. The game decides which objects are best for the Sim to use based on the quality of the object and the Sim's



**Figure 6.4**

Random placement of objects conflicts with internal *TS3* game logic. From *The Cunt Life/The Tunt Life* (Inside Gaming 2013a).



needs, thus causing Cunt to use the objects in the room in a seemingly random manner. The Inside Gaming team, however, interpret this randomness not as a reflection of the game logic but rather as a reflection of Cunt being a strange and eccentric character.

Being bad or inept players is not something that the Inside Gaming team ever deny; in fact, there are certain situations in which they admit how bad they are at playing the game. For instance, when they learn that the reason Tunt is unable to use the toilet is that they have deleted the door to the bathroom, James says, "We think the game's stupid, but we're stupid." Their refusal to learn the game mechanics and rules is an act of transgression in and of itself because the game operates under the assumption that the player understands these core mechanics and rules. Not only do the Inside Gaming crew refuse to learn how to play the game, but they also actively take steps to make sure they cannot learn any more about those rules, quickly dismissing the blue pop-up boxes that appear in the top-right corner of the screen that offer tips and tutorials on various aspects of the game. The Inside Gaming players do not hide that they do not "like" *TS3* and often comment on how they think the game is "garbage" and "terrible."

Such love-hate relationships have been observed in various cases where fans negotiate their relationship with the object of fandom (e.g., Lewis 1992), declare a sense of ownership over it, and become critical toward it. This description draws on cross-media examples of the cult followings often acquired by bad movies (Jancovich 2003). However, whereas films that gain cult followings for being bad are enjoyed because of their bad content, *TS3* has almost universally positive reviews (with a score of 84 out of 100 on Metacritic [n.d.]) and is thus objectively not a "bad" game. A better parallel can be drawn with romance antifans, who remain attracted to the novels they claim to hate (Wagenseller Goletz 2012). Let's Plays, however, suggest a case far more complicated because Let's Players do not simply play for their own enjoyment but to entertain others. A historical context for Let's Players may be found among court jesters, who entertain through humorously challenging the status quo, including those in power (Otto 2007). Arguably, the kind of disrespectful mockery pervasive in the studied *TS3* Let's Plays also sends a message to the creators of one of the most successful games of all times.

### Accidental and Expert Success

Playing a game incorrectly or against the intended way of playing may allow some players to gain exceptional advantage in the game, either accidentally or intentionally through bugs, glitches, cheats, or hacking. These loopholes allow for gameplay

that subverts implied play by both inept/amateur players and expert players alike. Notably, Myers makes a distinction between inferior and skillful play, where “we most often consider the outcome of knowledgeable bad play to be rules-breaking (and thus dysfunctional), and the outcome of ignorant bad play to be rules-learning (and thus functional)” (2005, 136). In the case of *Inside Gaming*, reckless play is only remotely functional and may appear rather skillful to an outside observer. In terms of succeeding in the game, inept play is not always a hindrance. Inferior players may be more likely than skillful or rule-obeying players to try random and unrelated things in the game.

The “inept” *Inside Gaming* crew take Cunt into the future using a time portal in *The Sims 3: Into the Future* expansion pack (Maxis and EA Salt Lake 2013). There, they accidentally realize that they are still able to access build mode and that, therefore, they can sell items in the future world. After selling almost everything in the future world, they take Cunt back through the time portal to the “present day,” where they still have the many thousands of units of the in-game currency Simoleons that they gained by selling everything in the future. This is an example of where their lack of skill by chance results in a (fruitful) transgression being committed against the internal game world.

After the *Inside Gaming* crew stumbles upon this ability to sell items from communal areas, it becomes a repeated strategy for them throughout the series when they enter a new communal space (such as the university dormitory) or when they are running low on money.

Expert players of a game, meanwhile, are able to use their mastery and knowledge of in-game mechanics to subvert gameplay when things are not in their favor. Rewards, bonuses, and shortcuts to a game serve as forms of reward to expert players who have dedicated enough time and effort to become pro players. Whereas *Inside Gaming* negate the death of their character by creating a son for him, Robbaz chooses to resurrect a dead character called Bertram using the in-game tools. Bertram is portrayed as a butler in *Redneck Brothers*. By getting Bertram’s ghost to eat ambrosia in *TS3*, Robbaz brings him back to life, and he is able to join the brothers’ household again. In the game, ambrosia is a very rare and high-level food item that reverses aging in live Sims and revives dead Sims. Creating it requires mastery of multiple skills and several ingredients that are hard to find. Demonstrating patience, dedication, and knowledge to create ambrosia, Robbaz comes across as a pro player who reaches his goals through deeply understanding and utilizing the mechanics of the game.

The ability to obtain an item as difficult to get as ambrosia can also be referred to as *superplay*: “Superplay is a generic term that covers a range of gaming practices that

differ significantly in their execution and implementation but are bound together by a common desire to demonstrate mastery of the game through performance" (J. Newman 2008, 123). Much of what Robbaz achieves in his Let's Play videos can be seen as examples of superplay as the inherently performative nature of Let's Plays mixes with the high-level tasks he sets for himself at the beginning of each episode. In direct contrast to the superplay displayed by Robbaz, the Inside Gaming crew resort to cheating in their Let's Play series, directly subverting the rules and spirit of the game. Adam, a member of the team, states: "For the sake of transparency I just wanna say, I used cheats. I gave us 50,000 dollars 'cuz this game is stupid." They cheat because of a perceived fault in the game. They feel felt as if they are unable to do what they want to do in the game, so they cheat to try to make up for that inability. However, James is quick to point out that "the problem isn't that we didn't have money, it's that none of us have the patience to do and build the things we need to do and build." This comment suggests some self-awareness that the fault lies not with the game but rather with their inept playerhood and unwillingness to master the game.

## Conclusions

The Let's Play series by Inside Gaming and Robbaz provide valuable insights into acts of transgressive play that can be achieved within *TS3*. Both expert and inept players are able to use the game to commit transgressions through forbidden/brink play and bad play. The measure of success in performing the latter is not always limited by the players' understanding of the game mechanics. Inept players may cause transgressions against the game system itself (what Holger Pötzsch in chapter 3 of this volume calls *ludic transgressions*) by causing internal logic problems that would not be caused by expert players, who follow the path of an implied player. At the other end of the player spectrum, however, expert players are able to bend the game to their will using modifications, transgressing both in-game systems and moral/social boundaries.

We have discussed two *Sims 3* Let's Play series in which transgression relies on external audiences of videos shared on YouTube. In fact, playing the game just for its instrumental value of entertaining elsewhere (Wirman 2007) may be considered a type of transgressive play in itself—playing without a goal, just to enjoy it, to really play it. Although it may be challenging to consider such Let's Players as fans of *TS3*, we see how strong fan bases around the Let's Play videos form a kind of secondary fandom.



## 7 Queering Games, Play, and Culture through Transgressive Role-Playing Games

Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros

*Monsterhearts* (Alder 2012) is a horror role-playing game (RPG) about “sexy monsters, teenage angst, personal horror and secret love triangles,” although the game “isn’t really a game about monsters” (Alder n.d., back cover, 42). It is an indie tabletop role-playing game that explores specific game mechanics and foregrounds a certain narrative experience. The content of the game is not that striking; it draws on the popular teen horror genre (e.g., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the *Twilight* saga), and its players are likely to know what they are getting into. In fact, the game’s designer, Avery Alder, is betting on that: “You play because you have a guilty attraction to supernatural beasts and harlequin love stories, but you harbor the secret presumption that you could write them way better yourself. Good. This is your opportunity to prove it” (Alder n.d., 4).

The figure of a monster is traditionally a metaphor used in popular fiction to remind us what we shall be if we fail to keep up our necessary social performance as humans and to guard the fluctuating boundary of the human limits of knowing (Ingebreten 1998, 29–31). The monster is associated with abjection, a source of horror that separates the human from the nonhuman while disturbing identity, system, and order (Kristeva 1982, 4). Carrying these kinds of connotations, the monster figure is an apt tool for writers of popular fiction to denote out-of-placeness or “out-of-systemness.” In our example, *Monsterhearts* is purposely playing with—and associating—monstrosity, adolescence, and queerness. As its designer notes, it is not really a game about monsters but a game about *disturbance*: it aims at luring its players to trespass on unknown territory and to transgress societal norms as well as the norms and conventions of traditional role playing.

What makes *Monsterhearts* noteworthy in this context is its game mechanics. Dice rolls determine who your character will be attracted to. This may seem like a small detail, but contrasted with the decades-long history of role-playing game mechanics where such a random determination would be impossible, it appears norm breaking that players do not get to decide their orientation. For instance, a player who thought

his male character was straight but now finds himself drawn to a man has to deal with the implications of same-sex attraction. Alder encourages the player to “explore what it means to be betrayed by your body, whether it’s becoming a flesh-eating monster that stalks the night, or being trans and experiencing the wrong puberty, or both” (Alder n.d., 43). *Monsterhearts* is a queer game artifact that not only transgresses the expectations and traditions of role-playing games but also actively pushes the player to be monstrous—or, put otherwise, to be *queer*.

In this chapter, we approach particular kinds of transgressions in role-playing games and conceptualize them as *queering*. This term is the key theoretical element through which we intend to grasp the player’s experience in a new way and develop the research field further. In short, *queering* refers to using something against the grain in a subversive or dissident way. As such, it is a good fit especially for considering acts of gaming the system. Generally speaking, the term *queering* also has rebellious and countercultural connotations in queer studies, although *queer* was originally used only to mean “sexually transgressive.” By broadening the term’s meaning, we hope to develop both game studies and queer theory through reciprocal effects.

We chose a certain subset of role-playing games for this project due to its focus on characters, performances, and narratives, which are key areas for the exploration of queer experiences. This character-driven conceptualization of role-playing games functions as a contextual frame within which our theoretical contribution is formulated. Furthermore, we also consider various kinds of role-playing games (digital multiplayer and single player games, analog tabletop games, and live-action games) in this text to highlight the differences between player agency and system as well as the context of play and the implications of playing in a small or a large group. But even though our primary context in this chapter is the role-playing game, we hope that many of our findings will have relevance beyond this specific game genre.

Our key motivation is to investigate how, first, possibilities for queerness and queer deeds are produced in game spaces through game design and player action, and, second, what the cultural context for understanding and discussing these possibilities seems to be at the moment. Through our game-centric and player-centric approaches, we discuss the threefold structure of *queering games* (by designers) and *queering play* (as an activity among players) and eventually make some remarks about *queering culture* (through, for instance, the so-called gaymer culture). This chapter, with its focus on an array of transgressive practices and concrete gameplay examples, thus sheds light on an issue that has not yet been developed in the field of game research. Before discussing and providing examples of how games,

play, and culture can be queered, we provide a brief introduction to the concept of “queer,” looking in particular at its relevance in game studies.

### Understanding Queering in the Context of Games

In her formulation of transgressive play, Jenny Sundén (2009) discusses queer uses of game spaces. In her thinking, the term *queer* acts as a reference to the ways that players appropriate the affordances of the games they play. When one starts toying with the norms and expectations governing the formation of games and play, the culture of games starts to tremble. Indeed, queering as a concept is associated with carving a space for action where such a space was not intended (cf. Russo 1987). Also, by means of “thinking differently” about gameplay, cultural norms of the ideal player can be made visible and turned around. Queer, then, has a particular relationship with cultural norms, which it both embraces and abandons, persistently playing with the mainstream (Ilmonen and Juvonen 2015). In theorizations, it encompasses a spirit of critique as well as the objectives of difference, self-reflexivity, and the drive for change (Giffney and Hird 2008, 4).

The antinormative stance of queer relates to the concept of transgression in multiple ways. In this volume, transgression is conceived largely as “passing over or beyond” (“Transgression” 2017), and to transgress is “to go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention, it is to violate and infringe” (Jenks 2003, 2). We see queering as a specific kind of going beyond, one in which heteronormativity, the binary gender system, and expectations of monogamy are questioned. In this sense, queering can be seen as an example of what Holger Pötzsch in chapter 3 of this volume calls *critical transgression*. There is also a connection to subversion, or using the system against itself, and to estrangement, or making the familiar strange—for example, by drawing attention to its structure and rules. These practices are always very context dependent because norms differ; in some settings, simply living life as a queer person is perceived as going beyond the boundaries.

*Queer* is an ambivalent term that is challenging to define concisely, let alone put to use as a theoretical tool. The term originated as a derogatory insult, and in many parts of the world it is still used as such. Indeed, even academic reviewers unfamiliar with queer theory at times react to the word, which they read as a slur. “Queer” as a theoretical concept started to be reappropriated during the 1980s. Queer theory is rooted in Judith Butler’s (1990) idea that getting labeled as a decent human requires us to engage in certain kinds of social, performative acts that we have been socialized into considering normal and acceptable. Her notion of the dichotomy of sexes as being naturalized

through performative acts has given rise to new theoretical thinking: if performative acts are at the core of identity and gender, those acts can be made visible and even subverted through play, resulting in alterations of social norms and expectations. As the term *queer* began to be used as a mark of resistance that rearticulated existing conditions in a radically different way, it paved the way for its use as a signifier of a new identity, sensitivity, community, and theory as well (Kornak 2015, 44–46).

In the context of this chapter, we use the term *queer* to encompass both practices that counter, undermine, and question heteronormativity and the binary gender system as well as nonheterosexual sexual orientations and praxes. Just as Dennis Altman regards the term as useful in unsettling “assumptions and preconceptions about sexuality and gender and their inter-relationship” (1996), we consider queering a practice that upsets existing boundaries and norms, questions moral standards, and makes these often underlying, unmentionable structures visible. Unobfuscating, making things visible and lucid, is often the first step toward unsettling them. Thus, queering can be understood as a radical practice that disrupts existing systems, although it can also have other, less dramatic purposes.

There is no doubt that gender and sexuality are important constituents of what it means to be human. A Deleuze-inspired understanding of bodies sees them not as entities but as assemblages that extend beyond defined boundaries, traversing even the border between human and nonhuman (Giffney and Hird 2008; Karppi, Kähkönen, Mannevu, et al. 2016). These assemblages produce identity and gender through iterative performances. This performative theory of gender allows us also to analyze how game characters (are made to) express their gender and sexuality through looks, actions, and reenactments and what that expression might mean for game studies as well as game design. It is equally evident that the player’s understanding of gender and sexuality plays a part in both the player’s online self-presentation as well as in the creation of game characters. In fact, it has been argued that the fluidity and constructed nature of gender in online worlds is evidence of the constructed nature of all gender (Osborne 2012, section 1.3).

In gender and queer studies, the question “What is queer?” has often been approached through concepts of identity and representation rather than through practice, which is in line with the more general cultural studies approach. In the context of games, however, a character’s looks might not be the most interesting thing to analyze after all; rather, the character’s actions and intentions within a gameworld should be examined as reflecting both naturalistic preferences and fantastic imaginations. Therefore, to create medium-specific theory, it is important to acknowledge that theoretical tools, knowledge, and insights relating to forms of expression where the participants’ agency



is lower—for instance, representations of queer characters in Hollywood films—may not be directly applicable to forms where the participants can be considered cocreators (as in analog role-playing games or computer game modding). That being said, the game industry is often strikingly similar to the film industry—in, for instance, recycling problematic or marginalizing forms of representation and rarely offering queer takes on gender and sexuality (cf. Shaw 2009; Shaw and Friesem 2016).

However, queer games do exist, and queer play is possible. Even queering the culture around games is feasible. Queerness in games is expressed mostly in association with characters who are labeled as such, who relate to other characters as queer, or whose available actions somehow legibly mark them as queer (Shaw and Friesem 2016). Focus on these actions is aided by the fact that there is a specific emphasis on performance in queer studies (e.g., Stuart 2008, 80–83). The primary means through which players interact within the game space is a game character, especially in genres where a fictional world is important, such as role-playing games and the more character-driven action adventures. The player character is the focal point of the RPG gameplay, and the character's multifaceted performance, steered by the player and structured by game mechanics, is at the core of the play experience.

Role-playing games have been defined as a subcategory of games in which participating players create imaginary events through enacting anthropomorphic character constructs in fictional worlds (Sihvonen and Stenros forthcoming). As is visible in this definition, game characters and their enactment form the core of role playing, so much so that the game's progress is tied to character development and personal-narrative arcs. However, character development can take many forms; in multiplayer online games, for instance, the role-playing genre description of the game refers most of all to the fantasy setting, character classes, and the mechanics of leveling up. (For a discussion of the definition of role-playing games, see Björk and Holopainen 2005, 252; Hitchens and Drachen 2008; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008; Montola 2008).

A growing body of work on queer gaming is being produced in academia, although this line of inquiry is relatively recent (for an overview, see Shaw and Ruberg 2017). Indeed, roughly a decade ago the media seem finally to have discovered the idea that not everyone who plays digital games is straight, although queer people have obviously played games since they were invented, and queer representation in digital games dates back to the 1980s (Shaw 2015a). Adrienne Shaw locates the turning point to 2006 because of the visible confrontations relating to queer guilds in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and the publication of *Bully* (Rockstar Games 2006), which included possibilities for nonnormative same-sex interactions (Shaw 2009, 228–229). Even more systematic queer options for players have been available from the start in

productions such as *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) (see Consalvo 2003), which is remarkable because these games are mainstream, globally popular, and aimed at all age groups (cf. Sihvonen 2011). In our earlier work (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015), we map the representations of queer characters in tabletop role-playing game sourcebooks and note that the year 2005 was an important turning point due to the publication of the thoroughly inclusive romantic fantasy game *Blue Rose* (Crawford, Elliot, Kenson, et al. 2005) and the monstrous and queer game *Wraethu: From Enchantment to Fulfilment* (Constantine and Wood, 2005).

Since the mid-noughties, role-playing games, especially of the digital variety, have been studied from a queer point of view. In addition to indispensable research done by Adrienne Shaw (2009, 2015a, 2015b), Jordan Youngblood (2013), for instance, has studied how digital RPGs can be “queered,” and Lee Sherlock (2013) has studied transgender players’ confrontations with the heteronormative environment of *World of Warcraft*. As part of his study on gay video gamers, or “gaymers,” M. William Mac-Knight (2013) has uncovered queer experiences in videogames in general. Some of the groundwork still remains to be done, however. For instance, historical overviews of the presence of queer content and themes in games are incomplete, although Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem (2016) have recently started to amass and analyze a public digital archive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) content.

### Artifact, Activity, and Shared Culture

For us, queering is the action of transgressing norms relating to identity and conduct or the performance of a persona. These norms can be cultural, situational, or internalized and personal. Even though transgressions by and large may be unintentional, as discussed in the introduction to this volume, our focus in this chapter is firmly on the deliberate breaching of norms. Next, we consider queering as it happens on three levels: the artifact, the play activity, and the shared culture of gaming. It is useful to separate these levels analytically because doing so makes thinking about them clearer, but at the same time it should be remembered that in practice these “levels” may be completely tangled and even inseparable.

The political dimension in queering games has been addressed in earlier work. For instance, Edmond Y. Chang has discussed the possibility of what he calls *queergaming*, which “queers [Alexander Galloway’s concept of] counter gaming to change, challenge, or reimagine the normativity of games” (2015, 9). Resistant and subversive readings have a long history, as do appropriative measures on sites and systems.

Furthermore, Chang’s (2017) classification of queergaming values resembles our three-level categorization. His first category is *queer(er) design*, which he sees as needing

to move past playable token gay characters to considering how queer experiences matter in terms of platform, player, and programming. This idea is quite close to our conceptualization of queering the artifact. His second category, *queer(er) play*, which is about finding ways to play against the game's intent, resist its rules, and play in a collective manner, is likewise similar to our concept "queering play"—although he uses the term *queering* in a much broader, more generally resistive way than we do. Finally, his third category, *queer remediations*, comes close to our concept "queering game cultures" in that players borrow, repurpose, and appropriate games, like any media, for their own needs. Indeed, he notes that "players have been imagining queerness in games and their relationship to games long before inclusion and the commodification of queerness became fashionable" (2017, 21).

### Queering the Artifact

A designer can queer their game artifact by incorporating narrative elements that disrupt the heteronormative order or game mechanics that push the player toward queer performance. The former are often about making the lived experience of queer people visible and can be exemplified by the digital game *dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012a), which addresses trans experience. The latter are about subverting expectations and traditions to create action that is often hard and sometimes even unthinkable in traditional game systems. *Monsterhearts* is an example of this approach because in it players lack control over the desire exhibited by their characters, thus breaking from the tradition of RPG systems of the past. Queering that takes place through a designer's work is transgressive in relation to cultural norms in general and often more specifically toward game culture norms (compare this type of queering to "ludic transgressivity" discussed in chapter 3 of this volume).

### Queering Play

Players can queer the game they are playing. This can happen either in concert with queer design, following the designers' cues for queer play, or it can happen in spite of the design, by playing against the design (cf. Sihvonen and Stenros forthcoming). Some game designs give the player room to maneuver, to counterplay, to queergame, or to bring in queer performances, whereas others are very controlling, offering limited options for the expression of personal preference. Examples of playing along with queer design include choosing to explore the plotlines involving same-sex attraction in the single-player digital RPG series *Dragon Age* (BioWare 2009–) and using *The Sims* as a platform for polygamous role play. However, possibly queergaming simply by following the rules is not in itself an act of queering play. Queering is an active choice, not just playing along. That being said, playing along with queer design or digging

out possibilities for queer play can be regarded as transgressive in relation to cultural norms—and to internalized, personal norms.

Playing against the design can be exemplified by deciding to play a happy gay character simply by using the rules of the tabletop RPG *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend* (Task Force Games 1988), which strongly discourages players from enacting what the designers view as “perverse sexual desires” (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015), or by engaging in openly erotic interactions in *World of Warcraft* (Brown 2013). Playing against the design is transgressive at least vis-à-vis the situational norms of the game setting. However, it has to be acknowledged that in most games it is possible to make some transgressive choices, although that may require ignoring some of the rules, changing them through modding, or abusing the discrepancies and discontinuations in the rules (e.g., cheating [cf. Consalvo 2007]). In stricter rule systems, queering might be an expression of expert play or of transforming the game through play (cf. Aarseth 2003).

### **Queering Game Culture**

The most ambiguous and complex level of queering is the third one, queering game culture. Queering design and queering play, when made public and visible, can work toward carving spaces for alternative identity performances and experiments in game culture. Designers’ work is obviously visible in game artifacts, although sometimes queer play options are alternatives one needs to actively search for or specifically trigger. In these cases, queer play may become visible through play residue—for example, through streaming gameplay or sharing edited videos, written accounts, or photographs of playing (cf. chapters 5 and 6 in this volume).

However, queering game culture can happen without play as well, via extending and negotiating with the game’s fictional universe through fan practices such as fanfiction. Mostly operating in online forums, fanfiction is shared in the forms of texts and images, slash or stories containing a pairing between same-sex characters, and other community practices that encourage queer play (such as LGBTQ guilds and gaymer forums). Simply expressing a gaymer identity can be seen as transgressive in the most vocal gamer culture at the moment, which is currently being contested and criticized in numerous ways, as exemplified by the Gamergate controversy (Mortensen 2016) tied to the normalization of digital gameplay (Kultima 2009). The struggle over game culture can be seen as one of framing: What is considered proper gaming? And who are accepted as true gamers? Within this conflict, queering is a political act with norms at stake.

In the last section of this chapter, we discuss and further develop our argument on these three categories of queering in the context of role-playing games, providing some practical examples along the way.

### Queering the Artifact, Queering Gender

Design is based on making active choices. When creating a game, designers choose what to include and what to leave out. Numerous considerations influence these choices, from time, effort, and money needed to implement a choice to customer segments and artistic visions. Whatever the underlying reasoning, these choices are also political. A game that seeks to model lived experience always leaves something out. There is normalization, where the diversity of life is not reproduced. These choices are political, and they define what is possible within the gameworld. These procedural systems and simulation rules are also how games argue; Ian Bogost (2007) calls this “procedural rhetoric.” A simulation is always simplifying, reducing, and also “othering” the source system.

In the indie multiplayer survival game *Rust* (Newman 2013), every character originally appeared as a white, bald, naked male. In 2016, it was announced that its developers had implemented a new feature: the game system would randomly assign all the game characters skin color and gender from two options. *Rust* would not give its players a choice of their physical appearance, and the characters would be immutably locked to the players’ Steam accounts. Instead of resorting to the norm of the white male, the game apparently started running a social experiment to see if the skin and texture of game characters would transpose into gendered, social practices within the gameworld. In addition to achieving an even spread of “races” and “genders” that would help identify characters, the systemic change was also supposed to make the social aspects of the game more interesting (Newman 2016b).

The lead designer of *Rust*, Garry Newman, is known for his interest in social experiments, and he has mentioned a desire for randomization in the past. When all *Rust* characters were white males, one of the differentiating factors was the shape of their genitalia (Plunkett 2016). The alteration in the game system infuriated many players, including trans people: one complained that assigning a fixed sex was reminiscent of real-world transphobia (Newman 2016b), but the designers explained: “Technically nothing has changed, since half the population was already living with those feelings. The only difference is that whether you feel like this is now decided by your SteamID instead of your real-life gender” (Newman 2016a). The long-term implications of this social experiment remain to be seen, but at least it is evident that there is a strong

connection between the *Rust* players' real-life gender identity and their avatars' gendered characteristics.

*Rust* is noteworthy because traditionally in role-playing games either everyone gets to choose some key attributes of their character (as in tabletop RPGs), or everyone plays the assigned, same character(s) (as in some digital single-player games). Not getting to choose even when options are available breaks the norm. *Rust* also underlines how gender is central to some but not all role play. Anecdotally, there are tabletop RPG groups in which performing a gender different from one's own is seen as suspect, but most tabletop cultures—following role-playing game sourcebooks—see doing this as a nonissue. In live-action RPGs (larps), the norm that one should play a character whose gender matches one's own is more common, and designers may even not consider the alternative (cf. Koski 2016).

In some larp design traditions, such as Nordic larp (Stenros and Montola 2010), it is a common trick to write all or most characters as genderless and then either to assume that the character's gender follows from the player's gender or to let the player choose the character's gender. This structure helps overcome gender stereotypes: fewer warriors and leaders default to male, and fewer characters are defined just by their relationships (spouse, child) to other characters. It is also a practical design choice because the gender split of the participants is not known in advance, and gender-neutral characters bring robustness to casting. The creation of characters' key relationships before the genders are known is also seen as a natural way of including same-sex characters and relationships.

This method is an easy way to include queer relationships in a larp that normalizes and de-emphasizes the queerness of characters. However, treating heterosexual and homosexual relationships as interchangeable entails problems, too. The story world needs to be constructed as relatively equal for homo- and heterosexuals for such relationships to function similarly, and the experiences particular to queer relationships (or to straight relationships, for that matter) are not fully developed.

Incorporating queer relationships through gender-neutral character design has taken place in the context of digital games as well. Dene Carter, the creative director of *Fable* (Lionhead Studios and Big Blue Box Studios 2004), explained the inclusion of gay content as a happy accident emerging from the nonplayer characters' code and the dislike of extra work: "We'd have had to write extra code to remove that in the case of same-sex interactions. This seemed like a ridiculous waste of time" (quoted in Ochalla 2006). Although there are digital games that explore specifically queer characters (for example, the *Grand Theft Auto* series [e.g., Tarantula Studios 1997; Rockstar North 2004, 2013]; see Shaw 2016), many of the most visible queer characters and relationships

exist as interchangeable alternatives to heterosexual characters performing the same function. Indeed, Stephen Greer argues that “the potential for non-heterosexual identification or role play is primarily constructed and validated on the same terms as playing straight” (2013, 5; see also Chang 2015 and Shaw 2015a). Edmond Chang goes a step further: “Games like *FrontierVille* and *World of Warcraft* offer beginnings for gendered and queered play, allowing players to imagine and enact a range of desires, but both games narrow these choices and possibilities, rendering them algorithmically inconsequential, and restore them to heteronormative ends” (2015, 7).

One way to think about this is to see all the romanceable nonplayer characters in a digital game and all character sketches in a larp design as bisexual. However, that is a particularly reductive way of thinking about bisexuality; as Greer notes, “we tend to understand bisexuality as something other than merely contextual or opportunistic reciprocation of attraction” (2013, 15). Such a design may create cues for queer play, but there is very little that is queer about the design itself. Creating more specificity in characters requires more work, and, indeed, in both larps and digital games that often means fine-tuning based on the genders chosen (for instance, dialogue trees or character rewrites).

### Queering Play, Gaming the System

Games are a remarkable medium for trial and experimentation because they constitute a possibility space for social action governed by explicitly artificial systems of rules as well as incentives and obstacles for interaction. All systems can be played with in ways that do not follow their designed intent, and ludic systems that seek to encourage playfulness are particularly susceptible to being played in inventive ways. Gaming a system—that is, using a system in an unintended way by abusing loopholes, toying with the rules, and hacking procedures—is always transgressive in some way in relation to the game artifact (see chapter 3 in this volume).

The term *game* is commonly used in two ways in academia. On the one hand, it is used to refer to a designed artifact, something in which a system of rules is described or coded; on the other hand, it is used to refer to the act of play according to and with a systemic artifact, an enacted and embodied performance (cf. Frasca 2007, 40–41; Juul 2008; Stenros 2015). There is a gap between these two definitions; a group of players need not enact a performance of a game strictly according to the designed artifact and the designer’s inscribed intentions.

In game studies, gameplay design has been called *second-order design* (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 304) because designers never directly design play activity. In fact,

this challenge is common because all design is “second order” in this way; a designer designs tools and systems, not the activity directly, and this gap exists not just between games and gameplay but also between all systems and their use. The intended way of using a system tends to be narrower or specific in some way than what usage of the system can afford. Thus, it is possible to use a system in unintended ways without breaking its explicit rules (Greer 2013).

When systems, be they games or something else, are used as designed, we can label this practice as *using the system*. If the intended—that is, correct—way of using a system is ignored or extended with different rules and goals, then we encounter *playing the system*. In games, this could mean bringing in goals set and validated by the player(s), using the game for alternative purposes, or grieving other players. For example, a player might use customization and modding tools as well as client-side fixes in multiplayer online games to alter how she sees her own character and her screen, although it will not affect how others see her in the game.

However, when many people start using the system in a particular, nonconforming way, a new activity form comes into being. These common, alternative ways of using a system can be called *gaming the system* (Stenros 2010). A more roundabout way of playing the system is by widening the concept of a game system to include other players and the surrounding paratextual industries. Now playing the system assumes merely a metaphoric meaning because it is done through interactions in gaming culture.

It is in this gap between the intended usage of a system and the actual uses of it that queer play emerges in response to designed cues—or in the absence of them (Sihvonen and Stenros forthcoming). *Queering the system* can be understood as practice that disrupts and hijacks the existing system’s meaning making. If conducted spontaneously or singularly, queering the system would be a subcategory of playing the system. When done in a planned and practiced manner or in a social context, it falls under gaming the system. Therefore, as play is made public or play is performed for the public, its dynamics change. The most obvious examples of queering play are known through controversies they have sparked in online discussion forums. One way of interpreting these controversies is to regard them as symptoms of a “mediating” attitude toward role play and the use of game characters. Regarding gender performativity as transgressive practice in online RPGs, Heather Osborne writes,

Performing alternative gender and sexual identities in RPGs proved satisfying for many respondents. For some, the richness of roleplaying lies in exploring characters’ personalities and backstories, including their gender and sexuality. For others, performing characters mediated their explorations of their own gender identities and sexualities. This intertextual, negotiated reading frames roleplaying as a queering, transformative practice. (2012, section 6.3)



Role-playing games are particularly apt for queering because in them the social layer of character interactions is rarely codified by rules to the extent that identity play becomes impossible. Indeed, when a queer person plays RPGs, they queer them almost by accident.

### **Queering Game Culture, Normalized Queer Play**

Queer play can feel completely normal and norm abiding for everyone involved. Tabletop role-playing games are the most obvious example. Tabletop role-playing games are a private art form because they are tied to a specific time and place and closed off from the external world. Only the people present are privy to what happens. Furthermore, tabletop RPGs are not only free from larger-scale social pressures but can be based primarily on participant-created material. Tabletop RPGs can be based on published systems, settings, and narratives, but the participants can and do fine-tune these elements liberally. Within this socially constructed separate space for playing, the “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955; see also Stenros 2014), players can explore issues they struggle with, they can fail without losing face, and they can construct a fantasy world that is personally interesting and fitting for them. An example of these practices can be found in Ashley Brown’s (2013) ethnographic study of sexuality in games. She discusses a tabletop role-playing group in which queer themes and characters came up in ways that do not seem transgressive of local social norms but rather like a normal part of the proceedings. The players in the group identified somewhere on the queer spectrum.

Single-player digital games have potentially even fewer participants than tabletop role-playing games, but the players of these games engage in play with a game product that is less susceptible to queering because the gap between the system and the play is narrower. Of course, modding the artifacts can widen that gap (Sihvonen 2011). Transgression in single-player games or in small homogenous groups is possible, but it often happens in relation to a wider cultural norm. Importantly, the transgression is private and stays private unless it is specifically made public.

In an analysis of #nerdcore pornography, Tom Apperley has postulated that some of the problems in contemporary game culture stem from the fact that what was once private has now been made public. Trying to act in public as one does in private leads to confrontations:

Part of the very public reaction by gamergate against diversity in games is that they understand gaming as a “intimate” rather than “public” activity, and believe that they have a right to continue to use games as private spaces. I would go so far as to call this state of affairs perverse. Freud notes that an important part of normal infant sexuality is a stage of playing with their own

shit, which they eventually leave behind when they are shamed by their parents. Gamergaters have been left alone to play with their own shit for so long that they consider [it] a normal state of affairs, and are willing to go to grotesque extremes to defy civilized conventions. (2016)

The private, even intimate context of playing in a trusted small group or even alone allows for exploration of topics and actions that would be questionable in more public settings. Tabletop role-playing games have a long history as “boys’ clubs” (cf. Peterson 2014; Trammell 2014), where even “playful raping” of characters could be normalized (cf. Fine 1983). In the early 1980s, however, the sourcebooks were devoid of anything too objectionable—at least in part due to the moral panic that targeted RPGs in that period (e.g., Grundhauser 2016).

From the 1990s on, sourcebooks started to flirt more openly with sexuality. Some of the edgiest sourcebooks offered hooks for fairly outrageous material, such as “the fourteen inch barbed penis” that Brown’s (2013) group discusses. Yet most RPG sourcebooks do not include any queer content, and even the supplements on fantasy sexuality tend to be quite tame (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015). An obvious exception is the infamous and ridiculed (cf. MacLennan and Sartin 2009) 900-page sourcebook for the role-playing game *F.A.T.A.L.* (Anonymous 2003), which contains rules for rape and has magic items for impregnation, anal rape, and public masturbation. Even so, it does show that in private RPGs the standards of conduct can be very different and that Apperley’s characterization of “playing with one’s own shit” is at least at times fairly accurate. Such play is interpreted as transgressive only when it becomes public.

As the private gaming practices of different groups have become visible—be they #nerdcore, in which sexism is normalized; gaymers, for whom queer identities and conduct are quotidian; or some other group—the game culture has become a site of visible struggle. Queer design and queer play made visible are, in line with the history of what is “queer,” fundamentally political acts.

### **Conclusion: Systems Promoting Transgression**

Queer players have become increasingly visible in game culture over the past decade. The players who find queer topics interesting and for whom queer content does not constitute transgression have found each other mostly online. Websites, forums, and Facebook groups are devoted to queer play and players; the identity marker *gaymer* has been proliferating, and conventions devoted to LGBTQ game culture, such as GaymerX, have been organized. At the same time, as queer content in games has grown, discussions about queer play have increased, and demands for more queer inclusivity have become more widespread. In the present day, some games are explicitly positioned and

marketed as allowing queer (or at least gay) experiences (e.g., *Dragon Age: Inquisition* [Bioware 2014] and *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* [Game Grumps 2017]), and many others have subtly queer characters or themes (e.g., the *Grand Theft Auto* series). There are collections of queer games created by the community (Bryk and Granger 2016) and books calling for more queer games (Anthropy 2012b).

Games can let us not only see but inhabit the queer, the transgressive, and the monstrous. All of these dimensions can be dangerous, just as they can be liberating. The choices that designers make re-create or question what is normal—and what does or does not exist. Shaw's call for *queer game studies* is timely. According to her, the “goal should be to critique the underlying assumptions in game research, and see whose experience is marginalized” (2015a, 75). Even though there is likely to be huge variety in these assumptions, it should be acknowledged that there are also firm conventions and normative ideas concerning what game studies is and what it should be in the future. Because games as systems are simplifications of the surrounding world, they are potentially always even more narrow and normative than the culture in which they exist. Game studies needs queer studies in order to catch up with the world around it, although game players are not going to wait for that—they will carve places for themselves in play and within game culture. Indeed, even queer game studies has been challenged to account for the assumptions inherited from queer studies that tend to deemphasize ethnicity, class, ability, and gender and to overemphasize sexuality (Shaw and Ruberg 2017). In this chapter, our focus has been fairly limited, and thus we clearly fail the latter challenge.

There will always be queer artifacts and queer play because simulations and models will always be, by definition, simplifications. Some assumptions of normalcy, average behavior, common knowledge, and experience will be utilized. The plurality and diversity of life cannot ever be fully reproduced in game contexts, and so transgression is likely to happen in any gameplay situation. For some players, queer will remain a mark of an edgy experience, a monstrous difference perhaps, a signifier of the possibility of transgression. For others, it is simply an authentic, honest life.

### Acknowledgments

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### III Emotions



## 8 Guilt in *DayZ*

Marcus Carter and Fraser Allison

I get a sick feeling in my stomach when I kill someone.

—Player #1431's response to the question "Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?"

Death in most games is simply a metaphor for failure (Bartle 2010). Killing another player in a first-person shooter (FPS) game such as *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) is generally considered to be as transgressive as taking an opponent's pawn in chess. In an early exploratory study of players' experiences and processing of violence in digital videogames, Christoph Klimmt and his colleagues concluded that "moral management does not apply to multiplayer combat games" (2006, 325). In other words, player killing is not a violation of moral codes or a source of moral concern for players. Subsequent studies of player experiences of guilt and moral concern in violent videogames (Hartmann, Toz, and Brandon 2010; Hartmann and Vorderer 2010; Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012) have consequently focused on the moral experiences associated with single-player games and the engagement with transgressive fictional, virtual narrative content.

This is not the case, however, for *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive 2017), a zombie-themed FPS survival game in which players experience levels of moral concern and anguish that might be considered extreme for a multiplayer digital game. The subjects of virtual violence in *DayZ* are not virtual agents, but real human opponents. When killed, players lose all in-game advancement, a significant penalty in the harsh virtual environment. Further, *DayZ* is a "sandbox" game, in which players are not in clearly delimited teams and no linear narrative is provided; choice—particularly around how players engage with other inhabitants of the virtual world—is left to the player.

These unique configurations facilitate a wide range of highly evocative moral experiences that are core to *DayZ*'s wide appeal, including pronounced feelings of player guilt and moral anguish. Here, we report the results of our analysis of 250 responses to

a player motivations survey, which contained both Likert-scale and rich-text-response questions regarding their experience playing *DayZ* and focused centrally on the question “Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?” We highlight how the results overwhelmingly indicate a breadth of challenging moral choices, ethical concerns, and feelings of personal guilt and anguish. Through identifying the clear moral disengagement strategies (Bandura 2002) used by players when discussing their *DayZ* play, we demonstrate that despite occurring in the ludic context of *DayZ*, player killing can be a source of moral concern and guilt.

It is in this context that player killing in *DayZ* can be understood as a form of transgressive player practice. Drawing on Chris Jenks’s definition of transgression as going “beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention” (2003, 2), this chapter demonstrates how player killing violates and infringes a player’s personal moral code. Further, the nuances of the ways that players do or do not feel guilt while playing *DayZ* provide novel insights into how we might understand the ethics of competitive and transgressive gameplay in multiplayer games. Despite the strong negative experiences we describe in this chapter, we conclude that player killing in *DayZ* demonstrates the potential for transgressive play to be part of the appeal of play.

### **Moral Disengagement and Guilt in Multiplayer Games**

Transgressive play practices can occur when play oversteps or violates a player’s own moral code. To examine this type of play in *DayZ*, we draw on Albert Bandura’s (2002) theory of moral disengagement. Bandura characterizes morality as a process of self-regulation in which people compare their own actions to their learned moral standards and avoid taking actions that they anticipate might induce guilt. Moral agency is described as both a constraining mechanism to prevent immoral action and a proactive power to act in morally positive ways. Yet moral self-regulation is effective only when it is activated. People who are involved in conduct they perceive to be inhumane electively disengage their moral self-regulation by evaluating their actions and their context in a way that defuses the potential for self-censure (Bandura 2002, 102). As a consequence, moral disengagement can also be thought of as evidence of a person’s awareness of overstepping a moral code. Bandura identifies eight mechanisms for selective moral disengagement, each of which involves a self-serving interpretation of either the action, the effects of the action, or the nature of the victim.

There are several similar theories on moral disengagement and management, such as Gresham Sykes and David Matza’s (1957) *neutralization techniques* as well as Alvaro Barriga and John Gibbs’s (1996) *secondary self-serving cognitive dissonances*. In a review,



Denis Ribeaud and Manuel Eisner (2010) found close overlap among these theories, concluding that they capture essentially the same cognitive processes. Here, we apply Bandura's theory of moral disengagement because it has previously been applied to digital games.

The earliest example of this application is in the study by Klimmt and his colleagues (2006), which demonstrates that the moral disengagement described by Bandura happens when people play digital games. Based on interviews with ten German players of violent videogames right after they played such games, mostly in the FPS genre, Klimmt and his colleagues argue that although moral disengagement applies, players also actively engage in a *continuous* moral-management process, which means that "players mostly do not find it difficult to cope with moral concern; they frequently seem not to experience any moral problems at all" (2006, 326). They attribute this moral management to the player's reliance on game-reality distinctions and within-world justifications, such as violence being narratively appropriate or required to complete the game. In the interviews, phrases such as "it's just a game" were frequently invoked and were the reason put forward most strongly to divert moral judgment. However, Klimmt and his colleagues suggest that the game-reality distinction is a weak defense because games are increasingly immersive. This interpretation is up for debate; although in our survey respondents frequently cited a feeling that *DayZ* is unusually "real," this realness is rooted less in the immersive quality of the virtual world than in the individual emotional stake in gameplay (Allison, Carter, and Gibbs 2015).

Of note to this chapter, Klimmt and his colleagues (2006) found that moral management is salient to single-player gaming but not to multiplayer gaming: "In multiplayer games, when typically teams fight against each other, no moral reasoning at all seems to take place. All that counts is that one's own team wins and that members of the opposite team(s) are defeated. It is apparently not important if the moral position of one's team is 'evil' or 'good'" (2006, 323). They suggest that this moral ambivalence can be explained by a performance orientation in competitive multiplayer gaming as opposed to the orientation toward narrative frameworks and a game's imaginary in single-player gaming. *DayZ* notably fits neither the single-player template nor the competitive multiplayer template. Although it is played with multiple players online, it features neither a common goal toward which players are working nor set teams to which players belong. This means that negotiation and social risk management are a larger part of the experience, creating a game situation that is not accounted for in the Klimmt study. Other more recent studies (Hartmann, Toz, and Brandon 2010; Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012; Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012; Hartmann, Krakowiak, and Tsay-Vogel 2014) consequently focus on the moral experiences associated with

single-player games and the engagement with fictional, virtual narrative content that can evoke moral concern.

Research into the moral experience of multiplayer gameplay beyond this framework is limited. A notable recent exception is C. Thi Nguyen and José Pablo Zagal's (2016) examination of the ethics of multiplayer gameplay, which contributes a distinction between ethical and unethical competition that is useful for understanding *DayZ* play. As they note, competition in competitive games has a moral value. Nguyen and Zagal draw on Bernard Suits (2005) to argue that although most competitive play is based on causing violence to frustrate an opponent's plans, striving to win a game provides an arbitrary in-game goal in service of the players' real goal, which is to have a positive experience of struggle. With that real goal in mind, one player's "mere violence" against another player may be transformed from a negative act to a positive one by contributing to this positive experience of struggle. This understanding explains why players typically lack moral engagement in playing FPS games and why killing in multiplayer games is generally not understood to be transgressive. Nguyen and Zagal's approach also provides a framework for understanding why behaviors such as "ganking" (the killing of a weaker player who poses no contest) and "spawn-camping" ("staying in a location that provides a strategic advantage over the location where enemy players spawn, or appear, in a game" [Nguyen and Zagal 2016, 9]) are ethically flawed: in essence, they unbalance the player's in-game goals. However, research into extreme multiplayer competitiveness in *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003) (Carter 2015b) highlights the way these kinds of play styles can be acceptable in certain contexts rather than fitting into an absolute "unethical" category.

### ***DayZ***

*DayZ* is one of the first games in the emerging massively multiplayer online FPS genre, which combines the persistent virtual world of massively multiplayer online games such as *EVE Online* and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) with the control and gameplay typical of games in the FPS genre, such as those in the *Call of Duty* series. As a sandbox game, *DayZ* provides no linear narrative or explicit goals; it has only a "rudimentary narrative structure ... necessarily constructed by the player" (Schmeink 2016) to survive in the harsh, zombie apocalypse of its post-Soviet setting.

Play begins on the shore of Chernarus, a 225-square-kilometer environment with more than 50 villages dispersed between farmland and forest, based on a real-world area in the Czech Republic. Each replication of the virtual world can host up to 64 users

simultaneously. Players begin with few items and must scavenge everything they need to survive the zombie-infested virtual environment, including food and water (which the players' characters must constantly consume to maintain health), medication (needed to heal wounds, infections, and sickness), weapons, and ammunition. These resources are scarce, and players have a limited ability to store these items, requiring constant and careful resource management. Some items (such as tents) can be deployed to increase a player's ability to store items.

Collaboration in this harsh virtual world thus offers numerous incentives—security, resources, and capability—to survive. Players can speak to one another using a proximity voice system (Carter, Wadley, and Gibbs 2012), which allows them to communicate by voice or text if their avatars are within 50 virtual meters of each other. Some players use this system to negotiate peaceful encounters and trades or for ad hoc collaborations while others use it to trick and play treacherously (Carter 2015a). However, *DayZ* provides no mechanism for formally designating friends, teams, or foes. Commonly, however, players with preexisting relationships will communicate with their friends during *DayZ* play via a third-party voice application in order to overcome this limitation. In either case, any new player encountered in the game is thus ambiguously friend or foe: a potential collaborator, trader, or murderer.

This feature of the game is significant because *DayZ* features what game designers refer to as “permadeath”: if killed—by zombies, starvation, sickness, or other players—a player's character is permanently removed from the game (Carter, Gibbs, and Wadley 2012). The player returns to the shores of Chernarus with a different avatar, and all the player's advancement in the game is lost, representing hours or even days of effort. Because players cannot choose where a character spawns, this may mean they are now hours of nervous scavenging and travel away from reconnecting with their friends, who might be located on the other side of the map. This experience of dying has been shown to engender extremely strong, negative emotional reactions (Allison, Carter, and Gibbs 2015).

When a character is killed, their corpse drops, and the items the character scavenged from the virtual world can be looted from the body by other players. Of course, this provides a strong incentive to kill and betray in *DayZ*, but in fact players regularly act as “ideal survivors” (Schmeink 2016), gathering in camps, trading, forming communities, and helping sick and wounded players. Indeed, many players are willing to risk their in-game advancement for the opportunity to have a tense and thrilling social experience with another player in the apocalypse.

In this chapter, we argue that although killing other players offers significant in-game reward, players will often avoid killing others. Players of *DayZ* are—nearly

always—likely to have experienced permadeath prior to killing other players, and they have thus experienced the strong negative emotional experience that comes with it. Despite the zombie apocalypse imaginary, despite the competition over resources, despite the FPS gameplay, we show that players do sometimes feel guilt when killing other players because they recognize the pain and agony it causes in their opponent. This feeling of guilt—well evidenced by the exhibition of moral disengagement strategies—is exacerbated by the fact that *DayZ* places moral responsibility on players for their in-game actions. That is, it is the freedom to choose not to kill that means killing can be transgressive in *DayZ*.

### Research Design

This chapter draws on data from a survey that aimed to identify and investigate the different motivations *DayZ* players have to play this unusual game. It replicates Nick Yee's (2006) template with minor changes to suit the practices available to *DayZ* players. Such minor changes include the removal of questions that pertain to *World of Warcraft* guild play and in their place the introduction of questions that interrogate high-consequence death. The final questionnaire included 41 questions addressing the player's enjoyment of or behavior toward game elements and situations, each asked on a five-point Likert scale. An additional 10 open-response questions were included that asked players to elaborate on favored and disfavored aspects of *DayZ* and to describe player interactions they had experienced. Respondents were surprisingly generous in the detail of their responses to the rich-text questions.

The online survey was advertised on the *DayZ* forums, a Reddit subforum (*/r/DayZ*), and Twitter. A majority of the responses came directly after the game's developer, Dean Hall, promoted the survey on Twitter. There were more than 4,000 hits on the survey (1,704 completions), of which 98.4 percent were from male participants (the highest gender bias we are aware of in a game studies survey).<sup>1</sup> Respondents were from 64 different countries, with an unsurprising dominance of First World, English-speaking countries. The top-ten countries composed 77 percent of the sample: United States ( $n = 426$  participants), United Kingdom ( $n = 349$ ), Germany ( $n = 138$ ), Canada ( $n = 90$ ), Sweden ( $n = 89$ ), Australia ( $n = 74$ ), Netherlands ( $n = 55$ ), Norway ( $n = 54$ ), and Finland ( $n = 42$ ). The average age was 23.3 years (standard deviation = 6.37), with 28.8 percent of participants selecting "18" as their age, the lowest option available in the survey because the survey was intended for (and advertised to) players older than 18 due to human-research ethics requirements. Less than 30 percent of the sample respondents were older than 25. We do not believe that these percentages accurately reflect the

demographics of *DayZ* players, as the forums through which we advertised our survey are likely to be spaces in which young men are overrepresented.

Based on the rich-text responses, we believe that because of the developer's promotion of the game, some participants thought their responses would be incorporated in the ongoing design of *DayZ*, despite a page detailing the purpose and origin of the research shown to participants before they consented to participate. This misunderstanding could account for the high level of detail in responses and the high completion rate. It may also have influenced participant responses in other ways and may have motivated respondents younger than 18 to participate, selecting "18" as their age, which would account for the disproportionate number of (supposed) 18-year-olds in the sample.

For this study, we randomly selected a subsample of 250 respondents who answered the open-text question "Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?" We conducted a thematic analysis of these responses using the collaborative coding tool SaturateApp. Moral management was employed as a sensitizing concept—that is, as a way of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience, according to theory development (Bowen 2006)—for replies that exhibited moral management. Responses relating to negative feelings were open-coded through a thematic analysis of 40 sample responses, which was then reviewed and updated in consultation with colleagues. To identify differences in player preferences with regard to character death, each player's responses were cross-referenced against the player's quantitative answer to the five-point Likert-scale question "When you play *DayZ*, how enjoyable do you find the consequential nature of death?"

We strongly believe that the responses examined in this chapter honestly reflect player experience. First, the perception that the survey would influence *DayZ*'s ongoing design most likely motivated players to be more honest because they understood that false answers might affect the development of a game they enjoy. On this, we note that the quantitative version of the question was in the context of 41 questions that covered the breadth of *DayZ* play on a "never"-to-"always" scale. We suggest that this context obfuscated any particular interests the researchers might have had, resulting in responses that actually reflect how often a player feels bad and overcoming any social desirability bias (Nederhof 1985). Similarly, the qualitative version of the question at the conclusion of the survey was an optional one wherein players could expand on four broad questions relating to permadeath, feeling bad, general like, and general dislike. Although several of the responses shared here may seem extreme, they correspond with what we have found in general in online discussions, reviews, and ethnographic play with others.

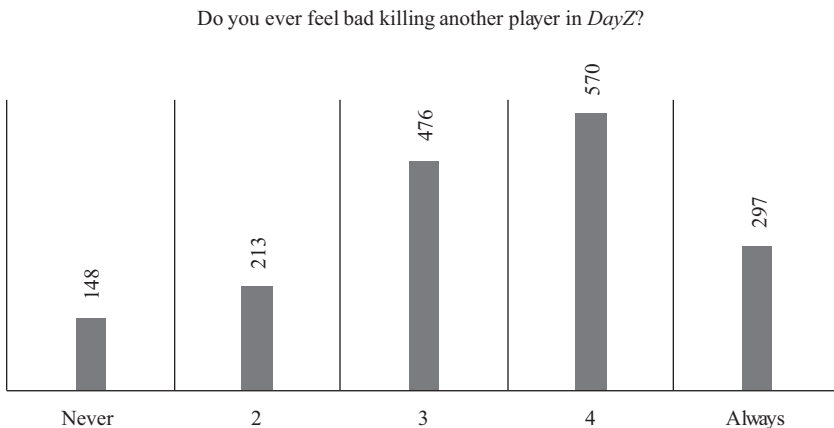
## Results

### Feeling Bad

When asked whether they ever felt bad killing another player in *DayZ*, more than 90 percent of the survey respondents said that they had, and 17 percent reported that they always felt bad to some degree (see figure 8.1). Of the 250 respondents, 105 described specific instances or conditions in which they felt guilt or regret after killing other players.

The severity of the negative emotions varied considerably among respondents. Some said that they felt only “a bit” bad, whereas others reported “extreme regret” or that they felt “horrible.” At the most extreme, one player described several nights of disrupted sleep and guilt continuing for more than a year: “I once accidentally killed a team mate in crossfire, I actually had some really bad nights of sleep following. I still feel bad. ... And he guilts me into being ‘bait’ by reminding me (this was over 12 months ago in the mod)” (#37).

Most responses explained the conditions under which killing another player was regrettable or unjustified. Relatively few referred to the consequences for the victim. Those who did so described their empathy for the victim-player’s loss of accumulated gear (“I would usually think how much time did it take them to find, scavenge the items they used to have, at least before I ended them” [#217]) and, by extension, the



**Figure 8.1**

Quantitative responses to the survey question “Do you ever feel bad killing another player in *DayZ*?”

termination of their investment in playing time. No respondent mentioned feeling empathy for the virtual character itself.

### **Unprovoked Attacks**

The most commonly cited circumstance in which players felt bad after killing another player was when the act was unprovoked. The killing could have been done because they wanted the other player's gear, because they were unsure if the other player would attack them, or simply because they were bored. In many of these cases, players expressed only minor regret, reasoning that unprovoked killing is part of the nature of the game:

Yes, we opened fire on a geared guy who was minding his own business and it was fun but we felt a little bad afterwards ... not too much though. (#42)

Sometimes when I kill a player out of fear I feel bad after but never in self defense. (#171)

This issue arises because there is no way to play *DayZ* without consenting to player-versus-player (PvP) combat; there are no non-PVP servers. In other cases, respondents specifically described their victim as "friendly" or "innocent." These responses were characterized by much stronger expressions of guilt, which suggests that the players experienced more self-recrimination when they focused on the nature of the victim than when they focused on their own actions and whether their actions were justified by the circumstances: "At best I try to avoid other players or watch them from a distance. Although if I can't leave the area I may have to kill the other player. I feel extreme regret afterwards knowing that player may have been friendly and no threat whatsoever" (#142).

As noted elsewhere (Carter 2015a), the geography of *DayZ* influences the way players interact with each other. Players have more pronounced feelings of guilt if they kill in areas closer to where players spawn and less regret in committing unprovoked attacks in "end-game" areas such as the military base.

A number of respondents reported feeling bad after they killed another player by accident. This is consistent with the point made earlier because it suggests that when players do not have a justifying framework for their actions, they are forced to confront the outcome rather than thinking in terms of their own motivations: "I was attempting [to] show my friend that the sights on the nagant [rifle] were off so I fired a shot at a distant player who appeared AFK [away from keyboard]. The inaccuracy of the sights combined with the distance meant that he should have been safe but he moved just as I fired the shot so he was killed" (#137).

Similarly, some respondents articulate their regret around the potential lost opportunity for a friendly, social interaction. One player referenced feeling “kind of bad” after killing another player, “since he may have been friendly but simply scared so the situation could have gone differently” (#189), and another player wondered afterward “if we had stopped and talked a little maybe we could have done some trade or barter” (#124).

As a result of the ambiguous relationship between players in *DayZ*—Are other players enemy combatants, potential ad hoc collaborators, or a source of social encounter?—these particular players imagined how the encounter could have gone differently if not for their decision to kill the other player-character. In the *DayZ* online community, stories of unique and appealing player encounters typically celebrate social interactions, and, for many, the opportunity to have one of these encounters is a core appeal of *DayZ*.

### **Victim Was Not a Threat**

The second most commonly cited condition under which respondents felt bad for killing another player was when their victim was not a threat. This lack of threat could have been due to friendly intentions or a lack of weaponry, and it was cited both by players who chose to kill their victim for personal gain or entertainment and by players who did so out of fear.

If he clearly isn't a threat and I am bored and just kill him, I am pretty much devastated. (#207)

Yes, [I feel bad] if it turns out that they were not a threat or were looking to interact instead of just a shootout. (#49)

The assessment of harmlessness was most often based on the victim's lack of effective weaponry, which can be discerned somewhat by the appearance of the victim's avatar (if it is carrying a gun or a rake). In many cases, respondents reported feeling guilty even when they had no way to tell that their victim was not a threat prior to their decision to kill them, such as when the victim was holding a weapon that the respondent later learned did not have ammunition.

A particularly common subtheme is guilt over killing players who had only recently spawned and had not yet had time to accumulate gear with which to defend themselves. This guilt had the appearance of following a widely held social rule; many respondents specified that they never felt guilty in the particular case of killing a player whom they had seen killing newly spawned players.

Yes, [I feel bad] if it's a player who just spawned. They should be able to spawn and not be spotted right away. (#143)

Sometimes [I feel bad], when they're new players but they want to kill me. (#101)



The social rule against killing new and underequipped players appeared to be only partly a concession to fair play and sympathy for the underdog. It also seemed to reflect a sense of regret that the player who killed did not gain materially by doing so. Several players said they did not feel bad after killing others unless they discovered that the killed player had no useful gear for them to loot: “It feels like I’ve killed them for no reason” (#165). In one sense, this response contradicts the finding that some respondents felt empathy for other players’ loss of time and gear when they were killed. However, in another sense it is consistent with that finding: players had no moral qualms as long as their focus was on their own gain, and the negative sentiment appeared when there was no personal gain to justify their actions.

### Unfairness

A small number of respondents reported feeling bad when they thought they had acted unfairly toward another player in killing that player. Lying to and betraying other players were cited as specific sources of guilt:

I was a bit of a bandit when I first started playing, I tricked a few people before killing them and did shitty stuff like that, I feel bad for those ones:P. (#155)

Depends, if I tricked them and they seemed like a nice person then yes I’d feel bad. But most of the time no, I don’t feel bad about it. (#169)

This finding aligns with research into betrayal in games such as *EVE Online* (Carter 2015b), which has indicated that for some players the social action of deceiving another player can feel more like a real transgression than the virtual act of killing the other player’s character. Like theft, the virtual act of killing in *DayZ* deprives an opponent of the resources they have accumulated in games—different means to the same end.

### Moral Disengagement in *DayZ*

We have established so far that players feel bad when killing others in *DayZ*, but this feeling alone does not demonstrate transgression in the form of violating a player’s personal moral code. As noted earlier, moral disengagement can be treated as evidence of a person’s awareness of overstepping or violating a moral code, whether in reference to a “real” or ludic act. Bandura (2002) notes three sets of moral disengagement practices: (1) the cognitive restructuring of immoral acts; (2) the diminishment or obscuring of an individual’s agentic role in causing harm; and (3) the focusing of disengagement on the victim of the actions. Klimmt and his colleagues (2006) note that the game context provides a further set of moral disengagement strategies, which we also discuss.

**Table 8.1**

## Moral Disengagement Practice

<i>Moral Disengagement Practice</i>	<i>Number of Examples</i>	<i>Average Score</i>
<i>Moral Justification</i>	23	3.65
<i>Advantageous Comparison</i>	6	3.83
<i>Euphemistic Labeling</i>	5	3.80
<i>Displacement, Diffusion, and Distortion</i>	5	2.60
<i>Dehumanization</i>	22	2.86
<i>Attribution of Blame</i>	59	3.35
<i>Game-Reality Distinction</i>	9	2.11
<i>Sportslike Conduct</i>	8	3.25
<i>Narrative Justification</i>	0	–
<i>Total</i>	137	Average from 1,704 responses, 3.38

**Moral Justification and Advantageous Comparison**

Moral justification refers to disengagement operating on the “reconstruction of the behavior itself” (Bandura 2002, 103), which renders conduct acceptable by portraying it as a positive behavior and thus allows people to preserve their own pro-moral view of themselves. Whereas moral justification reconstructs behavior as moral, *advantageous comparison* makes reprehensible acts acceptable by contrasting them to other, more unacceptable acts by exonerative comparison. In responses to our survey, we noted 23 instances of moral justification (average score 3.65). In some instances, killing a player was judged as morally justified because the player killed was considered immoral for some reason:

If I kill a player who is killing other players then [I] feel extremely satisfied. (#207)

Sometimes I kill less geared players because I saw them harming other players. (#216)

In the data collected, it was difficult to distinguish between instances of moral justification and instances of advantageous comparison ( $n = 6$ , average score 3.83). In many comments, players described killing other players as moral for one reason or another, and in other comments players alluded to a preventative aspect of their murdering, seeing it as a way to save friends or to protect others or even themselves: “When I know they are pure bandits or backstabbers, I enjoy it so much, it makes me feel like I just removed a big threat on the game” (#187).

### Euphemistic Labeling

Through sanitizing language, conduct can be constructed as less problematic, thus reducing personal responsibility (Bandura 2002, 104). Soldiers “waste” the enemy; attacks are “clean, surgical strikes”; civilian casualties are “collateral damage.” In *DayZ*, terms such as *opening fire* and *servicing justice* are used to exculpate conduct.

[I feel bad] each and every time. Even if they are “bad spawns” asking to be put down. (#91)

Cruel people in *DayZ* deserve to die, and when they do, justice is served. (#43)

Sanitizing language follows the theory of moral cleansing, or the “Macbeth effect” (Zhong and Liljenquist 2006), wherein moral concern “evokes a desire to physically cleanse oneself” (Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012, 1356). In this sense, many of these terms exaggerate the seriousness of the interaction so that it will resemble morally justifiable conduct in real conflicts, as opposed to the use of game-specific terms discussed later that can also be categorized as a form of sanitizing language.

*Agentless passive voice* is another form of euphemistic labeling: using language to attribute acts to nameless forces rather than to specific people (Bolinger 1982). According to Bandura, with agentless passive voice “it is as though people are moved mechanically but are not really the agents of their own acts” (2002, 105). A response quoted earlier in the discussion of the need for justifying frameworks is appropriate here as well: “I was attempting [to] show my friend that the sights on the nagant [rifle] were off so I fired a shot at a distant player who appeared AFK. The inaccuracy of the sights combined with the distance meant that he should have been safe but he moved just as I fired the shot so he was killed” (#137). Here, though the player had a causative role in the death of the other player, he described the actual killing in the passive voice. “He was killed” rather than “I killed him” draws attention to how players use agentless passive voice to further suppress moral concern.

### Displacement and Diffusion of Responsibility, Disregard or Distortion of Consequences

Studies such as those of Nazi prison camps (Andrus 1969; Milgram 1974) and the My Lai massacre in Vietnam (Kelman 1973) have demonstrated how people can exculpate themselves of moral control by viewing their own actions as being under another’s authority. We did not observe this moral management strategy in our data, likely due to the lack of situations where players are subject to another player’s authority in *DayZ*.

In the absence of an authority, personal agency can be diffused through the division of labor, such as by group decision making (Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson 1975).

Bandura notes that “any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others” (2002, 107). Because players of *DayZ* often play in groups, other members of the *group* were at times attributed with blame: “A member of my squad is a loose cannon and has forced me into confrontations w[h]ere [I] would rather have a positive social interaction such as trading” (#160).

Moral control can be further obfuscated by diminishing the harm of an action via the *disregard or distortion of consequences*. This distortion can be seen through attempts to minimize the harm attributed to one’s actions or through discrediting any evidence of harm.

It is like in paintball, do i feel bad that i stained someones top? (#75)

They will be able to start over anyway. (#28)

Klimmt and his colleagues (2006) point to the “game–reality distinction” as a game-specific moral management strategy; to suppress moral concern, attention is drawn to the fact that the acts happened within a game. We discuss this strategy further later in the chapter, but one interpretation of it is as an attempt to minimize the harm attributed to the player’s actions via such a hierarchical game–reality distinction, which can be seen as a special case of *disregarding consequences*. Not including these game-specific diffusions, we noted only five instances of these disengagement practices, with a low average *feel bad* score of 2.6.

### Dehumanization

Perceived similarity is a trigger of empathetic reactions. Thus, a variety of disengagement strategies attempt to dehumanize victims, to see them as subhuman, stripped of their relatable human qualities. Terms such as *mindless savages* and *gooks* have been widely utilized historically to dehumanize opposing forces in wars. *DayZ* players pervasively utilized the term *bandits* to refer to a type of player whom it is always acceptable to murder:

I usually only go for bandits or people that kill others. (#14)

I only kill bandits, so no. (#240)

This term negatively refers to players whose only goal is to kill and steal from other players. Although it is not commensurate with dehumanizing terms used historically, it similarly works to dehumanize an opponent in *DayZ*. Another common dehumanizing strategy Bandura discusses is to refer to people using the names of lower animals and demonic qualities: “I mostly kill bandits or ‘vampires’ that I have spotted killing or robbing others during my travels and don’t really feel bad about that” (#230).

Bandura notes how social practices (such as urbanization and high mobility) can divide people into *in-group* and *out-group* members, facilitating dehumanization. Thus, as well as diffusing responsibility, group play in *DayZ* leads to a hierarchy of the lives of in-group and the lives of out-group players, facilitating disengagement: “I kill players if they attack me or my friends” (#95). In total, we identified 22 instances of this disengagement strategy, with an average score of 2.86 in response to the Likert-scale question.

### Attribution of Blame

The most prevalent form of moral disengagement in *DayZ* appears to be attribution of blame: blaming victims, blaming circumstances, and blaming the game code itself. Attribution of blame self-exonerates immoral conduct by positioning agents as “faultless victims driven to injurious conduct” (Bandura 2002) by some external means. We coded 56 responses as some form of attributive moral disengagement, almost as many as all other strategies combined (78), with an average score of 3.35. Self-defense was the most common example of attribution of blame; “I’ve only killed to defend myself after being shot at or attacked first” (#185). When a player claims self-defense, they are exonerating themselves by fixing the blame on their victim.

We noted earlier that one of the more unique elements of *DayZ*’s design is the way all players consent to PvP combat just by playing because there are no non-PvP servers. In our discussion of elements of the game that made people feel bad, we showed that this issue of consent to PvP is a key source of feeling bad for players. The repetitive nature of *DayZ* play suggests that a moral management strategy can alter a player’s behavior moving forward; when moral concern is successfully repressed, players may seek out the conditions in which they can use that strategy again, perhaps as a form of moral growth. Viewed through this lens, self-defense can be seen a common and successful moral management strategy because *attacking another player is explicitly consenting to PvP*, thus absolving players of moral concern around PvP consent.

However, many cases of killing in *DayZ* do not meet this standard. Thus, players have to seek out other ways to suggest that the players they killed were consenting to PvP or in other ways deserved being killed. Reflecting the power of language in the process of moral disengagement, survey respondents commonly used words such as *hostile* and *threat* to legitimate attributing blame to a player who was not explicitly attacking them: “No cause i only kill if the player is a threat” (#3). These terms accompanied other play factors that gave permission for killing much in the same way self-defense does, but perhaps less convincingly for suppressing moral concern. These factors included the victim not talking on direct chat (the proximity voice system) or

there being “no way to contact them, e.g. a player with a sniper rifle looking over a field that I need to cross” (#29). Such factors may be a form of gatekeeping around the “right” way to play the game.

However, the victim was not always the target of blame. Several players exercised more complex disengagement strategies, attributing blame to the game. One player blamed the sociality of the game or perhaps the configuration of risk through per-madeath for forcing specific conduct and in this way absolved any moral concern they might have had: “Yes I do, but the simple risk of them turning on me, even if they are equipped worse than I am, is too large to not do anything about it. With doing something about it, I mean killing the other guy, even if you have handcuffed him and he’s been super cooperative and a nice guy. You might even like him, but he still needs to die” (#183).

Alternatively, the game’s specific geographies were attributed blame. One of the authors of this chapter has discussed elsewhere (Carter 2015a) the ways in which different areas of the *DayZ* gameworld are attributed different norms. The farther players venture from the starting areas, the more likely they will have to “gear up,” which will lead to harsher and more ruthless player interactions. The military bases—the best location for finding high-powered guns and ammunition—are the most common example of how different areas have different norms: “In a highly contested area like a military camp. It is always kill or be killed in a situation like that” (#201). The circumstances of the place where opposing players meet are to blame rather than the victims’ specific behavior. Being surprised (or “spooked” or “crept up upon”) was discussed earlier as a form of diffusion of responsibility, but the circumstances in which two players meet can also potentially be blamed.

### **Game-Specific Moral Disengagement**

As Klimmt and his colleagues have noted (2006), the game context of actions provides its own unique disengagement strategies. They identify the game–reality distinction, the “violence as necessary part of (sports-like) performance” justification, and the narrative-normative justification as moral management strategies that emerge from game violence (318). In our sample, we noted several examples of the game–reality distinction and the sportlike performance justification, but no explicit narrative-normative justifications. The absence of the latter is likely due to the lack of a linear or explicit narrative presented to *DayZ* players, although we expect the *zombie movie-esque*, apocalyptic setting to provide some resources to players attempting to suppress moral concern.

We coded nine comments as invoking the game–reality distinction, which has one of the lowest average quantitative scores for a response category (2.1) and prompted some of the briefest replies, such as “sometimes I feel bad for these players but it is just a game and they will be able to start over anyway” (#26). The responses that Klimmt and his colleagues categorize as this type of moral management strategy invoke a clear reality–game distinction—for instance, the explicit statement “This is something outside of reality” (2006, 317). Although phrases such as “just a game” perhaps claim that the player’s conduct within *DayZ* is simply outside the application of real-world moral concern or at least suppress moral concern as a form of diffusing responsibility, other responses are not so succinct and total.

Never, why would I? Its a game and death is a part of it. I don't kill if its avoidable. I will kill if i have to. (#7)

I know i am not truly killing someone i am just annoying someone and getting better survival gear for my team; It is like in paintball, do i feel bad that i stained someones top? (#74)

To claim “death is a part of it [the game]” is to acknowledge the negative effect of game death in the context of the positive experience players are attempting to achieve (Allison, Carter, and Gibbs 2015) and to acknowledge that there is a balance. This assertion is less totally exculpatory than “it’s just a game.” Despite this distinction, in this case the respondent continued to explain their conduct as killing only if it was unavoidable—if they were forced. Further, respondent #74 drew a parallel with paintball, seeking to diffuse responsibility by minimizing the harm done by their actions and by using euphemistic labeling (“annoying someone,” not killing them). Thus, we see here how the game-specific context of play does provide some absolution from moral concern, but that it is not necessarily powerful in *DayZ*, where the harm is befalling—in a ludic context—real people, as it is in the linear, single-player games studied in previous work (Hartmann, Toz, and Brandon 2010; Gollwitzer and Melzer 2012; Joeckel, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012; Hartmann, Krakowiak, and Tsay-Vogel 2014).

Klimmt and his colleagues categorized an emphasis on performance and achievement as a form of disregard of consequence; by “emphasizing the aspects of ‘winning’ involved in most videogame violence, other aspects such as physical pain or the destruction of living creature are neglected” (2006, 318). Further reflecting a distinction between *DayZ* and the games these authors studied, the sandbox nature of *DayZ* perhaps reduces the applicability of this strategy. This reduced applicability notwithstanding, we categorized eight comments as invoking sport, performance, or achievement metaphors, with an average “feel bad” score of 3.25. Notions of sportsmanship and fair competition were key:

I sometimes even enjoy outplaying the bandits I hunt. (#111)

Sometimes. If I lied to them or was unsportsmanlike in some way. (#147)

Killing players with guns feels like fair game. Whether they have ammo or not. Though if after killing them we find out they do not in fact have ammo I do feel a bit bad. (#10)

## Discussion

Whereas Klimmt and his colleagues conclude that “moral management does not apply to multiplayer combat games” (2006, 325), this chapter has clearly demonstrated that it does apply in *DayZ*, an admittedly unique survival-themed multiplayer combat game unlike those available during the study conducted by Klimmt. We have shown how *DayZ*'s lack of formally designated teams burdens players with the choice of who to kill and not to kill, thus introducing moral choice to gameplay. When combined with the harsh permanent consequence of in-game death, *DayZ* affords strong feelings of guilt, well demonstrated in this chapter by player responses and the breadth of moral management practices that players enact to exculpate their moral concern about whether their actions have violated a moral code.

Yet why feel guilty at all? *DayZ* is a multiplayer combat game that looks and feels like the majority of other games in the FPS genre. In fact, *DayZ*'s game engine and combat system is based on the game engine for *ARMA II* (Bohemia Interactive 2009), a military FPS simulator. Violence is the primary type of interaction players are afforded to have with other players by the game mechanics. In addition, the scarcity of resources and the substantial advantage gained from killing other players heavily incentivizes killing other players in the playing of *DayZ*. To apply Nguyen and Zagal's (2016) understanding, the lusory goal of a positive experience of struggle requires that players kill each other for there to be an actual challenge in the sandbox gameplay. John R. Sageng's chapter in this volume discusses how players routinely bracket external norms during their gameplay. It is understandable, therefore, to expect players not to feel bad about killing in this incentivized, military sim.

To understand this, we need to look beyond the design and mechanics of *DayZ* and into the social norms and codes revealed by the negative feelings expressed in the survey data. The primary categorization of killing in which players expressed negative feelings was the killing of new, unarmed, or “innocent” players, typically newly spawned players who were weaker and potentially inexperienced. Wrong-doing in this sense reflects notions of sportsmanship with respect to the competition in the game, where the challenge and meaningfulness of *DayZ*'s permadeath originate in the balanced competition between opponents. Similarly, players also reported feeling bad



about killing a player who was not a threat, such as when the latter did not have any ammunition for the guns they carried. These chivalric notions of a “fair fight” are preconceived notions about competitive play that players bring to *DayZ* but are also in turn reinforced by community rhetoric around “new spawns.” These notions are in contrast to “ganking” and “spawn-camping,” which Nguyen and Zagal (2016) have identified as unethical competitive play.

However, a sense of sportsmanship or chivalry toward weaker players does not explain the guilt and moral concern evoked from killing an armed and experienced player who was or might have been “friendly.” This moral discomfort, we argue, is a result of the “demarcation problem” in multiplayer games (Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold 2015): players’ inability to distinguish between the “right” and “wrong” ways to play a game. Informal rules are a thought province (à la Geertz 1982) developed by players as part of an effort to collectively maximize the appeal of playing. For “friendly” *DayZ* players, the appeal of play is found in the opportunity for social experiences and encounters with other players. With respect to this understanding, players’ guilt around killing friendly players originates in a conflict between the different and competing codes of conflict in *DayZ*, where “hostile” players (who kill all those they encounter) play alongside and in the same virtual environment as “friendly” players. Viewed through Nguyen and Zagal’s (2016) lens, this inner conflict further explains why players were less affected by guilt when killing in the “end-game” areas, such as the military base. The geographies of *DayZ* create different places of ludic interest where people pursuing different kinds of lusory goals can gather, similar to PvP zones coded into other massively multiplayer online games.

The results described in this chapter are significant because they demonstrate the potential for online digital games to employ transgressive play such as consequential player killing as an opportunity for ethical lessons and growth. Ultimately, providing players the freedom to choose which actions are “wrong” and which actions are “right” opens them up to making the “wrong” decision—a choice they can feel bad about and regret. As demonstrated in this chapter, these feelings of regret can have significance for players, and the competitive context of gameplay or similarity to other games in the FPS genre does not necessarily override player capacity for moral anguish. For *DayZ* players, the choice to kill or not to kill is an opportunity to exercise their own moral agency, which provides the opportunity for moral growth.

Yet these results also indicate a further, perhaps paradoxical, finding echoed in several of the other chapters in this collection—the negative experience of this kind of transgressive play is attractive to players. *DayZ* was an enormous success. Released first as a buggy and incomplete free mod and developed by a single designer, *DayZ* sold

more than 3 million copies of *ARMA II*, which was required to play it. A total of 3.7 million copies of the standalone version, a similarly incomplete perpetual “early access” title, have been sold. When first released, *DayZ* was celebrated for “giving PC gamers an experience they weren’t getting elsewhere, but which they were clearly hanging out for” (Plunkett 2012)—an intense and brutal experience, peppered with moral anguish and guilt.

### Note

1. Online surveys of game players show varying levels of participation by women, but the 30–40 percent range is more typical, and national surveys consistently find more than 40 percent of all digital game players are female (Brand and Todhunter 2016; Entertainment Software Association 2016). The game research consultancy Quantic Foundry has found that tactical shooter games, such as the *ARMA* series on which the original *DayZ* mod was built, have the lowest proportion of female players: only 4 percent in its data set, drawn from a self-selecting online questionnaire (Yee 2017). We speculate that the widespread use of proximity voice communication in *DayZ* may expose female players to a greater than usual risk of gendered harassment, leading to their lower participation in the virtual world—particularly in the context of the game’s established culture of simulated violent coercion as a form of play. This conclusion is based in part on comments from two of the female respondents to our survey, who described incidents in which they received gendered abuse from male players. A small number of male respondents also described aggressively sexist behavior between players.

## 9 When Is It Enough? Uncomfortable Game Content and the Transgression of Player Taste

Kristine Jørgensen

How do players experience uncomfortable game content, and what are their attitudes toward controversial topics in games? Is controversial game content also uncomfortable game content? As videogames mature, an interesting question arises as to how players experience uncomfortable content in a gameplay context. With its point of departure in a focus-group study with experienced players, this chapter discusses player attitudes toward and experiences with game content that has been subject to public controversies. In what situations do players experience game content as speculative, objectionable, or offensive, and in what way do they experience it as a source of insight and reflection?

Based in the idea that the term *transgression* indicates overstepping boundaries relating to social taboos, taste, ethics, or the law (“Transgression” 2017), this book is concerned with game and play practices that challenge boundaries in a broad sense—from gameplay that breaks cultural taboos or the social contracts between players to game content that may challenge players’ subjective sensibilities. In this sense, this chapter focuses on a *subjective account of the transgressive*—that is, how experienced players relate to game content that has been described as questionable or potentially harmful and what kind of game content these players find transgressive, either shocking or provocative or uncomfortable. The discussion provides insight into what it is that makes individual players feel the way they do with regard to such content and how they reflect on whether such content is acceptable in a game context. By taking a context-sensitive and experience-oriented approach to games, this chapter opens up perspectives that are in opposition to basic tenets about media effects upon which the majority of effect studies are based. Not least, this chapter builds upon and expands the idea that controversial content may invite *positive negative experiences* (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010)—that is, experiences that are distressing but also gratifying because they create new insights.

## Research Background

Research on controversial game content tends to be grounded in psychological effect research. This latter is criticized, however, for not being sensitive to sociocultural context—that is, for overinterpreting correlational statistics with little attention to the sociocultural (Ferguson, Olson, Kutner, et al. 2010) or to the playful context of game content (Gentile and Stone 2005). However, growing attention is being paid to context-sensitive and experience-oriented approaches. The fact that audiences sometimes value uncomfortable fiction has puzzled thinkers since David Hume (1777) addressed the so-called paradox of tragedy. Lately, this fact has become of interest to the psychology of entertainment, which explores the emotional and cognitive mechanisms at work in fiction that spawns so-called nonhedonic gratifications (Oliver, Bowman, Woolley, et al. 2016, 392) and how this effect may have relevance to people's lives (Zillmann 1998; Oliver 2008; Schramm and Wirth 2010; Bartsch and Oliver 2011; Cupchik 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick, Gong, Hagner, et al. 2012; Oliver, Bowman, Woolley, et al. 2016). Today, scholars and artists accept the notion that uncomfortable media content has the potential to enable awareness by provoking audience members into reflection (Julius 2002, 27) and by making them question their culturally received values (Grønstad 2012, 38).

In game research, there is also an increased interest in uncomfortable game experiences, stressing that games and play may be unsafe and not fun and may have implications outside the game itself (Malaby 2007; Juul 2013; Schechner 2013; Linderoth and Øhrn 2015; Brown, Gerling, Dickinson, et al. 2015; Mortensen, Linderoth, and Brown 2015; Stenros 2015; Jørgensen 2016; chapter 2 in this volume). Earlier research has focused on players' emotional experiences with controversial, uncomfortable, and excessive game content as well as on their interpretation of the content and subsequent meaning-making process. Using diary studies, Jasper van Vught, Gareth Schott, and Raphaël Marczak (2012) present a framework that accounts for player experiences with controversial content. Through ethnographic research on young adult males, Wannes Ribbens and Steven Malliet (2015) explore how play style in violent videogames is construed, and Gareth Schott (2008) has studied how young players articulate the pleasures of playing violent games. Of special relevance to this chapter are Heidi Hopeametsä's (2008) and Markus Montola's (2010) analyses of player experiences with distressing content in live-action role-playing games, in which they identify what they call *positive negative experiences*—experiences that are intense and distressing yet somehow gratifying because they create new insights or experiences (see also Jørgensen 2014, 6–7). Common to this research is the focus on qualitative

methods for uncovering the subjective experience of game content in a contextual perspective, taking into account features such as the playful situation or the fictional context in which game actions take place. This research focuses on the meaning-making processes that take place in the gameplay situation and highlights games as a meaningful form of engagement and a medium with the same meaning-making potentials as other media.

## Method

The data discussed in this chapter stem from a focus-group study aiming to gain insight into individual players' attitudes toward and experiences of uncomfortable game content. Because it can potentially be uncomfortable to discuss certain topics with a researcher one on one, for this study focus groups were chosen over individual interviews to offer an arena for deliberation between peers. Key individuals were recruited from the environments surrounding local game organizations in a Norwegian city based on their willingness to discuss controversial and uncomfortable content in games. These key recruits were individuals who considered videogames to be central to their fields of interest but who did not necessarily label themselves "gamers"; at the same time, the selection aimed at finding individuals with diverse opinions about games and game content. After initial conversations, each of the key individuals was asked to recruit additional respondents whom they thought they would be able to have interesting conversations without necessarily agreeing with them. In effect, the focus groups consisted of individuals who already knew each other and had an established sense of trust and who frequently played digital and analog games together.

Although the focus-group method allowed the respondents to discuss controversial and uncomfortable topics, the risk of this method is the potential dynamic it may produce. One of the individuals may dominate the conversation, and the more reticent participants might not speak up because they feel that they are not as articulate as others or that their viewpoints are less interesting. Also, the focus-group format may create a space where consensus is expressed rather than more polarized opinions. Although all of the groups in this study did have dominant individuals, most people joined the conversation freely and raised their opinions. In cases where they did not contribute much, I would ask them directly about their opinion.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) formed the basis for the focus groups. IPA is a qualitative method used in psychology for researching how people understand and deal with major life events and lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 1–4). Often used within semi- or unstructured interviews featuring

open-ended questions and prompts, IPA allows the subjects to talk about their experiences and interpretations unfiltered and on their own terms because the method values self-expression and subjective accounts of emotions and lived events (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 56–57).

IPA is also used with focus groups, but a known issue regarding this combination is that focus-group discussions often tend to reveal more about attitudes than about experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 71–73). Because the aim of this focus-group study was indeed to examine player attitudes toward game content and subjective accounts of game experiences, the use of such groups was an intentional choice.

After an initial presentation of their own game preferences, the respondents were invited to answer the question “Have you had a game experience that you found uncomfortable or disturbing in any way?” The next question directed to all groups was “What is the difference between a bad and a good negative game experience?” Most discussions started with individuals recalling strong experiences with specific games but quickly developed into an exchange of opinions and attitudes about games and game content. In the second half of the interview session, video clips from four selected games were shown, intended to be examples of different kinds of controversial content and to create common points of reference for the discussion.

A note on method and to what extent the results of this study can be transferred to other cases: this research concerns the meaning-making processes of experienced players with regard to uncomfortable game content, so conclusions about the psychological effects of videogames cannot be drawn from it. More importantly, the study examines players’ subjective accounts of their experiences in retrospect. As such, it is limited by the respondents’ memories. It is also limited by the fact that it is not so much a study of the respondents’ experiences as such, but of their *interpretations* of their own experiences. That said, as a study that concerns the meaning-making processes of experienced players, it has merit because it provides insight into how players understand videogames as a medium of expression similar to other media and art forms.

The chapter first presents an overview of the respondents and their overarching attitudes toward game content in general and toward the four case games in particular. Then I present and discuss the respondents’ views on uncomfortable game content—in what situations it was experienced as positive and in what situations it was experienced as negative. Last, I sum up the main results and draw conclusions. The chapter focuses on empirical data, and, for ease of reading, theoretical discussions are introduced where relevant.

### Who Are the Respondents?

Group 1 consisted of three men ages 35–36, referred to here as Tony, Oscar, and Aron, all skilled workers. Group 2 was of mixed gender and consisted of two students and one unemployed person ages 23–29, here anonymized as Karen, Shaun, and Luke. Group 3 was also of mixed gender and consisted of one skilled and two unskilled workers ages 24–31, here called Mary, Anette, and Greg. Group 4 consisted of men only, two students and two unemployed people between the ages of 21 and 26, here referred to as Neil, Ted, John, and Peter. All were of Norwegian background and were living in urban and suburban areas.

Although the recruitment of respondents focused on including diverse perspectives about game content, there was relatively high agreement between the groups in terms of genre preferences and attitudes toward game content. Genre preferences included real-time strategy games, first-person shooters, action-adventure games, and role-playing games, with an emphasis on story-driven games. A couple of the respondents mentioned casual games, but no one listed sports games among their favorites. All expressed an interest in analog games such as board games or table-top and live-action role-playing games.

When asked about whether there is an ultimate taboo with respect to what can be thematized in a videogame, everyone who expressed an opinion believed videogames are entitled to the protection of free speech. Although this attitude toward game content may stem from the fact that the respondents were raised in a liberal northern European country and have high game literacy, it is important to stress that despite the common stance against censorship, there were diverging opinions about which kinds of representations are harmless fun and which are justified targets of criticism. From the conversations, it became clear that the respondents were focusing on taboo player actions rather than on taboo audiovisual representations and that they felt that as long as the context justifies it, no topic is by its very existence off-limits. Some did, however, point out certain topics that they had a hard time being able to defend, but they clarified that such content should be ignored or the target of criticism rather than of censorship.

### Four Cases: From Public Controversy to Traumatic Situations

The four games used as a common point of reference had been subject to debates regarding their content, but for different reasons. The debates about three of the games had focused on violent gameplay but were framed in different ways. With only a few

exceptions, most of the participants in all groups had heard about all the games, but only a few had played most or all of them.

The obvious challenge of having participants discuss video clips from interactive media is that this format cannot reveal how the game is experienced in the gameplay context, and this fact was also raised during the interviews. The respondents were confronted with the question of how seeing a video clip rather than playing the game affected their understanding of the game. In response, all groups stressed that in viewing only a clip they were deprived of relevant narrative and gameplay context and that character empathy as well as the sense of agency and complicity disappeared.

### ***Hatred: Intentionally Provocative***

Described as “the most violent game on earth” (Jenkins 2015), isometric shooter *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015) is an example of a deliberately provocative game, criticized by some for its violent content but by others for its mediocre gameplay. The focus groups were shown a video of the introductory cutscene where the protagonist prepares for mass murder and the following gameplay. Across the four focus groups, three respondents out of thirteen had played the game, and eight knew the game by reputation. All groups believed that the game developers deliberately speculated in creating controversy, but they found that the game’s exaggerated style makes it difficult to take the game seriously. Although some of the participants who had not played the game believed they would find playing it uncomfortable, those with experience stressed that there is a discrepancy between how the game looks and how it feels to play.

### ***Spec Ops: The Line: Positive Discomfort through Subversion of Conventions***

The second game used is the antiwar military shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), often hailed for its storytelling (Dyer 2012) but also criticized for its dissonance between gameplay and narrative (Björk 2015). The focus groups were shown gameplay and cutscenes surrounding the dramatic turning point of the game, featuring a scene where the protagonist fires white phosphorous at civilians, believing them to be the enemy. Five of the thirteen respondents had played the game, and five knew it through media. Respondents with experience in playing the game described it as an example of an uncomfortable game where the discomfort was appreciated due to its ability to create a sense of *complicity* (Sicart 2013, 21–23; Smethurst and Craps 2015, 277; Jørgensen 2016)—that is, the feeling that the events that unfold in the game happen because of the player’s choices.



***Life Is Strange: When No Option Is Right***

As the only game among the four in which violence is not central to gameplay, the adventure game *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod 2015) features emotionally traumatizing actions related to bullying and teenage suicide. Hailed for character development and its treatment of social issues, it was also criticized for plot development (Riaz 2015; Savage 2015). The focus groups were shown a scene where the protagonist fails to hinder a classmate from committing suicide. Across the four focus groups, three participants had played the game, and five had seen gameplay trailers or read reviews. Group members shared their general impression that the video was understood as emotionally laden. Those who had not played the game shared a broad curiosity about it, although some of those who had played it expressed frustration with being the victim of the bad decisions made by nonplayer characters and with never being able to do the right thing.

***Grand Theft Auto V: Does the Satire Work?***

The respondents were shown last a clip from the open-world game *Grand Theft Auto 5* (Rockstar North 2013). This game was chosen as a representative of the kind of a game that has been the subject of much public outrage but for which the satirical in-game context may contribute to a mitigation of the seriousness of the actions represented (MacDonald 2013; Sterling 2013). Eleven of the thirteen respondents had experience with this game or an earlier version, and the two remaining respondents knew it by reputation. In the focus groups, they were shown a scene in which the player inflicts torture upon a nonplayer character. *Grand Theft Auto V* created the most diverse responses from the participants in the study, from rejection to acceptance, and there were disagreements concerning whether the game actually succeeds in its attempts at humor and satire.

**Uncomfortable Game Experiences**

Whether game content is experienced as uncomfortable is related to the individual's subjective interpretation because experiences are based on subjective taste as well as on sociocultural background. *Discomfort* can be understood as "an absence of comfort or ease; uneasiness, hardship, or mild pain" or "anything that is disturbing to or interferes with comfort" ("Discomfort" 2017). Discomfort has a wide span and may cover anything from emotional dislike to physical pain, including dissonance, provocation, disturbance, unease, dismay, opposition, and rejection. Importantly, however, uncomfortable game experiences can be interpreted as either positive or negative.

Following Stuart Hall's (1980) influential theory on encoding and decoding in media discourse, it is here understood that a media text is always formed within a specific sociocultural context. This "encoded" message is an intended interpretation or reading of the text, but that interpretation may or may not be shared by an audience, who in turn interpret and thus "decode" the content of the text. Hall discerned three ways of decoding media messages—the intended *dominant/hegemonic* reading, a partly critical *negotiated* reading, and an *oppositional* reading (1980, 101–103). Thus, disagreement with the intended message, misunderstandings, as well as different interpretations are possible, and so this theory, although acknowledging the author's power in creating a message, also highlights the importance of subjective and individual interpretations. This becomes important when understanding the diverse opinions players have toward game content and regarding what is experienced as uncomfortable as well as why game content that is celebrated by some can be experienced as problematic by others.

All groups expressed the idea that the sense of discomfort can be created by both positive and negative game experiences. For the respondents, there was an important difference between discomfort that is deemed valuable to the game experience and discomfort that is not. Positive discomfort is connected to game content that provokes reflection in the player, provides new insight, has a purpose in the narrative, or makes the player curious about the story and makes her want to continue playing. Negative discomfort, in contrast, disturbs the experience and creates the urge in the player to distance herself from emotionally engaging with the game.

Videogames today are complex representational gameworlds that are both ludic systems and fictional environments (Jørgensen 2013). As such, they involve the player in processes of fictional as well as ludic engagement. Building on cognitive theory of fictional engagement (Smith 1995), Petri Lankoski (2011) argues that players engage with player-characters through both *goal-related* and *empathic engagement*. Goal-related engagement concerns our focus on achieving goals and subgoals, whereas empathic engagement concerns how we understand and interpret other people. As a framework for understanding fictional engagement, empathic engagement stresses that we engage with fictional characters and situations through processes such as recognition, alignment, and allegiance (Lankoski 2011, 296–300). Player engagement in games is a combination of goal-related and empathic engagement, but in the following discussion we will also see that in certain situations the former may surpass the latter in importance, depending on the kind of tasks the player is attempting to complete. We will also see that the respondents in the focus groups related to game content in different

ways, depending on whether their engagement at a specific time was predominantly empathic or goal oriented.

### Positive Discomfort and Meaningfulness

According to psychologists who conduct research on nonhedonic entertainment, uncomfortable media content is appreciated because of its perceived emotional relevance in our lives. Ron Tamborini and his colleagues (2010) argue that such content ties in with basic intrinsic needs, as described by self-determination theory, and Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and her colleagues (2012) show that appreciators of uncomfortable media content find it to be relevant for reflecting on their own lives.

In this study of the experience of controversial game content and uncomfortable topics, it may not be surprising that most of the discussions centered on how such content affects empathic engagement. When discussing the difference between positive and negative senses of discomfort, the respondents expressed that discomfort often is experienced as positive if it feels *meaningfully* integrated into the specific context, either by having a role in the narrative context or by providing new experiences or by inviting reflection on game actions as well as on life in general. A sense of meaningfulness is central to empathic engagement in the game fiction.

One way to make discomfort feel meaningful is to make the game fiction feel *personal* to the player. According to cognitive theories of empathic engagement with fictional characters (Smith 1995; Currie 1997; Vaage 2010), establishing a relationship between the player and nonplaying characters in the gameworld is one way of making this possible. In Group 1, Tony described how in-game situations have a bigger emotional impact on him when they concern a game character with whom he has established a relation and knows well: “If you get to know someone in a game ... , if you establish a relationship with them, then the effect is much bigger. If it’s just ... a complete stranger that you’ve never seen before and who you don’t have any connection with, then it’s like, okay, I don’t care” (September 28, 2015, ellipses indicate pauses in speech).

Although characters die in games all the time, often as a consequence of player actions and intended by game design, the emotional impact is greater when these characters have a role in the game narrative and the player has established a relationship with them. However, because games are interactive media, empathic and goal-oriented engagement often coalesce. Players not only empathize with fictional characters on the screen but are also actively engaged in decision-making processes as part of the advancement toward the goal. Due to their agency, players can be made *complicit* for

their choices, something that has the potential to create an emotional reaction and even a sense of discomfort. With reference to the turning point of *Spec Ops: The Line*, Oscar explained: “The whole thing is that ... this was something I chose to do, right. And then I get the feeling that this was not close to being right. And *this* is what makes me react—when it is *my* choice. Not because the game holds a poster up saying what I should feel” (September 28, 2015).

*Complicity* is the feeling that one has responsibility for causing events in a game due to the sense of direct control over actions and an interest in keeping the avatar-protagonist alive (Smethurst and Craps 2015, 277). According to game scholar Miguel Sicart, the sense of complicity allows the player to engage with the game using moral reasoning and stresses the fact that gameplay actions have a moral dimension (2013, 21–23). It is this sensation that, according to Oscar, turns the discomfort of *Spec Ops: The Line* into a positive experience.

Respondents also pointed out that uncomfortable game content is meaningful when it is able to evoke reflection. In Tony’s view, a positive uncomfortable game experience is able to provide him new perspectives on his own life:

A good one is one that makes you think, something that stays with you when it’s over. Well, when you’ve had a new experience. ... *Spec Ops: The Line* was good in that sense, it really made you. ... When I was through, I uninstalled it, just wanted it gone, and just sit outside in the sun and think, hell, I have a good life. When it has given you a sensation that you value what you have much more after that kind of experience. ... (September 28, 2015)

The observation that fictional tragedy enables reflection and makes us feel grateful for our lives is supported by psychological research (Knobloch-Westerwick, Gong, Hagner, et al. 2012). However, reflection may also be connected to the fictional context of in-game events. According to Sicart, two techniques for ethical game design are *subtracting* and *mirroring*. *Subtracting* forces the player to reflect ethically upon the actions of the avatar, and *mirroring* puts the player into an uncomfortable ethical position (2009, 215–216). Luke described how these techniques work with reference to an episode in *Life Is Strange* in which the player has the choice to euthanize her paralyzed friend: “There was, mildly speaking, a very uneasy feeling when, just when you are about to make the decision, there’s an A or B, make your decision now, and they use a lot of imagery to make it really shaky and uncomfortable, you are forced to make a really bad decision. And regardless what you choose, it is bad” (October 9, 2015). Here, subtracting is activated as the player starts reflecting over the decisions that the avatar is making in the game, and this reflection also leads the player into an uncomfortable ethical position. In this sense, the situation Luke describes appears to be a combination

of the two, or what we could call *mirroring by way of subtracting*: the sense of discomfort is created as a consequence of the ethical reflection provoked by the game.

### Negative Discomfort and Distancing

Many of the respondents expressed that *positive* discomfort is discomfort that makes them want to continue to play; likewise, some also characterized *negatively* uncomfortable game experiences as those that make them want to quit the game. In this section, I address situations in which game content makes respondents lose interest in playing or, in other words, when uncomfortable game content transgresses the gameplay experience by making the game potentially unplayable.

When the respondents find uncomfortable game experiences to be negative, such experiences tend to create a sense of *distancing*. This sense of distancing distinguishes itself from the disinterestedness that Immanuel Kant argues is defining for aesthetic appreciation. Whereas Kant's disinterestedness presupposes taking a step back and contemplatively appreciating the work of art objectively and without emotion (Cashell 2009, 5), the distancing I address here is a state created by a disruption that threatens to break the ability to engage with the work. As Kieran Cashell argues, provocative art can never be disinterested because of the emotions it generates (2009, 8). However, such provocations may alienate the player of a videogame and prevent full involvement with the game. Thus, this sense of distancing is more closely related to the estrangement effect, or *Verfremdungseffect*, described by Bertolt Brecht (1964, 151) because it concerns how the game content hinders the player from identifying with the characters and actions in the game and makes the audience aware of the communicative process. Consider Oscar's viewpoint about the important fact that not all negative responses include discomfort. Sometimes they may simply be *bad*, in the sense of being unconvincing in achieving the intended function or by taking the player out of the engagement and making him think about the game's artificiality instead. He elaborates:

I think there is no bad uncomfortable experience, because bad uncomfortable game experiences are not uncomfortable—they are tacky. Either you think and feel that this is not good, or you think, what the fuck. ... Ugh. And that is what I feel about that *GTA* [*Grand Theft Auto* torture] sequence. Yeah, I see what they are trying to do, but it doesn't work. And sure, you can call it a *bad* uncomfortable experience, but I wouldn't call it *uncomfortable*. And, if it makes you feel something it is a good thing. But if you think that it is stupid, then it is a bad thing. (September 28, 2015, emphasis in original)

Oscar pointed out the important fact that negative response does not need to be uncomfortable, stressing that he rejects the scene in *Grand Theft Auto 5* not because of

what it represents or because the representation creates unease or provocation in him, but because the techniques themselves are not able to create the response it appears to be intended to create. No special emotion of discomfort is evoked in him, just a reflective evaluation that this scene does not work as intended.

However, my use of distancing here is concerned not with the distancing effect caused by intentional use of dramatic techniques but with the sense of distance that emerges in the audience through *oppositional* readings (Hall 1980). The players may not necessarily be so disgusted that they distance themselves from engagement, but they may feel distanced because they feel that the game setting, narrative, or characters do not resonate with their interests, values, or identity. Mary provided an example of negative discomfort created by such distance. She described her experience with *Grand Theft Auto 5* as one in which she feels distanced due to a lack of empathy with the characters: “My problem with all *GTA* games is that you basically play a psychopath. But in a way he is played as a good guy. ... And that, kind of, falls to the ground. ... It’s so ridiculous and stupid. Like they’re trying to sell you this character as one you would want to play, want to identify with, while he actually is quite unsympathetic, really” (October 16, 2015). Here, Mary’s distancing can be attributed to her *oppositional* reading of the game content: she is not able to relate the situations or characters to her own values or situation, which lowers her interest in playing the game.

With these examples, I have discussed the ways in which feelings of discomfort may be positive when they are experienced as meaningful within the in-game context. But if the discomfort is not properly contextualized, it may distance the player from empathic engagement. Tony explained: “If the story is good, I can accept a lot. But *Hatred* didn’t have—I won’t even call it a story. ... One of the things that annoyed me most of all was that it didn’t have an actual story. If they had fleshed it out, provide[d] us a flashback into his life about why he felt as he did, then it would have been much more effective” (September 28, 2015). Here, the absence of narrative motivation and context for the excessive violence appears meaningless and questionable, present only for the sake of provocation—or, as Oscar described it in the same interview, merely a marketing strategy and “an attempt to shock in order to sell more games” (September 28, 2015).

Another kind of discomfort that made the respondents want to stop playing is the feeling of powerlessness. According to Greg, “Games where you are a nonimportant person or something like that, and you feel that everyone is working against you, I don’t like that at all. ... That feeling of powerlessness, I can’t handle that at all” (October 16, 2015). He elaborated on how he prefers games in which his character is the driving force of narrative progression. When games put him in a situation in which he

cannot control events—for instance, because other characters are designed to betray the protagonist—he loses interest in playing the game because it deprives him of a sense of mastery, competence, and agency.

### The Mitigation of Game Discomfort

In the previous section, I discussed some situations in which the respondents' interest in a game was lowered due to negative discomfort. In this section, I discuss situations where distancing does not necessarily make the player lose interest but lessens the sense of discomfort.

This may occur in the context of exaggerated game content. For example, respondents were unable to take *Hatred* seriously due to its exaggerated style and excessive violence. Aron described *Hatred*: “It’s so excessively extreme that I can’t see the difference between him stomping a person’s head to pieces, and in *Gears of War* with this ... chainsaw rifle. It’s just, like, not realistic in any way. It’s not possible to take it seriously” (September 28, 2015).

It is difficult for Aron to take the exaggerations seriously, and the distancing removes the sense of discomfort that could have been preserved in more moderate representations. This suggests that exaggerated violence creates a degree of desensitization and lessened emotional impact of violence in *Hatred*.

Furthermore, humor may also help mitigate the discomfort of excessive violence. In Mary’s case, she did not find the humor to work well in *Grand Theft Auto 5*, but she explained how it nevertheless somehow mitigated the discomfort she feels with regard to the torture scene: “What I think is really strange about the scene is that they have tried to make it humorous at some points. ... In a way, well, it makes it a little less nasty because it becomes more absurd. In a way, this weakens it somewhat. ... [But] I still find it gross” (October 16, 2015). Here, the sense of absurdity contributes to making the scene feel as though it is less representative of actual torture. Recognizing but not accepting the attempts at humor and its ability to subdue the discomfort and sanitize the violence, Mary expressed the most clearly oppositional reading of the game.

Whereas Mary’s distancing from *Grand Theft Auto 5* is connected to her oppositional reading of the game content, it is possible that Aron’s distancing is an effect of the designers’ active attempt to distance the player emotionally from the game. This view is also supported by the fact that the game’s perspective positions the player a great distance from the action, representing nonplayer characters in the game as “not people, they are just stick figures” (Ted, November 11, 2015). This particular perspective also

distances the respondents from empathic engagement: “I lose some of the closeness, I think, to what’s going on. It’s a bird’s-eye view, it’s quite far away in a sense, which makes it lose its impact,” explained John (November 11, 2015). From this perspective, the sense of distancing is in accordance with the developers’ intention, and Aron and John, for this reason, are following the intended, *dominant/hegemonic reading* of the game. This perspective is supported by the fact that the respondents find the game to be exaggerated and by the unlikeliness for commercial reasons that the developers would intentionally put players off.

Following this line of thought, although the respondents may be distanced from empathic engagement in the game fiction, this does not mean that the goal-oriented engagement is gone. As mentioned earlier, games that claim shock value or attract criticism because of their controversial topics are believed to use the shock or criticism to gain attention. Group 4 shared that many games that have been targets of controversy due to their difficult themes or excessively violent content nevertheless do not feel uncomfortable to play. *Hatred* is among these games, which Neil described as “a twin-stick shooter, just with different models” (November 11, 2015). Referring to the *Hatred* gameplay as representative of a particular genre, but the audiovisual representation as new, he suggested that the controversial topics are implemented on the audiovisual or fictional level but not replicated in the game mechanics. As a consequence, such games may look transgressive to an observer, but the gameplay is, in fact, ordinary and may even draw attention away from the game’s controversial topic.

Because players employ empathic engagement as well as goal-oriented engagement, the ability to focus on gameplay while partly ignoring the audiovisual representation can be attributed to a mindset Anders Frank calls *gamer mode*: the player becomes occupied with playing the game as a game and so does not engage with its fictional representation (2012, 120). Gamer mode thus allows the player to disengage from the representation and focus on the game’s ludic elements, such as reaching the objectives rather than engaging in emotional drama or exploring the game mechanics rather than treating the game as fiction. Gamer mode allows the player to focus on playing the game and to ignore the game’s representational aspects. In such a context, the representation becomes mere audiovisual flavor, a spectacle meant for pure sensory immersion (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005), but does not really mean what it appears to represent. This kind of metacommunication is strengthened or weakened by the way the developers have chosen to present the in-game situation—in other words, the effects and rhetoric used.



## Summary

This chapter has been concerned with player experiences with uncomfortable game content and has demonstrated that such content can be experienced as both negative and positive, depending on the context.

Uncomfortable game content is viewed as positive when it is experienced as being integrated meaningfully into the in-game context and when the players feel that it makes them thoughtfully reflect. This means that positive discomfort is never *transgressive* in the original sense of the word—it never breaks absolutely with our ability to engage with the game but is mitigated because there appears to be a good reason for its inclusion.

On the contrary, uncomfortable game content is experienced as negative when players are unable to connect with what happens in the game; this inability to connect is caused either by insufficient contextualization of the uncomfortable content, due to the players' lack of recognition of the situations, or by a sense of powerlessness. In such cases, the experience comes closer to a true transgressive experience that oversteps our ability to cope with it. However, there are also situations in which game discomfort is mitigated—for instance, when the game includes exaggerated content or humor, when perspective creates distance, or when gamer mode can be activated.

Judged from the data collected in this study, situations in which the respondents experienced uncomfortable content as positive to the gameplay situation tend to be connected to empathic engagement. If the player interprets uncomfortable game content as having a negative impact on his or her experience, this impact tends to distance the player from empathic engagement. However, when goal-oriented engagement dominates, the respondents can, to a greater degree, distance themselves from discomfort induced by the fictional context. In other words, when in gamer mode, a player can more easily remain distanced from a sense of discomfort induced by game content. Thus, it appears that *play* and *transgression* are mutually exclusive. If an activity is experienced as play, it does not actually break with the player's ability to engage with it, but if the activity indeed does go beyond what the player can cope with, it is no longer play.

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## 10 “It Feels Real to Me”: Transgressive Realism in *This War of Mine*

Kristian A. Bjørkelo

Like movies and literature, games can present thought-provoking, uncomfortable scenarios that feel realistic to the audience. The pain and tragedy portrayed on screen and through gameplay seem genuine and affect the player. Taking a cue from this similarity, in this chapter I explore *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) through autoethnography as an example of *realism* in computer games. I do not consider this realism in terms of graphical or mechanical realism but rather as an accurate representation of a situation that is far removed from most players' range of experiences. I build on ideas of realism, social realism, and transgression and discuss how they relate to this game before I try to shed light on the gameplay experience.

Toward the very end of the chapter, I develop the idea of *transgressive realism* as a way of describing game experiences that feel real through their ability to disturb or be uncomfortable. Thus, they are transgressive because they are able to make us reflect in ways that entertainment media normally do not. Transgressive realism thus begs the question: Does playing a game that makes one feel uncomfortable or distressed enhance the game's sense of realism?

### *This War of Mine*

First released in 2014, *This War of Mine* has received attention for dealing with wartime suffering in a mature and engaging manner. Created by 11 Bit Studios in Warsaw, it draws inspiration from the Siege of Sarajevo during the Balkan War of the 1990s to make a serious, social-realist gameplay experience. The marketing of *This War of Mine* focused on the game as different from other war games. The public-relations slogan was “In war, not everyone is a soldier,” and the trailers used slow-moving, black-and-white images from the game and from war, accompanied by somber, classical music. The message is that war is something that happens to civilians more than to soldiers and that it forces civilians to make difficult choices for their survival.

For many players, playing *This War of Mine* is a rewarding yet uncomfortable and disquieting experience, reminding them of or confronting them with the civilian experience of war. And as expressed in discussions online (Toma 2015, 217–218), there are also those who find the game frustrating for different reasons. For some, it does not live up to the expectation of a war game or of a resource-management game, or it is experienced as simply depressing. Other players treat it like any other game, giving tips on how to successfully deal with the challenges. Sometimes these players are joined by voices explaining that the game has to be this hard and frustrating because that is how war is (see Toma 2015). The message is: war is horrible.

In *This War of Mine*, the player controls a group of three to four characters trying to survive in a bombed-out squat during a siege. The game is set in a city plagued by a (fictional) civil war. When the game starts, the player does not know how long the war will last, and the actual number of days is randomized for each playthrough. During the course of the game, the player must gather supplies, reinforce the shelter, trade, and deal with other survivors. The game days are divided into daytime, when the player takes care of the characters' needs around the shelter, and nighttime, when the player sends out one of the characters to scavenge or raid buildings in the city for resources. Over time, the available resources become scarce, and the world becomes more violent as the characters grow more desperate. The player must make difficult choices so that their characters will survive until armistice.

The game is semirandomized: there is a limited set of locations and events, but the actual selection of locations and events is randomized for each playthrough. The safe house is also randomized and has different rooms, loot, and challenges, such as locked rooms and debris. This randomization not only increases replayability but also adds a sense of uncertainty when a new playthrough is started.

When a player starts a game, their first tasks are to secure the shelter and to excavate the most readily available areas for resources. Available resources range from manure, raw meat, vegetables, and canned goods to mechanical parts, electrical parts, and wood as well as, of course, weapons, weapon parts, and ammunition. These resources are spent on keeping the characters alive and upgrading the safe house. The player also needs to make weapons to defend the safe house from the inevitable nightly raids or to use during the nightly search for resources.

During daytime, the game plays out like a depressing version of a dollhouse simulator such as *Little Computer People* (Activision 1985) or *The Sims* (Maxis 2000), where the players micromanage characters and their needs. But in this game everything is in disrepair, and the characters move around slowly due to injury, exhaustion, or depression. At nighttime, the player may scavenge or raid the locations near the safe house. This is

the stealth-action part of the game and is not without its moral dilemmas. The player must choose where to go, and the map screen indicates whether an area is populated or not and whether the people there are peaceful or not. The player can therefore choose to encounter no resistance and scavenge in environs that are safe but have smaller rewards or take a risk for greater reward by going where they can expect resistance. There is also the opportunity to loot homes and safe houses belonging to nonplayer characters, though this choice may end in a violent confrontation. Is the player willing to steal? Is the player willing to kill innocents? As the resources become more and more scarce, the player is forced to ask these questions. Is it better to “safely” rob those who cannot protect themselves? Or should the player take the moral high ground and steal only from those perceived as a threat or as criminals?

### Realism and Games

The term *realism* eludes a single working definition because it points both to a set of genres of artistic expression and to the attributes of these genres (Morris 2003). In addition, in philosophy, being a realist is an ontological and epistemological position, countered by an antirealist position (Braver 2012, 2015). Realism is further complicated by being defined and evaluated differently for different forms of expression; realism is not the same for paintings as it is for literature, nor is it the same for films or for games. As a genre, realism is generally focused on conventions for portraying reality with a certain level of authenticity and truthfulness. Postmodernists often accuse it of being obsessed with the minute details of everyday life (Beaumont 2010). When discussing realism in a particular medium, such as a book, a film, or a game, we tend to consider the level of realism of a work based on its verisimilitude—that is, to what extent it manages to create an authentic and truthful version of our perceived reality. For the purpose of this chapter, a working definition of *realism* is the representation of certain aspects of reality in a truthful manner or in accordance with our preconceived notions of what is real in the world.

According to Gonzalo Frasca (2003), videogames are not conventional representations like novels and paintings; they are simulations. They are dynamic models of complex systems that result in narratives or representations for the external viewer. Central to a videogame is the player who performs actions within the simulated game-world. According to Alexander Galloway (2004), the fact that games are played and are influenced by the player's actions complicates the problems of representation and thus the concept of realism. Because of the simulated nature of games and the player's actions, it is not enough to discuss the visual and textual representational qualities of

games; the world in which these actions take place and how they correspond to the “real” world must also be addressed. Galloway suggests discussing realism in games from the perspective of how these actions and worlds correspond to their real-world counterparts and how the gameworld adds kinesthetic, affective, and material dimensions to the discourse of representation and meaning. Furthermore, he suggests two distinct forms of realism in digital games: *realisticness*, which is the accuracy or authenticity of the audiovisual representation of the world, and *social realism*, which refers to the accuracy of game characters’ behavior, their social world, and the narrative. To this we can add *behavioral realism*, which refers to the truthfulness of the physics of the simulation—that is, the gameworld and the items in the gameworld behave according to our expectations of how they behave in the real world (see Breuer, Festl, and Quandt 2011, 2012; Pötzsch 2015; Šisler 2016). Behavioral realism is the springboard for Holger Pötzsch’s (2015) discussion of *selective realism*, wherein unpleasant aspects of warfare, for instance, are kept out of the simulation in war games, but concepts such as war, militancy, and violence are glorified. Commercial digital wargames are often surgically clean of civilians, thus allowing players to avoid the more problematic sides of war when playing such games.

These concepts become important as we move on to discuss *This War of Mine* and transgressive realism. In particular, *social realism* becomes central and is here understood as the truthful simulation or representation of the social world and character behavior within the game, as perceived by the player.

### Transgression and Games

The chapters in this anthology approach and define the transgressive and the act of transgression in games from a multitude of perspectives. What is transgressive is contingent on who, when, and where. It is subjective, and it is contextual. Central to the concept of transgression is the crossing of lines and the breaking of boundaries. Chris Jenks defines the act of transgression as “go[ing] beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention, it is to violate and infringe ” (2003, 2). Jenks adds that transgression implies an acceptance of the conventions: “Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (2). In this assertion, he finds support in Georges Bataille (1985), who argues that transgression serves to reaffirm the boundaries that are being transgressed. This position is perhaps well summed up by the saying “Rules are meant to be broken.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines transgression as “the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right, a violation of law, duty or

command; disobedience, trespass, sin. ... The action of passing of or beyond" ("Transgression" 2017). A transgression can be against conventions, expectations, or morality and is a violation that fosters negative responses by the community, institution, or individuals. A game can break with the conventions of a genre and thereby also with the expectations of the audience (see chapters 6 and 11 in this volume), but it can also include content that breaks with cultural ideals of morality (see chapters 3, 4, and 14 in this volume). Whether a game is transgressive or not, however, depends on the response it receives. A transgressive game, in this understanding, is a game that causes a negative response either from society or from the game community or from players engaging with the game in question.

With respect to games, the boundary being crossed can be the expectation that the game should be fun or pleasurable or that it should behave like other games in a particular genre. When a game breaks with expectations and turns out to be uncomfortable rather than fun or subverts game mechanisms with respect to the conventions of a genre, boundaries are broken. In certain contexts, this breaking of boundaries may create a negative response of disgust or offense (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016) and thus opposition to the game, but in other contexts the immediate negative reaction that the game does not follow expectations may be followed later by pleasure, acceptance, or reflection. In the latter case, transgression may reaffirm the boundaries that have been transgressed and further our understanding of them. Therefore, transgression can contribute to profound and meaningful experiences. In this sense, games also allow us to consider serious out-of-game matters (Jørgensen 2014) or to have negative experiences in a safe environment (Montola 2010). Games allow us to play around with transgression and corresponding emotions such as discomfort, anger, sadness, and disgust in a safe environment.

### **Autoethnography of the Individual Gameplay Experience**

Playing a game is an individual experience, formed by, among other things, game design and the player's individual context. It is nearly impossible for a designer or researcher to account for each individual player, and no reading can define every possible experience (Boudreau 2012). The different readings, experiences, and playstyles of *This War of Mine* found in online forum created to discuss the game attest to this (Toma 2015). At the time of writing this chapter, more than 4,000 discussion threads on Steam are dedicated to the game. Only a few hundred of the threads are active at any given time. Most of them are asking for help in different ways; a few are reporting bugs; and some are emotional posts about war, about the game, and about its emotional impact

or are complaints that it is a bad game because it does not make players feel good. There is obviously no one single way of playing or understanding the game.

There is a growing trend of acceptance and usage of autoethnography in anthropology, folkloristics, and other academic fields in which ethnography is the primary research method (Reed-Danahay 1997; Anderson 2006; Denshire 2014). Autoethnography is both a process and a product (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) that seeks to lift the self-reflective notes and biography of the embedded ethnographer to the level of a primary source in order to get a firsthand account of a culture or experience. Combined with the stories and perspective of other actors as well as with theories and analysis, autoethnography becomes a layered account of that culture or experience (Ronai 1995; Anderson 2006). In the context of this chapter, autoethnography is used as a tool to enhance the textual analysis, wherein I, in the role of a researcher, add my own emotional responses, reflection, and autobiographical details to the analysis of *This War of Mine*. As a basis for analysis, playing the game is not only acceptable but necessary (Aarseth 2003). By using autoethnography, I aim to make visible the autobiographical factors that inform my particular reading of the game. In addition, strong paratextual (Toma 2015) elements, such as marketing material, reviews, and discussions, provide contexts that influence my reading. The reading is focused on transgression and realism as I have experienced them while playing *This War of Mine*. This chapter is an autoethnographical text in a limited sense because it deals with only a single text and experience, not with an overall culture (*ethno*). It is also limited in scope because the full journal account and autoethnographical text of my playthroughs of the game are quite extensive. Playing a game is a subjective experience, and every playthrough of a game informs and shapes how the next playthrough is experienced. My first experience was very distressing, so I approached the second one more cautiously. However, at that point, I also had a better understanding of how the game worked and was perhaps better prepared for success.

### **My Autoethnographic Account**

While playing *This War of Mine* and documenting my play, I focused on detailing what happened in the game from in-game day to day, how the characters responded, and, most importantly, what my thoughts and reactions were to what was going on, while making detailed notes in my journal. I had already played the game a few months earlier, and I had failed to keep the characters alive. This first playthrough ended with them succumbing to illness, starvation, and injuries or being killed. The playthrough stopped completely when the final character became depressed and committed suicide.



This playthrough left me emotionally devastated. *This War of Mine* reminded me of the stories that people who had experienced the civil war in the former Yugoslavia told me. After telling a woman who had been caught up in the struggle as a civilian about the game, she flatly replied, “This isn’t a game to me.” No, it was her childhood, spent fighting to survive. My response to the game was formed by my relationships to the people who have lived through war—people who have starved, who have been in fire-fights, who have killed to survive, and who live with the memories of it all. Playing *This War of Mine* triggered my recollection of their stories and influenced my experience. This background to my playing of the game goes to show how our biographies form a context for our reception and reading of a game.

Throughout the text, I distinguish between the characters as programmed entities in the gameworld and myself as the player who makes them act in a certain way because this is how I experienced the gameplay, and I attempt to reconstruct my play experience. Likewise, being an autoethnographic text, the analysis is focused on the narrative experience of the play, even though that experience is without a doubt influenced by the underlying rules and mechanics of the game. These mechanics create a certain tension in the game as the player is pressed for time and resources and restricted in what and how they can solve problems. I also use present tense in my gameplay descriptions for greater immediacy.

Because the autoethnographic study was done during my second playthrough, I was better prepared. I knew what to expect, both from the mechanics and from myself. I could steel myself emotionally and was not as stressed because I had learned from my first playthrough how the mechanics worked and what the game allowed me to do. This shift reflects Elisabeta Toma’s finding that ambiguity or uncertainty becomes a mechanical resource in *This War of Mine* (2015, 212) because the player doesn’t know for certain how to play the game until the second playthrough, having learned the hard way in the first.

My second playthrough lasted longer than the first, about eleven hours and was spread over two days in early October 2015. I sequestered myself when playing it, turned off all my usual social media, and ignored the forums and wikis that could help me with the game, although, admittedly, I skimmed some of them after my first playthrough. I wanted to do this on my own, without the aid of others.

The playthrough starts with a household consisting of Zlata, a student; Cveta, a schoolteacher who loves children; Anton, an elderly mathematics professor; and Pavle, an athlete and a fast runner. I am allowed four characters because this is my second playthrough. They all have different skills that will be useful for survival;

Pavle, in particular, will be helpful because he is a fast runner with the largest carrying capacity.

I manage to stay out of trouble for the first few in-game days as I explore the neighboring houses. Early on, a sniper wounds Pavle while he is scavenging, and that makes me jumpy. Still in my first play session but fifteen days into the game, Pavle kills someone in self-defense while scavenging. I searched through that particular house earlier and know there are valuables left, and there are parts of the house that I have not yet searched, but at the time of my search there was a sniper keeping me from exploring the area. As I have Pavle dodge the sniper this time, my pulse is racing when I notice someone moving around the house. I remember the notes left in the house, indicating that someone actually lived there, and realize that he must have been hiding. I try to make Pavle run, but the man throws a punch at him—I instinctively return the attack. When I mash the mouse button to force the combat system to respond, Pavle strikes once with the crowbar, hitting the man hard. The man cries out and throws up his arms in surrender, but I have already pushed the button twice, and the crowbar comes down again, killing the man. It is not just a case of self-defense; it is killing an innocent who is defending his home. Back at the shelter, Pavle becomes depressed and unwilling to carry out any further actions. The different characters are programmed to react differently to certain actions in the game. Most of them will be depressed from killing innocents. They will slow down work or even be entirely unresponsive. Pavle has all of these reactions, which affects the rest of the household negatively and makes it difficult to get everything to run smoothly because the rest of the household start worrying about the depressed character. At this point, the player must have the others talk to the depressed character to cheer him up and return him to “peak efficiency.” In my playthrough, Anton tries to cheer Pavle up, while Zlata wonders how anyone will be able to live with themselves after the war. As a player, I tell myself that killing the man was an act of self-defense, that it was unavoidable and not really my fault—none of which I actually believe. I feel guilty. I am complicit in murder.

Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps argue that “games have the capability to make the player feel as though they are [*sic*] complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events” (2015, 277). Through the interactivity as well as reactivity of the game, the player gains a sense of responsibility for what transpires. In this instance, when Pavle kills the man in his home, I feel responsible for Pavle’s actions; they are after all my own, performed through keyboard and mouse. The feeling of complicity is a recurring factor throughout my playthrough of *This War of Mine*.

More hardships and doubts follow as winter approaches. In my journal, I question whether the game is designed to make ethical behavior difficult or if that is the nature

of war. Is the game rigged against being "good"? Is war? These questions, of course, play into the subject matter of this chapter. If war makes ethical behavior difficult or impossible, then a game that makes it hard or impossible *not* to compromise your ethics to survive is an accurate simulation. At least, it is a representation of the realities of war that resonates as truthful. As the situation becomes more tense and difficult, what would normally be clear-cut ethical lines begin to blur. Is it okay to steal from some people more than from others? Is it more ethical to risk a character's life by stealing from or killing bandits who can defend themselves or to keep the character safe by only preying on the weak and defenseless? This difficulty becomes a recurring theme as the game progresses and suggests that *This War of Mine* is what Sicart calls an ethical game because it forces the player into ethical reflection (2009, 212–215).

When attempting to scavenge Sniper Junction, Pavle is wounded by a sniper but survives and manages to get inside the nearby apartment building with the help of a wounded man. Once he is there, I can hear a baby crying. The room is dark, with a single light source shining down on a baby stroller. Whether the baby has been abandoned or the parents are just hiding, I cannot tell. The encounter sticks with me for a while because it makes me reflect over the fact that children are orphaned, mutilated, and killed in war. Children are usually conspicuously missing in war games. They are filtered out to create an ideological and morally "pure" playground for a war simulation, and, as mentioned earlier, this filtering constitutes a form of selective realism in which some elements are chosen to be truthfully represented, whereas others are downplayed or left out; "the [war game] genre plays into discourses that sanitize warfare and present it as a struggle limited to soldiers and armies" (Pötzsch 2015, 162). In *This War of Mine*, children remain reminders that they are also victims, whether as the crying baby or as the children coming to your door pleading for your aid. In the latter circumstance, you can choose to forsake resources or a certain amount of time of one of your characters for the chance that the children later may return a favor. The crying child in the carriage haunts me and serves as a reminder of what the game is about. Although it may have been a cheap rhetorical ploy to blackmail me through emotion, it works. When I later return to Sniper Junction, I look for the carriage, thinking that I may have overlooked something I can do for the baby, but the baby is gone. Picked up by its parents? Dead? Stolen? I would not expect a child to stay or survive in an actual situation like this, but I cling to the hope that the simulation is somehow lacking, that the baby would still be there and that I can comfort it. But, alas, not finding the baby feels like a defeat somehow.

As winter arrives, things intensify and get harder. I need to keep everybody warm, and after some days I start burning supplies I could have used to build things. Being

an academic, I try hard to avoid burning books, but some have to go, and I find this appalling. The idea of burning books strikes a certain nerve. It is the eradication of the written word, of knowledge and accumulated culture. It makes me think of the book burnings of totalitarian regimes and religious bigots. I burn everything else before this becomes an option, even when it means I am not able to build any tools or fortify the building. I still make the mistake of spending resources on building a comfortable chair—that is when I run out of firewood and have to scavenge some dangerous areas for more firewood.

The primary concern during the winter is Pavle's injury. This hurts my scavenging efforts, but I can still send out Zlata and even Anton if necessary. There are many of incidents during the winter that make me think that I may not make it to the end of the game. My characters are starving in spite of rationing food found early on, and they are falling ill due to the cold. Several scavenging runs are unsuccessful, but I start trading with different groups in the city. I cook moonshine and barter it for whatever I need—mostly at a local brothel, which I do not feel good about at all. It is obvious that the girls are being kept there against their will. I do not see them, but I can “hear” their voices as text floating over the building where they are kept, and I see men leaving the building after having satisfied themselves. The trading station is outside, so I never see the women themselves. I get only simple indications of their existence and the impression that they are ill-treated captives. The brothel confirms my preconceived notions about wartime prostitution and trafficking. I have read enough about sexual crimes in war zones to make my stomach turn, and I have heard women tell their own stories of what they have been forced to do in wartime. My instincts tell me to react—to do something, to turn the game into an action-adventure in which I save these women, but I fear it will not work. As someone who is invested and complicit in the fates of the characters in my household, I fear risking their lives. So I trade, and I turn a blind eye, wishing I could act differently.

When winter ends, I hope that things will change for the better. The situation, although still bad, is looking up. Cautiously optimistic, I send Pavle to scavenge in an abandoned church. The sortie does not quite go as planned because I am surprised by one of the armed thugs there. The thug manages to get off a few shots before Pavle beats the thug's head in with a shovel. Another bandit has heard the shots and comes looking. He does not see Pavle, but he is standing in Pavle's way. Pavle grabs the first bandit's shotgun and blasts away and does not stop shooting until the second bandit lies dead on the floor. Pavle is badly wounded and only barely manages to get back to the safe house. My heart is racing. This was way too close. I am not sure whether Pavle will recover.

Pavle is telling himself that they were bandits, and it is okay that he killed them because they have killed so many others. It was also self-defense. His bad morale, however, takes second seat to the fact that he is gravely wounded. He needs bandages—a lot of them. Everybody is happy he is alive but very worried. They all feel sorry for what he had to do and for his condition. I cannot say I blame them. I cannot help feeling that it was my fault. Was scavenging the church a necessary risk? Should I have instead tried robbing someone who could not defend himself? At this point in the game, I am pretty sure I will not make it. The fact that the game now enters its most dangerous phase, the Crime Wave, during which the shelter is constantly being raided, does not disprove this feeling. I am really desperate; I trade away everything that I do not have an immediate need for. Who needs ammunition ingredients when you do not have the tools to make ammunition? If I cannot use a resource to make food or take care of immediate needs, I am willing to barter it away.

After a brutal raid on my safe house, I become desperate for medical supplies and food. At the same time, children are at the door, begging for canned food. I decide to send Zlata to the brothel, but this time it is not to trade. I have seen a way in past the guards that will allow me at least to scavenge the place. I make Zlata sneak around the back and enter through a second-floor window. At this point, I am willing to steal from these guys. They are bad guys, creepy human traffickers, and I want to—no, I need to—win the game. Stealing from these guys just might be my best chance. Zlata manages to slip in through the top floor and is sneaking around when she is discovered. My judgment is that she can defend herself and get out, as Pavle did. I am wrong, and she is shot while swinging the crowbar at the guy who found her. She falls over dead.

The household falls into a depression, and their already scant resources are dwindling. I wanted to do better. I did not want Zlata to die, and it feels like losing the game. I know that people die in war. I know this on an intellectual level, but Zlata’s death is an emotional reminder. And the fact that it was my decision—my misjudgment and my poor gameplay skills—that led to it makes me responsible for it. I am complicit in Zlata’s death, as I was complicit in Pavle’s murders. *This War of Mine* could be accused of blackmailing my emotions by enforcing a tragic and dark narrative played out in a war setting where mere survival is a success. This interpretation is aided by the game’s paratext, the description of the game’s theme and trailers, which instruct the players that it is meant to make them feel bad. As with Greek tragedy, the audience knows what to expect, and the game makes the player complicit in all the tragedy that occurs. So it is only natural that I feel really bad at this point. At the same time, however, I return to the game. I am not ending the session. I need to play this through to the end.

Luckily, soon after Zlata's death, the war comes to an end on. A simple slide tells me that the war is over. The slide is followed by a summary of the playthrough and short descriptions of the fates of those belonging to my household. I take a deep breath, and I feel my shoulders relax. I did not realize how tense I was during the last hours of game-play. I watch the summary with a sense of melancholy and emptiness that overshadow my feeling of accomplishment. Even though I am relieved and happy at having succeeded, I still feel bad for the questionable acts I have been complicit in, and I cannot shake the knowledge that even though *This War of Mine* is just a game, it reflects the reality of so many people living today. Civilians are still the victims of war all over the world. Unlike with a classical Greek tragedy, however, with *This War of Mine* there is no catharsis (Aristotle 1996), there is no relief from discomfort; instead, the negative feeling lingers on like a dissonant note (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016), which runs parallel with the pleasurable feeling of having played through the game with moderate success and the feeling that it has been a meaningful experience. I tell myself it will be a long time until I play it again.

### **Making You Feel**

But what can be learned from this experience? First, I had a *positive negative experience*: an experience that is distressing but gratifying because it provokes reflection (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010). There is a seriousness that goes beyond the gameworld and the rules—what Kristine Jørgensen calls “play-external seriousness” (2014): the experience is not confined to the game but extends into the real world and allows me to reflect on real-world issues. While playing *This War of Mine*, I associated what happens in the gameworld to the real world in part because of the paratext and because the representation of war seems truthful. With respect to the terms discussed earlier in this article, *This War of Mine* is a realistic game in spite of its lack of behavioral realism or realisticness (Galloway 2004) or maybe even because of it. Creating furniture or making guns is a much more complicated process than is portrayed in the game, and the real world allows for a wider range of actions than does *This War of Mine*. The game mechanics resist you rather than aid you when you are in combat. You have to be precise in clicking your target and remember to change in or out of combat mode, and the reaction time is slow. When Pavle kills the innocent man, it is because I clicked the mouse several times in frantic self-defense before the hitting animation started, thus forcing Pavle to hit the man more than once. The same occurred when Zlata was killed. Although this slow reaction time can rightly be described as poor combat mechanics, the poor execution also seems intentional because it strengthens the sensation that the

protagonists are civilians and not soldiers trained for this situation. This is how combat is for most of us. At the same time, it is frustrating and scary. In playing *This War of Mine*, you fear entering combat more than you would in playing other games in which your characters are excellent and trained combatants.

Likewise, the graphics of *This War of Mine* are restrictive and “cartoony,” far from the vivid photorealistic worlds found in conventional wargames (Pötzsch 2015). Both the mechanics of the resource system and the graphics serve to create a dissonance between themselves and the game’s themes. On the one hand, you are just playing around with a house and its inhabitants, like a simple clone of *The Sims* or, more accurately, *Little Computer People*; on the other hand, you are dealing with the bleak and brutal realities of war—grief, violence, and survival. This dissonance highlights my understanding of the latter and, it could be argued, strengthens the game’s transgressive aspects.

*This War of Mine* is a game that strives toward social realism. The designers’ aim is to transport the player to a warzone so that they can experience it as a civilian would (Skipper 2014; Preston 2015). In the forums on the game, it is “described and interpreted both as a realistic and critical depiction of war and as a game” (Toma 2015, 220). The game’s representation of civilians in war seems credible to me, and I feel drawn into the misery of it all. I recognize the fight for survival against starvation, cold, injury, and illness as a real challenge in wartime. I recognize as realistic the moral and ethical tableau of the game’s many scenarios and quandaries. In *This War of Mine*, the player is confronted with tough decisions about life and death, theft, rape, trafficking, and one’s willingness to sacrifice for strangers and how much. These ethical dilemmas are part of war for civilians, which is an argument for *This War of Mine* as a social-realist game. At the same time, *This War of Mine* may force us to experience and admit these aspects of war, and it may even confront us with realities we have not completely considered or “which we would rather overlook” (Julius 2002, 189). It provides insight into a reality that we do not want to consider but that we now no longer can ignore. In this way, playing the game becomes a transgressive experience in a greater way than just making the player feel bad.

Elisabeta Toma finds that the game’s constraints pressure the player “to make decisions which contribute to the emerging narrative of the gameplay” (2015, 213). This view echoes the statement that the dissonance between the lack of realisticness and behavioral realism, on the one hand, and social realism, on the other, serves to heighten the latter. *This War of Mine*’s mechanics and procedural rhetoric—that is, how the game’s rules and procedures communicate a message and convince the player to act in a certain manner (Bogost 2007, 2–3)—revolve around resource management, and time is the most important resource because everything costs time, even the other

resources that are spent. The player spends time trying to find resources, harvest them, and spend them, and they spend time handling the health and morale of their household. Time is a very limited resource in the game, one that is crucial for the player's decision making. The player has only limited time each day to manage their household and each night to scavenge, and at the same time, the player does not know how much time they ultimately have until the game ends. When characters become wounded or depressed or are starving, they move more slowly or not at all, and, thus, the player's resources decrease. The characters' actions are placeholders for the actions they can take and the time they have to take them. The fewer effective characters, the fewer actions the player can perform and therefore the less time the player has available. Add to this that it costs time and other resources to keep slowed characters alive and eventually to return them to prime efficiency. Thus, the player must ration other resources and actions to fit within these boundaries and to get their characters to last as long as possible. Toma argues that the mechanical constraints combined with the narrative component, which we could refer to as the social-realist aspects of the game, make sure that every decision is a life-and-death decision, a very difficult one at that: "The message that the game thus sends is that life is difficult during wartime and details regarding time and resource management become [sic] to have a high importance for civilians, that food and safety may turn common people into killers and victims" (2015, 213). Just as I experienced in my household.

Miguel Sicart describes an ethical game as one that allows players to make their own ethical value judgments and perform in accordance with them (2009, 212–215). A game that allows players to reflect on whether their actions are ethical or not and allows them freedom of choice is considered an open ethical system. *This War of Mine* is thus an open ethical system. It will give players constant feedback, priming or instructing them to think a certain way about the choices they have made. The different characters in the game will respond differently according to how they are coded (*This War of Mine Wiki* n.d.), but their responses serve to make players reflect about ethics, with respect to how the game system is rigged. This reflection occurs because *This War of Mine* uses what Sicart calls *mirroring ethics*, meaning that the game is designed for the player to go through "an ethical experience similar to the one the game object encourages" (2009, 217). The player must experience the ethical dilemmas and conflicts of someone trying to survive a war, and no matter what choice they make or what happens, they are complicit.

Another factor that connects the player with the gameworld is empathy. Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan (2010) draw on empathy research in different disciplines to explain how games can be used to enhance a player's ability to empathize. A relevant



observation here is the idea of the mindful playing of games: for the player to be mindful and learn from a game, the game must prompt the player to empathize with the actions and characters in the game. The game’s paratext informs the player that *This War of Mine* is about civilians: “In a war not everyone is a soldier.” It is a subtle but apparently efficient prompt that makes the player approach this game from a different, more empathetic angle than other resource-management and war games. The player is prompted to play the game mindfully and seriously.

James Newman (2002) suggests that in playing videogames the player identifies with the gameworld rather than with the characters. In this regard, it could be argued that the player of *This War of Mine* empathizes and relates to the entire household, its fate and its chances of success, and not with the individual characters. This explains the commitment and empathy I feel as I suffer the travails of *This War of Mine* alongside the characters.

Along with a strong sense of complicity and the mirrored ethics, several other emotions are at work that make me feel for the characters and the world they inhabit: frustration, anger, sadness, panic, anxiety, and so forth—all enhanced by my personal background (on this point, see chapter 3 in this volume)—and I am tempted to say, “It all feels real to me.”

### Transgressive Realism

*This War of Mine* can easily be understood as a realist and, in particular, a social-realist game within the definitions I have discussed in this chapter. I argue that the game can be called *transgressive realist*, wherein realism is not only what is experienced as truthful but also something that can be considered a *positive negative* (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010) or transgressive experience. The term *transgressive realism* has been used as the philosophical middle position between realism and antirealism (Braver 2012, 2015), but in the context of *This War of Mine* I use it to refer to the way the game convinces players of the truthfulness and authenticity of the play experience by making them feel bad. To be so convinced requires an understanding of transgression as something that evokes discomfort. These feelings are reported in the forums for and the reviews of *This War of Mine* (Toma 2015), and they are feelings I experienced while playing the game. The sequences involving Pavle’s murder of the innocent man and later of the two bandits and then Zlata’s death in the brothel struck a chord in me and stuck with me until the end of the game and beyond. These feelings were strengthened by my own biography and by the game’s paratext, such as YouTube trailers and reviews, informing me of how I would feel about the game (Belman and Flanagan

2010; Boudreau 2012). This emotional response is also apparent in some of the negative responses that forum users had to the game, such as anger and frustration that the game is no fun, too punishing, unplayable and therefore not a game. The anger stems from being cheated out of the expected pleasure of a war game. To put it in a different way, the player has been transgressed against, but in a different way—perhaps by being confronted not only with unwanted emotions but also with unwanted realism and realizations about war (see Julius 2002, 189).

I suggest that when *This War of Mine* makes us feel bad, through mirroring ethics, empathy, and complicity, this negative emotion also feels truthful and real because it is real. This feeling creates the impression of realism in *This War of Mine* that runs parallel with its social realism, and it allows for further reflection on the experience, on the ethics of the situation, and how the game relates to the real-world situation that we are informed it portrays (Montola 2010; Jørgensen 2014; Aldama and Lindenberger 2016). When as part of the same research project from which this anthology sprang I co-organized a live-action, role-playing game that aimed to create *positive negative* game experiences, I found that creating discomfort for the players caused the game to be experienced as more realistic, even though the discomfort was purely mechanical and physical in nature (Bjørkelo 2016). Performing the game barefoot in a cold room, the players had a constant level of discomfort that bled (Waern 2011) into all the game's activities no matter how mundane, thus making it feel more realistic.

A counterargument can easily be made that because *This War of Mine* is realistic, players are more prone to have a purely negative emotional response rather than a positive negative one. This is a valid argument that I cannot dismiss. However, as is often the case, there is most likely a dynamic between the two processes at work. Where a game that feels real may provoke discomfort, this only serves to strengthen the sense of realism. The two form a feedback loop. In any case, I believe that transgressive realism is worth further exploration, not as a separate genre but as a tool to study the overlap between transgression and realism in an aesthetic context, focusing in particular on how social realism can be a potent vehicle for creating meaningfully transgressive game experiences.

My autoethnographic walkthrough of *This War of Mine* reveals a game that has several elements of transgressive realism. It is a game that tries to force an emotional response and ethical considerations from the player. The ethical challenges and experiences in *This War of Mine*—including murder, starvation, and sex trafficking—are intended to make the player feel bad. No matter what happens, the player is complicit in the wartime tragedies that occur. The worse the player feels about them, the more real the game feels. I suggest that the same can be said about scenes in other games,

such as the self-dismemberment scene in *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), in which the player, through performing this act in a very physical QuickTime event, becomes complicit in the act to the degree that they can almost feel the pain. The discomfort of the entire scene makes it all the more poignant and realistic, and it serves as an example of what can be called transgressive realism.

## Conclusion

This chapter argues for use of the term *transgressive realism* to describe the relationship between negative emotions and what is perceived as truthful and authentic—in particular, when *real* negative or painful feelings make something *feel* more truthful and real. To put it simply, if the feelings are real, what evoked them must also be real(istic). The opposite and maybe more conventional argument may also be true: that what is perceived as real evokes stronger negative emotions. Transgressive realism is a dynamic process between the two. I argue that the concept is a tool, not a genre or a genre aspect, to be used when analyzing how negative emotional response is related to realism not only in games but also in other media in general.

For instance, the movie *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993) feels real because it is a harrowing emotional experience to watch, and we can assume it has been filmed with this intention. Our knowledge of the Holocaust, the film's plot and performances, as well as the technical savvy of the director, editor, and producers amplify a feeling of discomfort that makes the film feel realistic. Games such as *This War of Mine* and *Heavy Rain* do the same. Using the concept of transgressive realism allows us to see how transgressive content and *positive negative* experiences enhance the impression of realism in a work.



## IV Content



## 11 The Renaissance Ass: Ezio Auditore and Digital Menippea

Tomasz Z. Majkowski

In this chapter, I conduct a textual analysis of Ubisoft's game *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009) through *menippea*, a transgressive mode of narrative relying on scandal and paradox to test a philosophical concept, and *parody* to uncover the game's transgressive potential. This focus may seem strange; the *Assassin's Creed* series is not usually perceived as offensive or rebellious, despite its many attacks on organized religion, especially Catholicism. Any controversy surrounding this game is more often related to its rather frivolous use of history. On one hand, the game takes liberties in both its visual presentation of the historical setting and its fictionalized recounting of historical events. On the other hand, it creates a sense of historicity and an authentic presentation of past places and events. Several authors have already analyzed this aspect of the game, focusing mostly on anachronism in the game's presentation of Renaissance-era Florence and Rome (Dow 2013; Szewerniak 2016; Westin and Hedlund 2016). Any further debate is silenced by two factors: the game's precautionary disclaimer about the design team's varied ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds and the uses of traditional videogame aesthetics. At first glance, then, *Assassin's Creed II* is just another mass-market sandbox game, faithful to genre rules and player expectations.

Here, however, I expose the way *Assassin's Creed II* transgresses genre conventions by critiquing three important assumptions of sandbox games. First, I deal with the game's stance on killing enemies and on death in general; then I problematize character development beyond the raising of attribute scores. Finally, I move to the more general issue of freedom that sandbox games are built upon. Focusing on these three problems, I aim to describe how a mainstream videogame can "go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention" (Jenks 2003, 2), not by provoking controversy and outrage among players or the media or by inspiring the player to violate the rules of the game, but in more reflexive ways. My argument is that transgression can be perceived intellectually as well as emotionally.

The game's transgressive strategies seem to be located within a situational frame (see chapter 3 in this volume) in that the game crosses genre conventions and rules. Yet because *Assassin's Creed II* also offers a more general criticism of videogame culture by contemplating death, change, and freedom in a broader sense, it seems to lean toward what in chapter 3 of this volume Holger Pötzsch calls a critical frame, but without being overly sensational. This reading opens up another way the game can be perceived as transgressive: in addition to challenging the three issues listed earlier, this chapter also challenges the assumption that only artistic games such as *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009) (see chapter 12 in this volume) are capable of dealing with serious topics.

My analysis is motivated by two additional factors. First, the way *Assassin's Creed II* includes transgressive ideas without violating gameplay and game-mechanical conventions is a result of more general principles ruling character-driven *storygames* (Ensslin 2014). Perceived from a Bakhtinian perspective, the storygame is a hybrid form that combines the characteristics of several preexisting means of expression, from traditional games to cinema. Moreover, as an interactive form, it creates an impression that the story takes place here and now and is prone to player intervention. A constant tension between various ways to describe the world, all combined within the game, results in parodic tension—that is, a sense of mockery or exaggeration (cf. Majkowski 2015b). Both qualities link the formal aspects of the storygame to the tradition of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984a, 1984b; chapter 3 in this volume), so the genre opens up to transgressive content without necessarily violating its own rules.

Second, I believe the transgressive content of *Assassin's Creed II* is often ignored or oversimplified in academic analyses. For example, the well-described motif of the double avatar (Compagno 2015; Apperley and Clemens 2016)—the player playing as Desmond Miles while controlling the body of Ezio Auditore and various other assassins—is not just a gimmick devised to bring some critical potential to an otherwise bland mass-market game. The game in fact employs this motif to meditate on certain fundamental issues of human existence: life and death; identity and change; freedom and power. The seriousness of these issues and the transgression of genre conventions that we find in the game are the reasons I use the literary category *menippea*—which Mikhail Bakhtin calls “a genre of ‘ultimate questions’” (1984a, 115), reaching a serious philosophical subject through playful transgression—as a major analytical tool to examine it. But before I begin a proper game analysis, I want to discuss certain theoretical assumptions regarding *menippea*.



## Menippea, from Ancient to Digital

Menippea is a narrative mode that transgresses genre boundaries and combines various genres into a coherent whole in order to distance itself from ideological and aesthetical conventions. This way it questions established truths in new, unexpected ways, either to validate them as universal or to ridicule them as false. For example, *Don Quixote* (1605) is a menippean novel testing the truth of chivalrous romance and chivalry in general against realistic portrayals of day-to-day country life, which are rather different from a romanticized setting like Arthur's kingdom. Utilizing the menippean form, the novel is able to ridicule knightly ideology yet praise the protagonists' noble and courageous nature.

The term *menippea* originates in classic Greek satire, supposedly invented by Menippus of Gadara. His style, combining prose and verse to present a narrative based on a certain ideological stance, inspired several Greek and Roman authors to pursue a unique literary mode, distinct from both traditional, didactic satire and adventure romance. From this new tradition, a separate type of European literature was created and appropriated.

Yet it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that this mode was rediscovered and described, when menippean qualities within certain novels, poems, and dramas were brought to light by Northrop Frye (1957) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a, 1984b), whose work on Dostoyevsky serves as the basis of my inquiry. Bakhtin (1984a) ties menippea to his concept of the *carnavalesque*, which he describes as a main vehicle for transporting the unstable, dialogical, and ambivalent values of the carnival into narratives.

Since its introduction to literary theory in the 1960s, menippean satire has been an analytical tool employed to interpret works of classic literature—Shakespearean dramas included (Weinbrot 2005)—as well as to describe properties of the self-reflective, postmodern novel (Kharpertian 1990; Greenspan 1997). My attempt loosely relates to the second practice. I agree with Linda Hutcheon's (1985) point about the necessity to adapt Bakhtinian thought to nonliterary practices because Bakhtin's own preference toward literary analysis was dictated by sociointellectual trends of his own times, and he always stressed the historical dynamics of culture.

### The Carnavalesque Properties of Menippea

In trying to uncover menippea as a pervasive mode within European narrative tradition, Bakhtin distinguishes fourteen aspects of this form, including generous use of humor and general playfulness; employment of fantastical elements and tropes—both

conventional and innovative; freedom from historical and biographical particularities; the ability to deal with broad philosophical questions; and the tendency to comment on what is important and relevant to particular “ideological issues of the day” (1984a, 118). Within the menippean narrative, contradictory elements and contrasts are played against each other. The protagonist is simultaneously wise and foolish and travels from the heights of Mount Olympus to the lowest slums populated by thieves and prostitutes—and back again. The living have regular colloquies with the dead and the gods, and they all engage in eccentric, scandalous endeavors and situations. Even the narrative style itself is not fixed: menippea switches from prose to poetry and combines various genres and tones, resulting in dialogic tension. The final aim is “the creation of extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a truth” (Bakhtin 1984a, 114). To achieve this aim, menippean texts must employ a carnivalesque worldview and transgress the boundaries of good taste and what is considered proper literary craftsmanship, resulting in scandalous, provocative literature easily disregarded as vulgar (Bakhtin 1984b).

Menippean narrative’s whimsical, playful fluidity and its tendency to challenge established rules come from the genre’s connection to forces of *cosmic laughter*: the unofficial, rebellious worldview that manifests itself during carnival festivals and shapes the ideology of menippea, “permeat[ing] both its external layers and its deepest core” (Bakhtin 1984a, 133). The category of the carnivalesque in a game analysis allows us to include the player’s active participation as an important factor of the inquiry—the carnival itself is always participatory (Bakhtin 1984a, 122)—while remaining faithful to narrative analysis. As David Annandale observes in his Bakhtinian investigation of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North 2004), “Its free roaming form and the extraordinary contingency of its background events make it carnivalesque to even a greater degree than the carnivalesque literature that Bakhtin celebrates, suggesting that the video game may be an art form particularly well-suited to the embodiment of these energies” (2006, 89).

The category of the carnivalesque also allows us to describe the transgressive properties of the game because the aim of the carnival itself is to transcend social, aesthetic, and moral borders to create a temporary, upside-down world of ambivalence, where things that are usually divided coexist. To achieve this effect, the carnival produces an arsenal of images, rites, and practices that aim to bring down the high and appreciate the low, to exchange a face with an arse (Bakhtin 1984b, 21).

Many carnivalesque images and practices can be found in videogames, *Assassin’s Creed II* included—from playful violence to the grotesque body imagery to allegories of limitless consumption (Majkowski 2015b). Yet the tone of *Assassin’s Creed II* is different

from outright carnivalesque titles such as *Saint's Row: The Third* (Volition 2011), *Gears of War* (Epic Games 2006), and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games 1992). Its overall tone tries to be more serious; there is an attempt at education in the shape of an in-game encyclopedia; and even violence seems to be toned down. Yet these characteristics are hardly a sign of weakening the carnivalesque properties because menippean narratives can be seriocomical, simultaneously somber in tone and rooted in the joyful relativity of carnival truth (Bakhtin 1984a, 106–108). The menippean properties of *Assassin's Creed II* depend more on particular images than on an overall carnivalesque atmosphere of freedom from social restraints—although the primary gameplay mode, climbing buildings instead of traversing streets below, has certain carnivalesque properties and blurs the distinction between high and low on a spatial level.

### Bakhtin, Parody, and Digital Games

The main menippean potential of *Assassin's Creed II* is tied to a generous use of *parody*, “an integral element in Menippean satire and in all carnivalized genres in general” (Bakhtin 1984a, 127). Parody can be understood as “the creation of a decrowning double” (Bakhtin 1984a, 127), a motif (a character, an event, a plot, an image, and so on) that simultaneously relates directly to another, serious motif within the game but debunks its pathos. Such parody is not necessarily funny (see Morson 1989, 69): to serve its purpose, it “introduces ... a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one” (Bakhtin 1984a, 197), therefore exposing both the parodied and the parodying as equally invalid and misguided. The latter characteristic distinguishes carnivalesque parody from simple satire: whereas simple satire addresses ridiculed issues from the position of moral superiority, carnival laughter is universal and deals with both parts of the parodic equation. Its aim is not to replace outdated or inadequate ideas with a new set of more current values, but to force the rebirth of the ridiculed issue itself (Bakhtin 1984a, 126–139). Being the instrument of such cosmic laughter, parody therefore has a quite complicated relation to the idea of transgression in *Assassin's Creed II*.

A classic example can be used to illustrate the concept of the decrowning double. Miguel de Cervantes's book introduces a pair of grotesque twins: the tall, lean, romantic, and deluded nobleman Don Quixote and the short, fat, down-to-earth peasant Sancho Panza. Their simultaneous presence in the novel serves a parodic purpose. The squire ridicules his master's maddened ways from a commonsense position, and the squire's simplicity and practicality are ridiculed by the knight's noble conduct. By masterful introduction of decrowning doubles, *Don Quixote* describes both chivalrous delusions and peasant practicality as equally laughable.

My understanding of parody as a major figure of videogame poetics is based on a similar presumption. As stated earlier, the contemporary storygame is a conglomerate of various narrative practices of describing the world, each of which has an ideological background of its own. When they attempt simultaneously to describe the same phenomenon, they often contradict each other, exposing each other's shortcomings in the process. An extreme version of this contradiction creates a "ludonarrative dissonance" (Hocking 2007)—a form of parody invalidating both parodied elements at the expense of the game's coherence.

Such tension is most easily observed in games with strong narrative elements. On the one hand, there is a strong tendency in AAA games to imitate the visual style of cinema and create a plot that unfolds semi-independently of the player's activities. On the other, the same games lure the player with an illusion of freedom of action in an open world. The coexistence of the transfixed narrative and gameplay freedom results in a parodic tension between the two. Plot-related events are multiplied and distorted on the gameplay level to provide the player with sufficient challenge. For example, villainous groups include a ridiculous number of soldiers for the player to dispatch. At the same time, avatar abilities, such as the capability to heal gunshot wounds by crouching behind a wooden crate, are exposed as absurd within the narrative. Just as Sancho Panza ridicules Don Quixote and vice versa, mechanics and narrative are at odds with each other in AAA videogames, constantly reminding the player that neither is the only and proper way to describe the world.

Therefore, I argue that parody lies at the very core of the videogame, although it is rarely perceived. Players and critics more often seek cohesion and describe strong parodic tension as a design flaw, despite this tension's ability to unmask the ideological bias of various genres constituting the videogame (cf. Majkowski 2015a).

### **Parody and Transgression**

As a figure able to ridicule social, political, and aesthetic norms, parody is a convenient vehicle for transgression in artworks. However, the relationship between parody and transgressive aesthetics is complicated. The presence of a decrowning double (Bakhtin 1984a, 127) exposes the ideological limitation of the parodied original. As W. C. Simons puts it, "Because parody works ... to critically expose how a dominant discourse is limited and bounded ... it is typical and characteristic of a particular era and socio-ideological situation[;] it shows that a dominant discourse is aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal" (1990, 24). As such, the decrowning double can serve two purposes: to free the parodist from the dictatorship of what is considered proper and to criticize dominant ideology. Therefore, it can be perceived as "a threatening, even

anarchic force, one that puts into question the legitimacy of other texts” (Hutcheon 1985, 75).

But the work of parody is paradoxical: its existence depends on what is parodied. Therefore, without the original and its ties to the dominant discourse, a parodic gesture is pointless, and “parody’s transgressions ultimately remain authorized—by the very norm it seeks to subvert” (Hutcheon 1985, 75). It can thus be argued that Bakhtin’s idea of carnival falls short in that carnival is short-lived and licensed by the authorities. By extension, a weak point of the concept of the carnivalesque is also revealed: it operates within the limits established by official discourse. This is the way David Annandale (2006) analyzes *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, pointing out the game’s inability to address various important social issues.

Yet such criticism is valid only if the carnival and the carnivalesque are treated as forces of social and political change that fail to achieve their goals and ultimately reinforce the status quo (see chapter 3 in this volume). But the transgression committed by the carnivalesque is rarely tied so closely to the political ideal of subversion. Instead, it can be a “deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” of the norm (Jenks 2003, 2), a way to bring to attention the very existence of a moral, aesthetic, or social boundary. With this purpose in mind, an “ambivalent carnival laughter burns away all that is stilted and stiff, but in no way destroys the heroic core of the image” (Bakhtin 1984a, 133).

### The Creed of the Assassins

*Assassin’s Creed II* is a sequel to *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) and the second of a twelve-game main series, which has eleven spin-offs. In the first four games, the player controls Desmond Miles, a modern-day bartender who turns out to be a scion of a long line of Assassins—members of a secret order waging a shadow war against the Templars over the faith of the world. The stakes are high as the Templars try to create a world of rational order by depriving humanity of free will, and the Assassins, champions of freedom, try to prevent that.

Plugged into the Animus, a device that allows access to genetic memory, Desmond relives the adventures of his Assassin ancestors. The first game allows him to visit Palestine during the Third Crusade. The second game, which is the subject of this analysis, relocates the series historically and introduces a new ancestor, the Renaissance Italian nobleman Ezio Auditore da Firenze.

During the course of *Assassin’s Creed II*, Desmond relives several key episodes of Ezio’s life, from his birth in 1459 until his first encounter with the mysterious Precursors in

1499. Desmond witnesses a conspiracy that leaves Ezio's father and brothers falsely accused of treason and executed and that involves the cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, who later is elected Pope Alexander VI. Tracking the conspirators, Ezio discovers that his father was a member of the secret Assassins Order and that Borgia is the leader of the enemy Templars. The game ends with Ezio beating up the pope in the Sistine Chapel, before discovering beneath the chapel the ruins of a civilization predating humanity. The Precursors created a technologically advanced culture that vanished from the earth millennia ago but is still remembered as the pantheon of Roman gods. During a confrontation with a hologram of the long-dead Minerva, Ezio learns that the real stake in the war between the Assassins and the Templars is control over the Precursors' artifacts.

The game is played from a third-person perspective, with the camera over Desmond's and Ezio's shoulders. In the first few minutes, the player takes direct control over Desmond, but once Desmond is plugged into the Animus, Ezio becomes the player's avatar, and modern-day buildings are replaced with a full historical environment. The head-up display, containing a map, a health bar, and mission details, appears only when the player is playing Ezio, implying that it is the Animus interface.

Desmond's episodes are short and played in a limited space. In contrast, Ezio is free to roam the re-creation of four Italian cities: Florence, Venice, Montereggioni, and San Gimignano (with parts of the Vatican in the finale), either walking through crowded streets or climbing buildings and traversing rooftops. The story progresses through a series of short quests. There are many additional activities, from gathering collectibles to making sidequests unrelated to the main plot. Although the game emphasizes the need for secrecy and introduces a number of stealth mechanics, open combat is hard to avoid, and stealth is most crucial during some of the storyline missions, when being discovered can result in failure.

If Ezio dies or is unable to complete a storyline mission, the game reloads from the last save point, informing Desmond and the player about desynchronization: apparently, the modern-day hero cannot diverge too much from his ancestor's life but must repeat the memory correctly. A similar mechanism is introduced to explain why access to certain areas opens up as the game progresses.

*Assassin's Creed II* can be easily connected to Bakhtin's fourteen-point description of menippea (1984a, 114–118). The game combines fanciful, fantastic tropes of reliving through technological devices the memories of distant ancestors in a meticulously re-created, historical open world. This world shows every sign of Bakhtinian slum naturalism (Bakhtin 1984a, 115) as Ezio recruits prostitutes, thieves, mercenaries, and other lowlifes as allies. The protagonist adopts various ideological stances and tests them

during changing circumstances—while doing so, he regularly confronts the dead and dying. He, too, is a dead man, just a digital shadow of the fifteenth-century Italian nobleman—a shadow inhabited by both Desmond and the player. The world is full of contradictory and eccentric characters, from a brothel-operating nun to the villainous, heretic pope. During the game, the player takes part in carnival festivities and meets an Olympian goddess.

Although this analysis is certainly valid as an opening move, it should be supplemented by two important inquiries. First, we need to take into consideration the difference between literature and videogames, at least to signal the tensions and intersections between player choices and game story (Kapell 2016). Second, we must check what kind of truth the menippea puts to the test and what norms are transgressed—an important step when analyzing a game with the tagline “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.”

To do both, I focus on what is parodied within the game. *Assassins Creed II* provides handy examples of decrowning doubles. The protagonist, Ezio, has several doubles. He serves as an avatar for the player as well as for his modern-day double, Desmond Miles. Within his timeline, he is contrasted with Vieri de’Pazzi, his equivalent from a Templar-related family, and with Rodrigo Borgia (Compagno 2015). The final combat of the game turns out to be fisticuffs with a rather unassuming, corpulent priest dressed in pontifical robes and parodies the convention of the final boss fight while decrowning Rodrigo Borgia. But as fun as creating such pairs is, the game has more general parodic aspects. Most crucial, several elements of the narrative are parodied by their equivalent on the gameplay level, opening the game up to a menippean reading.

Dealing with grand topics is the main goal of menippea, according to both Bakhtin’s and Frye’s interpretations of the form. Menippea challenges established knowledge, opposes myth and intellectual laziness (Frye 1957), and serves as the trial of a philosophical idea to cleanse it from everything petrified and pathetic (Bakhtin 1984a). In this way, it reaches the potential to transgress both good taste and sanctioned knowledge, to shake up what was already petrified by social norms, and to reach toward a universal, fundamental truth of human existence. In the next section, I elaborate on the topics of death, change, and freedom by exposing contrasting, parodic elements of *Assassin’s Creed II*, especially Ezio Auditore’s foolery. I start with death because the game announces the topic of killing in its title. Then I interpret the protagonist’s ever-changing character and ideology and finally move on to a discussion of freedom, the central problem of open-world sandbox games. Thus, I scrutinize whether a market-oriented, seemingly benign videogame is capable of transgressing norms and addressing serious issues without being outright preachy.

### Requiescat in Pace

In *The Golden Ass* (late second century AD [Lucius Apuleius 1999]), the only ancient menippean novel that has survived in its entirety, the protagonist Lucius is turned into the eponymous animal. He suffers great misadventures and, in consequence, transforms from a seeker of carnal pleasures to a priest who leads a more meaningful and spiritual existence. He also learns about love, mercy, and the cruelty of fate (Bakhtin 1981; Freudenberg 2005). Ezio Auditore's situation (and that of his doppelgänger Desmond Miles) is very similar. He is taken from the comfort of a privileged life as the son of a wealthy banker and transformed. As the storyline unfolds, he is forced to try out a new set of ideas and values and finally reaches peace, learning what those values mean in practice. The lesson learned is indeed important: it is about death. And because the protagonist serves as the avatar of not just one but two different entities—Desmond and the player—his experiences also allow them to learn the same lesson.

The topic of death is introduced in the very first Ezio scene: as an infant, the protagonist almost dies. He is saved, but only to serve as a vessel for somebody else and for a purpose that is not revealed to him until the end of the game. As a young man, Ezio witnesses the unjust and unpreventable death of all the men of his immediate family. Hunted by the law, deprived of wealth and privilege, he is ejected from society (one may say he symbolically dies) and must assume a new persona: that of an outsider and an avenger. The narrative change is stressed on a gameplay level as the combat changes. Up to this point, Ezio was just brawling with his rival and his cronies. But the very moment the player regains control after the cutscene that shows the execution of the Auditore family, the first real swordfight occurs, resulting in the death of Ezio's opponents. He shows no remorse after the event; he only thirsts for more vengeance. This obsession serves as a justification for the first assassinations that the player must execute. Then, as Ezio becomes Assassin-in-training, he starts justifying killing by referring to the Assassins Order ideology. He also tries to show respect for his victims by acting as their confessor and gently guiding them to the other side. He almost always fails.

Gameplaywise, certain storyline missions require the player to assassinate a member of the Templar conspiracy. Success results with a "meaningful death" sequence. It starts with Ezio/the player stabbing his target. Then the gameplay pauses to play a "threshold dialogue." The scene is strange in a videogame but common in the menippea, with the protagonist arguing to be let in through the door. Sometimes, as in the case of Seneca's *The Gourdiffication of the Divine Claudius*, the door leads to the afterlife (Bakhtin 1984a; Greenspan 1997). In *Assassins Creed II*, the scene at the threshold of death is



very prominently presented. Against a blank background, Ezio holds his victim almost lovingly and exchanges final words, trying to glean some important information or commenting on the sins of his target.

His attempts are either resisted, as when the victim insults or mocks Ezio for the last time, or partially succeed, as when he learns incomplete information. Then, after the victim dies, Ezio tries to say something profound, usually in Italian. Finally, he says, "Requiescat in pace," a Latin phrase strongly associated with Christian burial rites, meaning "May he rest in peace." With this final remark, the whole scene becomes contradictory: the killer is masquerading as a priest administering the last rites even though there is no indication that Ezio believes in the afterlife. Moreover, the visual aspect of the scene, with Ezio holding the victim in his arms, is closely reminiscent of the *pietà*, the archetypal pose in which the Virgin Mary grieves over the dead body of Jesus.

The final conversation between Ezio and his victims serves mainly as a justification of the assassination. If the victim tries to excuse the actions for which Ezio kills him, the assassin refuses his confession and points out that the victim has only himself to blame, a response in direct opposition to absolution. Sometimes it is Ezio who regrets his deeds and explains the murderous act as an inevitable result of circumstances. In the absence of God or any other form of higher justice, the assassin presents himself as a deliverer of justice in the form of a death sentence. However, he is not a judge, capable of condemning or exculpating someone. He is just an auditor—the impassive deliverer of an inevitable result.

The solemn, serious atmosphere of the meaningful death sequence is contrasted with the player's satisfaction after completing a difficult and lengthy quest. The assassin, delivering the killing blow, is depicted not only as a priest delivering last rites but as a mourning mother. The final conversation parodies the way such exchanges are presented in popular culture: it lacks any deep meaning and never results in conciliation. Moreover, in the game's finale Ezio is revealed as an impostor, faking stoic impartiality in killing but still seeking revenge. The very idea of a meaningful death is thus questioned, and justifications for the act of killing are invalidated.

### **The Trail of Bodies**

The game undermines the idea of an assassin being the auditor of human life in another way as well. As soon as the death scene ends, the game resumes, and, just like before the scene, the player must dispatch a horde of enemies, typically the dead target's bodyguards. The resulting combat is full of flashy moves and cinematic finishes and is completely deprived of any moral justification. Killing generic thugs is Ezio's bread

and butter, and his body count is so impressive that subsequent games in the series acknowledge it.

The body-count problem could be dismissed if these enemies were presented as life-deprived target dummies. But the game problematizes Ezio's mass murdering by giving the grunts a personal life. Scenes show the brutes playing cards, getting bored at their posts, and conversing about the money they will bring home to their families. None of this appears to move Ezio, nor apparently does it affect the player, who has no choice but to participate in Ezio's killing sprees, or Desmond, who only takes the opportunity to hone his own killing techniques in the Animus. After all, he is just reliving his ancestor's life and has no power to affect it.

The contrast between the importance of certain deaths and the lack of a sense of others' significance reveals several parodic contradictions. The first one is between the game narrative and gameplay: the narrative tries to remain serious about death, whereas gameplay carnivalizes it (Majkowski 2017). The second is between the position of the player and the protagonist. Ezio craves absolution and constantly justifies himself, but the player knows that killing in videogames is just something one does to progress without giving it too much thought—as if questioning game violence is the province of media enemies only (Nauroth, Gollwitzer, Bender, et al. 2014).

The third and most important contradiction shows the crack in the titular creed and the order upholding it. Although the Assassins are fighting to free common men from oppression, in fact they care only about important figures of power. Other people are only a means to an end: they provide moral justification for the actions carried out for the Assassin Order. On the gameplay level, most other people are deprived of agency and wander the streets aimlessly. If the player is not using them for cover, they are just nuisances, blocking the avatar's movement and commenting on his actions. They are civilians, people Ezio does not kill, as the game reminds the player every time she stabs a random figure—although the very possibility of such action reveals a tension between game narrative and gameplay once again. Some of the civilians are marked as more important—the peddlers and courtesans, thieves and mercenaries whom Ezio can hire as support. The gameplay significance of these figures comes with a narrative price, however, in that they are deprived of even a pretense of life. They exist only to aid the protagonist in achieving his task, unable to move from their spot when not following the assassin and obeying his orders.

Common men turn into collateral damage if they side with the Templars, even if they are driven by the poor economic condition that the Pazzi family guards complain about. Yet this narrative motif is contrary to the ideal the Order supposedly upholds: that of the free will. The people are free to choose as long as they choose correctly.

Moreover, the reluctance to kill unarmed civilians is contrasted with the joy of murdering defenseless guards. As an assassin, Ezio does not give the opponents any opportunity to defend themselves, preferring stealth tactics, a preference that in turn contrasts with Ezio's supposedly honor-based quest for vengeance (Yie 2017) that is executed only in confrontation with major enemies, who deserve their own death scenes. But, then again, the division of the nonplayer characters into four factions—civilians, henchmen, enemies, and targets—can be dismissed as artificial because all of them are governed by the same rule set and all can be stabbed with the same hidden blade. As much as the mechanics of killing separate people into categories, they make them equal at the same time.

### **Ezio the Ass, or Metamorphosis**

Among the most important of Ezio's qualities is his ability (or inability) to learn and change. During the course of the game, the assassin goes through several transformations, changing his social standing, his worldview, and abilities. At the very beginning, Ezio changes from an infant in the first scene into a member of the Florentine nobility and establishes himself as a romance hero in the world of feuding Italian families. The theme is stressed by two indirect quotations from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: the fight on Ponte Vecchio resembles the opening of Shakespeare's drama; then Ezio climbs to his beloved's bedroom and spends a night there. The lighthearted tone of the beginning is soon transformed into something darker, as also happens in the well-known play. But the romantic trajectory is confronted with a political one, and there is no more room for Ezio's romance, so the storyline disappears from the game. When the male members of the Auditore family are hanged, the only survivor changes again, this time into an avenger without any regard for romantic love, at least until his honor is satisfied. All the narrative transformations are stressed both on the visual level, as Ezio dons his assassin's costume, and within the gameplay, as the ability to kill enemies is unlocked. The sudden change of topic introduces an important menippean quality of the game: the ability to adapt to new kinds of ideological truth.

In his analysis of *Assassin's Creed II's* semiotics, Dario Compagno (2015) stresses the importance of Ezio's confrontation with Vieri de'Pazzi in San Gimignano. It is, indeed, the moment of the next transformation in which Ezio tries to discard his personal quest for vengeance in favor of public service. The tension between the personal and the public plays out as a story of a hero's gradual maturation from having purely selfish motivations to becoming a public servant, similar to the trajectory in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. But this trope is complicated by introducing the analyzed issue of death.

To become a proper political animal, Ezio changes from innocent infant to brash yet harmless youngster and then cold-blooded killer who resolves all problems by spilling blood. But this path of maturation is then rejected as invalid. At the end, Ezio must surprisingly embrace Christian values, end the bloodshed, and confront God, who, quite ironically, turns out to be a female ancient alien, disguised as a pagan deity. At the beginning of the sequel, however, the new set of values also turns out to be false. Once again the protagonist's decision, which at first is presented as valid and profound, turns out to be rash and foolish.

Indeed, for most of the game Ezio is either misguided or clueless, and even as he works to uncover the reason behind his misadventures, he usually fails. Each ideological stance he adopts is dismantled the same way: it turns out the protagonist is either mistaken or deceived. When his family is imprisoned, young Ezio seeks help from the very person behind the false accusations. While pursuing his personal vendetta, Ezio accidentally uncovers political conspiracy. As soon as he finally emancipates himself from the need for vengeance, he finds himself extremely close to avenging his family.

But the most delicious unveiling comes right after Ezio defeats Rodrigo Borgia for the first time. Ezio's assumption that he has been acting on his own will to achieve victory and maturity is shattered. He suddenly discovers there were no coincidences and that what he mistook for his own achievements were only parts of the assassin's training. All strange and dangerous adventures were carefully curated by the Assassin Order, to which his supposedly unrelated allies all belonged. And as soon as Ezio comes to terms with this new situation, he is enlightened again. When he meets the holographic image of Minerva, the goddess suddenly starts talking directly to Desmond, knowing he will relive Ezio's memories in the future. This way, Ezio realizes that he is insignificant and all his misadventures were staged by a long-dead alien being, whose goal was to deliver a message Ezio does not care about to a person he will never meet, a passenger in his own body.

Thus, the game comments on several genre conventions. First, it violates the idea that the main character should be ideologically stable, relentlessly pursuing his or her goal from the beginning to an end, like Nathan Drake or Lara Croft. Second, it opposes the idea that during the game narrative both protagonist and player accumulate knowledge so that they have a better understanding of the world, necessary to conquer the final challenge. Finally, it comments on the assumption that the protagonist's efforts matter and only he is able to save the world when Ezio's fight against the Templars turns out to be insignificant in light of the impending cosmic catastrophe Minerva informs Desmond about.

### The Renaissance Fool

But with all his naïveté, Ezio serves an important role. As a clueless outsider, he has the potential to uncover what is hidden and to question what is believed to be true. The first quality comes to play quite often. As soon as he is ejected from society, Ezio starts to peep and to eavesdrop. He frequently follows people to places where they feel safe and sees them without their public mask, exposing their pettiness and hypocrisy. This skill, combined with his inability to maintain proper social norms, provides an outsider's perspective and enables social critique. It also allows the player to put Ezio Auditore in line with a distinguished dynasty of literary fools, such as Lucius in *The Golden Ass*, Parsival of the Round Table, Simplicissimus, and Gulliver in his travels.

This way Ezio becomes a transgressive figure par excellence because, as Bakhtin would put it, he gains “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation” (1981, 159). Ezio's ability to dismantle social norms by associating with thieves and prostitutes to fight a corrupt elite is stressed by the eccentricity of his looks and behavior. He dresses in unique and distinct clothes: he is branded as outsider and assassin by an easily recognizable hood. He also acts in a very peculiar way, not following the loops created by game artificial intelligence. He has freedom of movement but pays for it: when in a crowd he constantly bumps into people, knocks them over, and cannot maintain his pace when walking. He also climbs walls and roofs, which does not go unnoticed, and there is always a voice commenting it. Unseen bystanders are either calling him an idiot or a madman for his behavior or speculating about his private affairs: Is he drunk or in a hurry to meet his mistress? There is no respect or admiration in those remarks. Instead, he is constantly abused by the crowd he is trying to protect. This way Ezio's honorable quest and serious methods are degraded through the familiar, vulgar, and disrespectful language of the marketplace, one of the most prominent aspects of carnival (Bakhtin 1984b).

Ezio's foolery has one additional purpose: he serves as a mask for somebody else. Not only is he simultaneously a protagonist and an avatar—the player's embodiment within the gameworld (Burn and Schott 2004; Klevjer 2012; Jørgensen 2013; Vella 2014)—but also the control the player has over Ezio is indirect, mediated by an already established protagonist-avatar, Desmond, which complicates the relationship between the player and the playable figure. As Tom Apperley and James Clemens put it, “This game, and the rest of the *Assassin's Creed* series, renders the issues [of avatar control] in a way that self-reflexively stages the processes of focalization, localization, integration and programming for its players. This is a peculiarity of the series, but this offers crucial

transparency on this important aspect and elements of the player/avatar relationship” (2016, 122).

The player experiences the Renaissance world from the perspective of a fool and outsider. Thus, it is possible to playfully question parts of the established knowledge by exposing its falseness, even if everything seems to be in order at first glance. The effect is doubled by the presence of Ezio’s doppelgänger Desmond, who appears undereducated and needs constant explanations. Those explanations are delivered by the historian Shaun, whose disdain toward Desmond’s stupidity stresses the game’s general attitude toward official historical knowledge as oppressive and unplayful. The visits to Renaissance Italy are constantly interrupted by Shaun’s unhelpful tirades, so the impression of Ezio being only a mask is enhanced. But it is also worth noting that all abusive comments, although filtered by the two avatars, are aimed directly at the player. It is the player who makes Ezio clumsily navigate crowded streets or forces him to climb—and be ridiculed for it. Shaun’s historical commentaries are there to educate because the implied player does not possess sufficient knowledge of Florence’s topography or the fine details of Pazzi’s plot. Therefore, the game abuses the player as much as it abuses both avatars, simultaneously turning them into scapegoats the player can blame for her own shortcomings in operating the interface or recognizing important historical landmarks.

And historical background information is only one way the game reminds the player that she has not been transported into the historical past but is experiencing only a simulation: there are glitches onscreen, the map and menu have very distinctly modern looks, and so on. Ezio’s role as an avatar is taken one step beyond the conventions. Not only is he controlled by Desmond, who in turn is controlled by the player, but the game control scheme also turns him into a marionette, with limbs attached to controller buttons. Instead of attacking, the player must press the “armed hand” button, and when she wishes to speak, she must press the “head” button. Ezio’s body is even further degraded because it is usually observed from behind, with his backside prominently displayed, especially during climbing, and his face covered by the hood. The constant shift between exposing Auditore’s face in cinematics and exposing his derriere in gameplay sequences serves as a classic carnival inversion of the face and the buttocks (Bakhtin 1984b, 21).

Yet the situation of control remains paradoxical. As Apperley and Clemens observe, to operate the game successfully, the player needs to incorporate the controller scheme. During gameplay, the player’s body is immobilized in front of the screen, and her fingers operate the controllers, a position parodied by Desmond’s total immobilization inside the Animus (Apperley and Clemens 2016, 119–121). Moreover, the particularity

of the *Assassin's Creed II* controller scheme results in forming a muscle strain that the game community jokingly calls "the assassin's claw" (Ubisoft Forum 2012). The game demands that the player press and hold the right trigger on the gamepad, so the constantly bent index finger becomes sore. But it is in this way that the player is revealed as being controlled by Ezio and performing his movements to the point of physical discomfort.

The marionette metaphor reveals yet another aspect of Ezio's foolery. As already established, he is misguided about his deepest conviction. He believes himself to be a free man fighting for the freedom of others and perceives members of the Assassin Order as defenders of free will against the Templars. The way the message about the Order is delivered to Ezio even convinces the player. But it is constantly contested. First, the Assassins are revealed as the force behind most of Ezio's adventures. Second, the player is constantly reminded that she is steering Auditore via sophisticated technology: This motif reaches its culmination when Ezio is revealed to be nothing but an avatar also on the narrative level when the goddess Minerva addresses Desmond directly, using Ezio as a medium.

The opposition between Ezio's beliefs in freedom and practice is ever present. In the narrative, he rarely acts on his own volition; he is usually forced to action by external circumstances. As an avatar, he is also shackled, doing exactly what the player makes him do. But the player is also manipulated in that the game poses as an "open world" when it is in fact quite linear, with several parts of the game world opening and closing on narrative demands. There are possible yet forbidden activities—murdering "civilians" being the most prominent among them. Deviation from the established narrative results in desynchronization and the collapse of the game, so in reality the player has exactly as much freedom as her grotesque double, Ezio. This contradiction is emphasized by the overall narrative frame: playing as Desmond, the player is just recreating actions Ezio already accomplished in the past. A constant fight for freedom is thus simultaneously revealed as an ultimate lack thereof.

## Conclusion

*Assassin's Creed II* addresses two videogame issues through contradictions present in a single motif or image: the problem of violence and the player's freedom. This duplicity of game elements creates several "decrowning doubles," especially in the interaction between narrative and gameplay, although this trope is ever present also in the narrative itself. Constant contradictions, paradoxes, and the tendency to ridicule any attempt to address what is usually perceived as a serious issue stress that a definite answer is impossible.

The way *Assassin's Creed II* employs contradictions and creates doubles can be traced back to the way the game is constructed. The way the game is played and the story is told result in tension, often perceived as dissonance. *Assassin's Creed II* exploits this tendency of the game genre to take a stance on different dilemmas haunting videogames—whether death should be treated in a playful or serious way; whether the protagonist should be a heroic figure; and whether the player is free to act within the game world or is just another piece in the game machine. By exploring various answers, the game creates an intellectual test, transgressing both genre expectations and the typical ideological background of mass-market videogames.

It is worth noting that the game achieves its transgressive status without violating the overall sense of coherence during play or heavily deviating from the sandbox genre. It is easy to dismiss subtle yet transgressive parts of the game as a conglomerate of design flaws or inconsistencies typical to every storygame. This tendency gives validity to menippea and the carnivalesque as both interpretative frameworks, enabling a perspective that uncovers important aspects of the game, and cultural modes behind narrative-heavy videogames in general. *Assassin's Creed II* is just a convenient and persuasive case because it poses easily observed menippean qualities, such as reliance on parody in the Bakhtinian sense and a tendency to combine genres and to blend realism and fantasy. It also relies on motifs that are characteristic of menippean narratives, such as the threshold dialogue, the fool as a protagonist, and metamorphosis as a plot device. But in the videogame genre as a whole, the menippea is not limited to this example, and the tendency to perceive transgressive qualities as something common in videogames suggests that the whole genre is tied to the carnivalesque.

*Assassin's Creed II* shies away from definitive answers to the questions it raises, so it is hard to tie the game to a particular ideology, at least regarding issues of death and freedom. This is another general carnivalesque quality. The only version of truth allowed by the carnival is transgressive and ambivalent because carnival resides between various ideological and narrative positions, freely crossing aesthetic and moral boundaries. As such, it cannot be explained, but it can be experienced. For this very reason, videogames, a cultural form well suited to presenting that experience, turn out to be a very appropriate medium for menippea—perhaps even more so than the novel.



## 12 Destruction, Abjection, and Desire: Aesthetics of Transgression in Two Adaptations of “Little Red Riding Hood”

Ragnhild Tronstad

Time and again, theorists and designers of videogames address the questions of how and why games could be considered works of art (see, e.g., Flanagan 2009; Tronstad 2012; Sharp 2015). In this chapter, I do not continue this discussion but instead start with the simple observation that a common characteristic of art and videogames is that our engagement with them often leaves impressions that continue to resonate in our minds long after the interactive engagement is over. The main hypothesis to be explored in this chapter is that transgression in various forms affects such resonance in the minds of game players and art audiences.

*The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009) is a horror videogame presenting six variations of the well-known fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood.” When playing *The Path*, the player must cautiously balance the urge to explore with careful awareness of the potential dangers lurking in the woods and must avoid the wolf, but not at all costs—the wolf is, after all, her destiny. No other goals are defined in the game. There is, in other words, no escape for those who want to play.

In this study, I compare my experience of playing *The Path* to my experience of watching *Fotnote til Rødhette og Ulven* (Footnote to Little Red Riding Hood, hereafter referred to as *Footnote*) (Jonasson and Vislie 2014), a theater performance thematically related to *The Path* in the sense that both are adaptations of the same fairy tale, but in different media and genres. Reading the two works in parallel, I am particularly interested in the implicit threat of violence that lurks in the background of both works and how this lurking violence introduces a kind of potentiality that set the works in play.

The term *potentiality* has the same etymological roots as the term *power*. In games, power in the form of agency is usually negotiated and distributed among the players according to rules that may be more or less explicit and formalized. However, neither work discussed in this study seems willing to grant the audience sufficient agency to autonomously engage in the play. Presenting a surprising and unpredictable narrative,

*Footnote* renders in its audience a sense of vulnerability rooted in the anxiety of not being able to predict what the work will confront them with next.

The typical fear for members of a theater audience is that they will be confronted in person, *as a person*—to be expected to *participate*. This is the opposite case from playing a videogame, where participation is anticipated as part of the deal. In *The Path*, however, very little agency is granted the player. The playful negotiation between game and player thus happens in a manner quite similar to the playful negotiation between the theater performance and audience in *Footnote*—in the player's or audience's imaginative expectations of what is to happen next.

In this chapter, I investigate how the violence of the two works functions as an igniter of the player's and audience's playful imagination. In this investigation, I apply a concept of play derived from Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1960] 1993), who sees play as inherent to aesthetic experience in general, regardless of artistic medium. Psychoanalytical theory forms another part of this chapter's analytical framework, providing a perspective from which the type of conflicts addressed in these two works, *The Path* and *Footnote*, can be articulated and productively related, despite their apparent incommensurability.

*Footnote* repels us by confronting us with the *abject*. In psychoanalytical theory, the abject is that part of us from which we want to liberate ourselves: it represents the mother, the edges of our body, that which is cast off (Kristeva 1982). *The Path*, in contrast, serves us stories of desire, staging the all-too-familiar conflicts of adolescence, where “the sense of expansion, of new power, and the desire for discovery, can lead to provocative behavior and the deliberate violation of moral and social rules” (“Transgression” 2006). The two adaptations thus realize two rather different interpretations of the familiar fairy tale: one in which transgression is seen as a progressive movement on the path toward adulthood and enlightenment; the other in which the transgressive moves in the opposite direction, backward into regression, confronting us with the pitiful, dirty, and abject—that which did not evolve into a higher stage.

The latter version of the story, as presented in *Footnote*, is indeed a rather unusual one. How the performance was to be read and interpreted as a *Footnote to Little Red Riding Hood* was something of an enigma to me for quite a while. The three available reviews of the performance (in two Norwegian theater journals and one newspaper) matched my initial confusion, agreeing that the only obvious reference to the fairy tale seemed to be the one found in its title and that other connections were difficult to spot (Erichsen 2014; Pettersen 2014; Amundsen 2015).

It was not until I embarked on this project of analyzing *The Path* in terms of its potentially transgressive aesthetics that other possible relations between *Footnote* and

the fictional-mythical world of “Little Red Riding Hood” started to dawn on me. It is not entirely uncommon that when doing textual analysis, we find that the text under scrutiny turns out to mean more or something else than we initially assumed. In this case, however, my initial attempts to analyze a videogame came to influence my understanding of an entirely different text, a theater performance. My subsequent analysis of the theater performance in turn broadened my perspective on what transgression may imply in the context of “Little Red Riding Hood” and thus ended up informing my reading of the transgressive aesthetics at work in *The Path*.

### Transgression

Transgression is defined as “the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin” (“Transgression” 2017); to transgress is “to go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention, it is to violate and infringe” (Jenks 2003, 2).

In chapter 3 of this volume, Holger Pötzsch addresses the historical, cultural, political, economic, and epistemological contingency of what in a specific situation may be experienced as transgressive and thus constitute a transgression. In order for transgression to happen, there must be a limit or boundary for what are considered acceptable acts. Especially within art contexts, boundaries available for transgression are fluid and in constant change. The act of transgressing one such boundary may very well cause the transgression to lose its edge and the act to become normalized. Thus, *transgressivity* must be analyzed in each specific case according to its relevant parameters—what makes this act transgressive in a certain respect to a particular person or group of persons.

In my analysis, I address how both works transgress genre and medium-specific conventions of the genres to which they belong. *The Path* transgresses by denying its player agency to interactively engage in the game and by imposing upon her an unconventional set of rules that force her to act in a way that is contradictory to her own interests in the game. *Footnote* intriguingly transgresses our expectations of how the well-known tale “Little Red Riding Hood” may be represented on stage, in one sense because what we are presented with contains so few of the familiar elements by which we usually know and recognize the fairy tale and in a different sense because its disrupted and distorted sequence of events is difficult to interpret and order into a meaningfully coherent whole. As a result, we are doubly confused: the elements we look for to create meaning are not there to be found, and the elements that are there do not connect in a way we are able to make immediate sense of.

Jennifer Reid argues that “throughout the history of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ ... there is a constant emphasis on transgression, either emphasised through the beastly male, the wolf, or alternatively through the eponymous heroine herself” (2014, 6). Several versions of the story exist, each mirroring the morality of its time. Whereas early versions end with the little girl and her grandmother being devoured by the wolf as punishment for the girl’s naïveté, later versions allow them to escape their brutal destiny when they are saved by a passing hunter. Some versions are even rather empowering on the women’s part, ending with the girl and grandmother playing tricks on the wolf, causing his death (Bettelheim 1976, 174). The entry on transgression in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* explains that transgression in fairy tales “generally has a normative function in affirming societal rules and practices, but this is not always so: social change is primarily produced by transgression and the subsequent acceptance of a new mode of behavior” (Stephens 2008, 986). In modern critical discourse, transgression most often denotes a rejection of repressive forces and is therefore a positive concept: a prerequisite for change, transgressive behavior is judged as constructive, whereas behavior that upholds traditional ideas is deemed destructive (Stephens 2008, 987).

In psychoanalytical theory, transgression is part of the “inescapable complementarity of desire and law, of law and transgression” (No Subject 2015). It is characteristic of the death drive as well as of the pleasure principle. In *The Path*, as in the traditional versions of “Little Red Riding Hood,” the pleasure principle represents a transgressive force that in the context of this volume appears curiously reminiscent of other practices of “escaping reality”—playing games, for example. In *Footnote*, however, the death drive rather than the pleasure principle seems to be the driving force. Representing the human being as a “suffering, passive victim of, or witness to, violence and death” (Black 2010, 59), “a type ... connected to poverty, ignorance and peasantry—a dehumanizing construct” (Black 2010, 44), the performance stages the abject in a manner that feels peculiarly invasive and threatening.

To distinguish between the various “frames, forms, and practices [of] transgressivity in videogames and play,” Pötzsch suggests a flexible, dynamic model containing the categories ludic, diegetic, critical, hegemonic, juridical, situational, and idiosyncratic. The latter category is of particular interest in the context of this study as it hinges on “subjective attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and convictions” where features of the game and play are subjectively experienced as transgressive by specific individuals.

Methodologically, in performing aesthetic analysis we approach the aesthetic object or event from a number of angles, informed by relevant theoretical perspectives, as we

try to come to terms with the dimensions of sensory effects and meaning production that emerge between the work and its audience. This process is necessarily based on and relying on personal experience. To the extent that it succeeds in producing insights into these dimensions, these insights may be more or less reflective of and productive to other people's understanding and experience of the work, depending on factors such as their sociocultural background, aesthetic preferences, and previous experience of similar works. With specific regard to the works analyzed here, it is not unlikely that gender may also play an important role.

### *The Path*

*The Path* was created by Tale of Tales, a game-development studio founded and run by two visual artists who have received much praise for the remarkably beautiful visual design of their works. They have also been known to problematize the concept of gameplay, challenging game designers and artists to design games that are "not games." They explain that the purpose of the challenge is to figure out how to make "good art with the medium of videogames" by abandoning "the idea that what we make should be a game" (Samyn 2010). As a consequence of this viewpoint, there is not much traditional gameplay in *The Path*, and the experience of engaging with it is largely interpretative rather than interactive. Except for being allowed to move rather freely in the landscape, the player has few opportunities to interact with the environment. Forms of interaction are limited to picking up objects and effectuating occasional cutscenes by entering certain places. Cutscenes often signify progress in the game, transferring the player-character from one stage in the game to another. During cutscenes, the player has no control over the character. Thus, apart from moving about in the game and picking up objects, the player has a rather restricted role and agency in the game. Engaging in interpretation and imagination to make sense of what is happening to her character, especially in terms of the possible dangers ahead, defines much of the gameplay experience.

To start the game, we choose one of six adolescent sisters as our player-character and protagonist. To complete the game, all six must be played in turn, and their different "paths" explored. The girls differ in age, the youngest one is 9 years old, and the oldest is approaching 20. Before the game starts, we find all of them gathered in the living-room of their apartment, ready to be picked up as our character to lead and control. Choosing one of them, we are taken outside and placed in front of a forest path, presumably leading to Grandmother's house. We are explicitly told not to leave the path, and then the game begins. If we choose to follow the path straight to our announced

destination, nothing much happens. A raven lands in front of us on the path, then leaves again. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of a white-clad girl in between the trees before we reach the garden gate in front of Grandmother's house. Entering the house in search of Grandmother turns out just as uneventful. It is rather obvious that our mission in the game is something else, something more, than just bringing Grandmother refreshments. If we instead leave the path and enter the woods, we can start exploring the environment, finding objects to pick up, discovering clearings, encountering people. Changes in the soundscape—such as the clanking of chains—warn us that there are dangers lurking nearby.

The versions of the fairy tale that confront us in the game are far from unambiguous. Like most games of exploration, the narrative progression of *The Path* depends on how we interpret and choose to physically move about in the game, steadily discovering new areas and items that may inform us and give us a gradually more complete understanding of our quest, its purpose and meaning—although they never become particularly explicit in *The Path*. One rule that soon becomes clear, though, is that we cannot complete the game without confronting our wolf. It turns out that each girl has her own destiny to realize, each destiny implying a “wolf”—that is, a symbolic encounter with a male figure in the woods representative of aspects we may connect to the wolf of the fairytale. At least once in the game, the encounter between the girl and her wolf is portrayed as a transcendental experience of being united with one's missing half—the romantic idea of true love as a possible destiny. In this particular encounter, the wolf comes in the shape of a handsome young man. In other encounters, he appears to be something more dubious, even literally wolflike. However, each encounter results in his revealing his true wolf nature in a blacked-out scene, leaving the lifeless body of a ravished girl behind. We are then brought back to the initial living room in which the game first began, where we may choose one of the remaining sisters to start another adventure.

In order to complete the game, instead of avoiding the wolf at all cost, we need to find the correct balance between being daring (to make progress in the game) and being careful (not to end the game and the girl's life too soon). It is a constant negotiation between the urge to explore and the wish to survive (so we can continue exploring, in case there are still unexplored areas and secrets to uncover). The ultimate choice of the game thus boils down to when we are ready to meet our wolf: When are we ready to sacrifice our present protagonist and move on in the game to realize another young sister's quest?

### The Fairy Tale in a Psychoanalytical Perspective

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim argues that it is of vital importance to the function and value of fairy tales in a child's development that the fairy tale is ambiguous as to what it literally "means." To get a proper sense of ownership to the story, the child needs to be able to gradually discover new aspects of it and decode more of its "meaning" as she grows older and more experienced. Stories that are too openly didactic, spelling out their moral to the child once and for all, as do some of the early versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," ruin the fairy tale experience (1976, 173).

Bettelheim points to the struggle between two opposite sides of the masculine as central in "Little Red Riding Hood": on the one hand, the out-of-control, aggressively sexual, brutish force represented by the wolf (in psychoanalytic terms, the id), threatening to destroy everything in its vicinity; on the other hand, the rescuing father figure, strong, reliable, and comforting, represented by the huntsman (in psychoanalytic terms, the ego) (1976, 172). In Bettelheim's perspective, both figures refer to the *father* in the child's subconscious interpretation of the tale. In *The Path*, however, the double addressee of the quest—the player and the player-character—is presumably past the Oedipal phase representative of the child in Bettelheim's theory. I interpret the masculine force in *The Path* to represent, instead of the father from whom the child must disconnect, the typically unstable, often delusive object of desire that can potentially fulfill the adolescent's yearning for adulthood. Another difference between *The Path* and our conception of the story based on the version popularized by the brothers Grimm is that there is no hunter figure available to rescue the girls in *The Path*. There may be various reasons for this figure's absence; transgression of the tendency within popular culture to always provide a happy ending is one reason. Another, as I have come to read the story, is that the savior is already implied in the wolf: not least in the example referred to earlier in which encountering the wolf is represented as finding one's soul mate. This interpretation makes the girls' "fall" and "death" ambiguous and a matter of making the right choice—just as they might sometimes be in real life.

#### ***Footnote to Little Red Riding Hood***

The female protagonist in *Footnote* evidently does not make the right choice—if she indeed has a choice at all. If "Little Red Riding Hood" is a tale about growing up, the grown-up life depicted in this performance certainly leaves something to be desired. The performance opens with the audience engulfed in darkness. No sound can be heard except for an occasional scratching of unknown origin. Slowly our eyes adapt to the

darkness, and we are able to discern the branch of a tree swaying slowly in front of us, scratching the wall. More branches become visible. We are in the woods, hardly able to see anything at all, feeling vulnerable and not knowing what to expect. Next, a person on stage is ambushed by another person. We hear them struggle, panting.

After this incident, the stage is slowly lit, signaling that the story is about to begin. Covering the back of the stage is a wall clad in foliage, in which two twittering little birds make occasional fluttering moves. The scenery creates an absurd gothic atmosphere, with the birds visibly stuffed and so poorly animated that the sight of them fluttering would be comical were it not rather unsettling. We are then introduced to what must be the everyday life in the home of a couple of indeterminable age. The relation between them is not clear, but somehow they appear more like brother and sister than husband and wife—perhaps because they share the same appearance, mixing the pitiful with the sinister. Their behavior and actions seem unmotivated and random, making it difficult to predict what is going to happen next. In my experience of the performance, this difficulty had an unsettling effect, influencing how I came to interpret and anticipate the future course of action. Thus, although very little in fact happens later in the performance, every small incident—laying out cutlery, setting the table—is read as a potential disaster.

I believe that the unsettling effect of these scenes can be ascribed to the onstage human figures' evocations of the abject—a perception of the repulsive with which we resist identification. Our resistance to identifying with them makes the objects, persons, and situations on stage appear uncomfortably close, as if they threaten to invade, infect, and assimilate us. Such an experience is not very common in theater but rather typical of experimental performance art. Furthermore, anticipation of rape and violence triggered by the performance's title as well as its opening scene may influence our perception of what is to come. It certainly does not help that the narrative structure of the performance is unclear, its sequencing of events appearing unpredictable, to say the least. Thus, the anticipation of violence and disaster continue to dominate our perception, preventing us from adjusting our worst expectations even though later experiences would suggest that not much *is* going to happen. The same mechanism is operative in my reading of *The Path*, up to a certain point.

### Negotiation as Play

Several philosophers have related the play concept to aesthetic experience—for example, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. As Gadamer applies the concept of play, it is understood as a mental movement between the aesthetic



object or situation being experienced and the experiencing person. In this interpretative movement to and fro between a work of art and its beholder, play may reach its highest possible state, emerging as a “structure.” This implies a transformation of reality in which its “truth” becomes apparent to the spectator. Often collecting his examples from theater and drama, Gadamer describes how the spectator may rediscover himself in the tragedy by recognizing “a metaphysical order that is true for all” ([1960] 1993, 133). Gadamer’s idea of play implies being played as a necessary part of the play experience. To avoid confusion, it should be noted that Jaakko Stenros’s discussion of norm-defying behavior in play and playfulness, in chapter 1 of this volume, applies a different conception of play than Gadamer’s. The latter concept is beyond good and evil in the sense that it designates a movement, an interaction between parts, and thus cannot be isolated to a single mindset.

As a work of art, *The Path* indeed requires of its player an interpretative to-and-fro negotiation, in which the player seeks to be realized as a player of this particular game by her decoding of its rules and figuring out its secrets. This negotiation is necessary for the player to take part in the interactive relationship. Whether the gameplay reaches the state of a “structure,” in Gadamer’s terms, that reveals a deeper kind of truth to the player must surely depend on each particular interactive-interpretive relationship. In a passage that corresponds astonishingly well with Gadamer’s perspective on the function of play in art and aesthetic experience, game designer and scholar Emma Westcott reports on meeting her teenage self in the game:

Moments spent playing *The Path* triggered my identification with almost forgotten memories of personal experience. This seemingly direct address resonates still. ... *The Path* re-tells a tale of feminine becoming in a form that has, from time immemorial, passed on wisdom from generation to generation. *The Path* reminds us of the potential of gaming to let us see through another’s eyes. (2010, 80)

As I have argued elsewhere (e.g., Tronstad 2004), in games of exploration the player’s interpretative acts become externalized, manifest in the choices she makes in the game. A negotiation process takes place between the player and the game, wherein the player tries out actions and adjusts them according to the responses she receives from the game, until some kind of progression is made. The interpretative negotiation decides the course of the path through the game, and to a certain extent it determines the resulting narratives that the player constructs in order to structure her experiences in the game. The process may often involve more action happening inside the player’s head than what is made manifest in the game, however. A great deal of the play going on in these games is thus compatible with Gadamer’s concept of play as it occurs in the act of aesthetic interpretation.

### Transgression as a Catalyst of Play

I propose that transgression in various forms stimulates our imagination and thereby functions as a catalyst for play to happen. This is certainly the case in the theater performance *Footnote*, in which the initial audience experience of being personally exposed to the possible dangers lurking in the woods is never properly released in the course of the performance but merely replaced by a continuous, restless anticipation of disaster. In the performance, this experience is in part produced by transgressing the theatrical convention of a separation between audience and stage, which physically and psychologically implies that whatever happens on stage does not personally affect the audience. The transgression of this convention is surprisingly and effectively accomplished by depriving the audience of their ability to visually control the situation, by removing all light in the black-box theater space where the audience and performers are situated together. This way, the physical addressee of the threat lurking in the dark becomes unclear, and every person on stage as well as in the audience is potentially exposed. The transgression is also accomplished when the audience's playful imagination is stimulated by depriving the audience of narrative control—in other words, by producing a sense of not being able to predict the course of action.

When I first started to play *The Path*, a similar kind of experience occurred. My initial explorations of the game were strongly influenced and characterized by a lurking threat of violence and sudden death, represented by the absent wolf. Instead of being reassuring, his absence—to me—only signified that he could potentially be present anywhere in the landscape. However, as Westecott notes, more than the promise of violence marks the transgressive in this game. The rule that forces the player to sacrifice each of her player-characters, one after the other, in order to proceed in and win the game, which acts against the usual player instincts to pursue survival, may be experienced as transgressive as well. The player-characters represent vulnerable young girls with whom we may easily identify. Intuitively, we relate to their situation and see their need for protection and guidance by someone older and wiser, yet this is not our mission in the game.

When we realize that we are not in the game to protect and save the girls—that their deaths are required to solve the game—something odd happens: it is as if the horror of the lurking violence that awaits them is canceled out. On the one hand, we now regain agency and a sense of power as players; on the other hand, the perhaps most important aspect of the initial playful experience is taken away from us. Allowing the girls to meet their destiny no longer feels like a transgressive act but is

accepted as part of the gameplay. From this point on, the gameplay is less impressive, in my experience.

My hypothesis is that the sense of horror works as a driving force behind the interpretative play to and fro between us and the work and is our main motivation for coming to terms with the work and appropriate its meaning. Our interpretative drive is stimulated by the narrative ambiguity, expressing a “powerful/powerless binary” (Reid 2014, 13) characteristic of the fairy tale, which is symbolically effectuated in the game as well as in the theater performance, directed at the player and audience.

### Play and the Pleasure Principle

Sigmund Freud ([1911] 1984) identified the *pleasure principle* as the guiding force for the id and thus decisive for our behavior in early childhood and infancy, leading us to constantly seek pleasure and avoid pain. He contrasted the pleasure principle to the *reality principle*, by which we gradually learn to abide as we grow up into responsible human beings. When Little Red Riding Hood disobeys her mother’s warnings, leaving the path and her duties behind to gratify an impulse to pick flowers instead, this choice is often read as an immature response from a child who is still ruled by the pleasure principle. The moral of the story, read from this perspective, is obvious: abiding by the pleasure principle leads you into trouble. The reality principle teaches us to postpone instant gratification in order to obtain a more precious future goal. If we follow the pleasure principle only, such goals, potentially granting us even greater kinds of pleasure, are out of our reach. Thus, the reality principle also fills an important function in realizing pleasure.

In popular discourse, playing games is often dismissed as an irresponsible, immature activity in which the player surrenders to the pleasure principle instead of devoting herself to more productive activities rooted in reality. This certainly holds true for some casual games, but not so much for games that provide a more complex game mechanic and rules that require strategic thinking and positioning in order to secure an objective. Far from providing any instant gratification, such games do not merely stimulate the player’s drive for pleasure but are sophisticated training grounds for learning to master the reality principle. Rather than pools of regression, they may be tools for personal growth and transgression—tools with which to refine and develop the player’s humanity. Engaging and provocative, the transgressive aesthetics operative in *The Path* may guide the player in hermeneutic interpretations to come to terms with, for example, emotionally disturbing experiences from her own adolescence.

“Pool of regression” is a more apt description of the world that confronts us in *Footnote*. In psychoanalytical terms, this world connects to destruction and the death drive. According to Freud, the death drive is an instinct in the organism that works against the life instinct and “whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death” ([1920] 1984, 311). It is the opposite of transgression—it is a conservative, self-preservative keeping-to-oneself and a *not*-becoming of anything other than what one already is.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have applied and explored different understandings of transgression and the transgressive in my comparative reading of two adaptations of the fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood.” For the videogame version, I have looked at how the game developers have transgressed conventions of the videogame as a genre and medium of play in order to investigate the potential for videogames to effectuate an audience or player experience that we are more accustomed to find in fine art. Gadamer’s equation of play with the aesthetic experience of artworks, as an interactive, interpretive movement to and fro between the work of art and its audience, has served as a frame of reference as I have argued that transgression in various forms may trigger and stimulate such processes. As Pötzsch points out in his chapter in this volume, however, transgressions of genre or medium-specific artistic conventions seldom function transgressively for very long. They often end up defining a new norm or are already considered the norm in an adjacent medium or genre. It is thus entirely possible that the staging of the abject in the theater version of “Little Red Riding Hood” would not have been experienced as half as transgressive if its context were not theater but experimental performance art. In performance art, staging the abject is, if not the norm, at least well within the received limits of what is considered the norm.

The final transgressive move discussed in this chapter is that of the character Little Red Riding Hood violating the rules set for how she is to behave. In several versions of the fairy tale, this transgression of rules functions as a stepping-stone and prerequisite for her progress and development into adulthood. In other versions, however, it signifies disaster and demise. Correspondingly, whereas violence represents a progressive force in *The Path*, its results are regressive in *Footnote*. Together, the two works represent the span of and ambiguity at play between progressive and regressive transgression in the classic fairy tale.

## 13 Exploited or Engaged? Dark Game Design Patterns in *Clicker Heroes*, *FarmVille 2*, and *World of Warcraft*

Faltin Karlsen

Playing digital games can be a captivating experience and in some instances a time-consuming affair. In the general public, spending too much time on games has been an object of concern, and the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre has often been publically criticized for being overly demanding of time, sometimes leading to excessive playing, with negative impacts on players' lives. Another game genre that has been criticized for being a "time sink" is the casual social network game, an example of which is *FarmVille* (Zynga 2009). In this case, it is claimed that people are duped into playing games without any real content by the deployment of alluring reward mechanisms—in this sense resembling the behavioral conditioning chamber known as the *Skinner box* (Skinner 1953)—and thus training the player to become hooked on the game. In this regard, Jonathan Blow, the designer of the acclaimed game *Braid* (Blow 2008), has stated, "If you look at a game like *Farmville*, there's actually no game there. It's just reward structure layered on reward structure layered on reward structure with a hollow center" (quoted in Makuch 2013). Even representatives of the casual-game industry question the status of such a design; for instance, Ken Rudin of Zynga infamously stated in reference to the company's practice of analyzing player behavior and tweaking the design to optimize engagement and sales that Zynga is "an analytics company masquerading as a games company" (quoted in Willson and Leaver 2015, 149).

This chapter analyzes game design patterns that stimulate players to invest more time in playing a game than they might have originally intended. The aim is to explore how potential effects of game design can be measured and to what extent designers are responsible for this effect. Because game designers do not directly design play experiences but are rather doing "second-order design" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 168) by creating the system within which the players interact, this topic is difficult to analyze empirically in a straightforward way. So I focus instead on specific game designs and what sort of play experiences they may enable. I tie this focus to a discussion

concerning to what extent this type of game design can be regarded as unethical or transgressive.

Broadly speaking, transgression means to overstep boundaries, including the action of “passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command” (“Transgression” 2017). In the context of game design patterns and time spent on playing, the question is whether game designers overstep ethical boundaries rather than legal boundaries. Earlier ethical research within game studies has often been occupied with content viewed from a player perspective, or how games may “encode, express, and encourage ethical reflection and ideas through their systems, mechanics, and representational elements” (Nguyen and Zagal 2016, 1; see also Sicart 2009). Other research has focused on ethical dilemmas in online games that afford players the opportunity to perform transgressive acts against other players, including theft and treacherous play (Carter 2015b), player killing (chapter 8 in this volume), and other unwanted and toxic behavior (chapter 15 in this volume). This chapter employs a different perspective by focusing on how game design itself may work against the player’s “best interests.” Rather than following ethical philosophy, the analysis employs the concept of *dark game design patterns* and explores in what way such design can be said to be “questionable and perhaps even unethical” (Zagal, Björk, and Lewis 2013, 8).

The objects of analysis are three games in which the manipulation of the temporal aspects of gameplay is a core part of the design: the idle game *Clicker Heroes* (Playsaurus 2014); the casual social network game *FarmVille 2* (Zynga 2012); and the MMORPG *World of Warcraft: Legion* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016). These cases are staple games of three genres that have been criticized for how their design manipulates players into wasting time (and money) on mindless activities or into excessive gameplay or addiction. The comparative approach is used to discuss different ways the same game design pattern can be embedded in games and to evaluate how discrete design elements may function in the larger game setting.

### **Method—the Implied Player’s Perspective**

Methodologically, there are several ways to approach the question of how so-called exploitative game design might affect people. I have chosen to conduct an analysis by playing the games in question, which is the most direct way to understand how a game functions from the position of the player (Aarseth 2003). The aim of this approach is twofold: (1) to analyze the games as “structure” and (2) to analyze the games as play experiences. The first aim focuses on identifying what kinds of dark game design

patterns exist in the games, and the second aim involves understanding how these patterns may be experienced in the larger context of the game. The motivation is to discuss whether game design patterns can be considered transgressive per se and to what extent the overall game experience and the motivation for playing may ameliorate the “effect” of certain design patterns.

In practice, my approach has been to play the games systematically and to log each play session through screenshots and written notes. I have been especially attentive to quests, missions, and other activities that rely on specific time requirements and hence stimulate the player to increase playing time. Because the games I analyze are known to gradually introduce more complex and time-consuming gameplay, I have not limited my data collection to a specific period but rather have played until the games seem to stabilize into predictable patterns without any new features being announced. However, the analysis is in no way exhaustive because the games gradually evolve through patches and expansions. My empirical data collection ended in December 2016, so my analysis refers primarily to the 2016 versions of the games.

### **Market Conditions and Shifting Concerns**

How games are designed is to some extent linked to the monetization model they employ. During the past decade, retail sales of games have dropped significantly, and digital distribution platforms such as Steam, Xbox Live Arcade, the Apple App Store, and Facebook have taken over a large majority of the market (Phillips 2016). The shift in distribution models and the huge amount of free games available on these platforms have also stimulated a shift in monetization and a “gold rush” toward converting traditional business models into the free-to-play model (Alha, Koskinen, Paavilainen, et al. 2016). In the free-to-play model, a game can be acquired for free but at the same time offers players the opportunity to buy virtual content during play; it is now the most common monetization model on Facebook and Apple platforms (Paavilainen, Hamari, Stenros, et al. 2013; Phillips 2016).

The free-to-play model has generally been criticized both by game designers and politicians for being exploitative and unethical. In 2014, the European Commission, for instance, raised concerns about the booming app industry, in which 80 percent of revenue was based on in-app purchases. For smart phone games, 50 percent of revenue was based on in-app purchases, and the European Commission was especially concerned that children were at risk of being exploited economically by games that were marketed as “free” (European Commission 2014). The criticism is directed especially at the most aggressive monetization strategies, aiming for short-term profits instead

of long-term player engagement—for instance, by the use of paywalls and pay-to-win features (Alha, Koskinen, Paavilainen, et al. 2014).

Although parts of the MMORPG market have also turned to the free-to-play model, many titles, including *World of Warcraft*, are still based on the subscription model. Subscription is an economic model that is designed to ensure a stable income and, in effect, to stimulate long-term loyalty. The criticism of *World of Warcraft* is therefore also different from the criticism of the free-to-play market and the casual market: public concern has instead focused on the huge amount of time players spend on the game and its “addictive” qualities, a concern also mirrored in a substantial amount of psychological research on this topic (King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths 2010; Karlsen 2013; Petry, Rehbein, Gentile, et al. 2014).

What is common for these monetization models is that time spent on the game is converted to money. Although noncommercial predecessors of MMORPGs, such as tabletop role-playing games and multiuser dungeons, are also known for being time-consuming, sometimes engaging players for years (Fine 1983; Kendall 2002; Karlsen 2009), a monetization model such as a subscription may be a way to take advantage of these qualities. I selected certain games to compare game design in different monetization models to see especially how short-term and long-term perspectives relate to each other.

### Dark Game Design Patterns

The concept of game design patterns is a description of reoccurring interactive design elements in games, for instance, certain types of quests (Björk and Hopolainen 2006). According to José Pablo Zagal, Staffan Björk, and Chris Lewis, a *dark* game design pattern is “a pattern used intentionally by a game creator to cause negative experiences for players which are against their best interests and likely to happen without their consent” (2013, 7). What qualifies as a “negative experience” and “best interests” is not further described, and their paper does not discuss how they should be measured. However, it is suggested that if a game seduces people to part with large sums of money or if the player’s expectation of the time commitment is “significantly at odds with the actual time requirement,” the design may be described as “dark” (2013, 3).

Zagal, Björk, and Lewis distinguish between three different types of dark design patterns: monetary, social capital based, and temporal. My analysis focuses mainly on design in the temporal category, but because all three types rely on each other to a great extent, I briefly describe all of them here. Dark *monetary* patterns are patterns that



deceive the player into spending more money than anticipated. *Predelivered content* is, for instance, a pattern in which game content exists upon purchase of the game but is not available until the player pays an additional fee. Dark *social capital*-based patterns are designed to make the player feel she has to play out of social obligation. One example is the need for “neighbors” in social network games such as *FarmVille* in order to progress. Dark *temporal* patterns may lead the player to experience that a game takes significantly longer than expected or to feel that she has “wasted her time” (Zagal, Björk, and Lewis 2013). *Grinding* is perhaps the most well-known pattern in this category, where simple activities are repeated endlessly to generate resources or to reach certain goals.

In my subsequent analysis, I identify the kinds of temporal design patterns that are implemented in *Clicker Heroes*, *FarmVille 2*, and *World of Warcraft: Legion*, sorted under the categories *grinding* and *play by appointment*. But, first, a description of these games.

### ***FarmVille 2*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Clicker Heroes*—Three Ways to Enthrall the Player**

#### ***FarmVille 2***

The original *FarmVille* was launched on Facebook in 2009 and quickly became the most played game on the platform, with about 80 million monthly users at its peak popularity (Jacobs and Sihvonen 2011). The company Zynga was a flagship in the development of the genre known as the casual social network game and released a long range of games in the same mold, including *FarmVille* (Zynga 2009), *CityVille* (Zynga 2010a), *FrontierVille* (Zynga 2010b), and *FarmVille 2*. *FarmVille* has also spawned many clones, including *HayDay* (Supercell 2012), which has been the biggest success in this genre in the past few years. A crucial part of Zynga’s initial success was its metric-driven game design, in which analyses of players’ behavior played a central role, rather than page-view-centric analyses that only counted views, which were more common at the time (Shiu 2015).

*FarmVille 2* revolves around developing and tending to a farm. While leveling, the player gradually gains access to more items, resources, and abilities. The player must grind resources such as grain and fruit to be able to acquire gold or other items needed on the farm. The gameplay is cyclic, and a typical cycle consists of growing plants that can be fed to animals, which provide materials that can be refined into food and sold for gold at the market, which in turn can be spent on upgrading the farm and make farming more efficient, resulting in more advanced food and more gold at the market, and so on. There is no gameworld to explore outside of the farm area, except for

neighbors' farms. The social interactions between players consist primarily of gifting and a leaderboard.

### ***World of Warcraft***

*World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment) was launched in 2004 and quickly became the largest MMORPG in the world, based on subscription numbers, and is allegedly the highest-grossing game of all time (Frederick 2017). The MMORPG genre can be traced back to text-based online games originating around 1980, so-called multiuser dungeons, and tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast 1974). The most direct influence on *World of Warcraft* is *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999), which was the first game in this genre to include three-dimensional graphics and game mechanics that later become staples of the genre, such as raiding.

In addition to raiding, *World of Warcraft* comprises many core features of the genre, such as avatar leveling, an extensive number of quests, and combat systems such as player versus player. The production company Blizzard releases expansion packs every other year, in which large parts of the game mechanics are revamped and new areas, avatar classes, and other features are introduced. The expansion pack that my analysis is based on, *World of Warcraft: Legion*, was launched in August 30, 2016, and introduced the new continent the Broken Isles, the new avatar class Demon Hunter, and a new level cap at 110.

### ***Clicker Heroes***

The idle or incremental game is a genre that started out as a parody of the “grinding loop” and click-based game mechanics of role-playing games (Deterding 2016). The word *idle* points to the fact that the game keeps progressing by generating resources without the player having to interact with the game. An early example in this genre is the game simulation *Progress Quest* (Fredricksen 2002), which mimics the game mechanics of *EverQuest*. The game has no graphical gameworld but consists of a text interface that informs the player about the progress of quests, the amount of gold being acquired, plot development, and so on. Apart from allowing the player to choose the class, race, and name of the invisible avatar, the game plays itself. At the start of the game, the avatar has low stats, equipped with feeble items such as a macramé hauberk, and the quests have names such as “Fetch me a toothpick,” but, typical of the genre, the avatar gradually becomes better equipped, and the quests more challenging with more impressive names.

A newer game in this genre is *Cow Clicker* (Bogost 2010), originally designed as a satire of social network games such as *FarmVille* and thus aiming to demonstrate repetitive and abusive game design. The only activity demanded of the player is to click on cows every six hours; alternatively, the player can buy out of the waiting time with so-called Mooney, bought for Facebook credits—which is bought for actual money.

During the past few years, idle games have gained popularity, moved from the sphere of satire, and become an ordinary genre of games, predominantly directed at the casual game market. *Cookie Clicker* (Thiennot 2013) was one of the first that gained broader attention, and *Clicker Heroes* is probably the most successful idle game to date. It even got traction in the hardcore game market and was listed among the top-ten games on Steam for several months during 2015 (Grayson 2015).

The main objective of *Cookie Clicker* is to kill monsters by clicking on them or to hire heroes to do the job. The heroes are hired with gold, which is accumulated by killing monsters. The game has no avatar, and the gameworld consists of one frame showing a monster on an island floating in the air, which the player can click on. The clicks can be enhanced by different power-ups, and the heroes can be boosted with *gilds*, which is a limited resource the player earns during the leveling process. There is also a game mechanism called *ascension*, which starts the leveling process over again but equips the player with hero souls, by which the player can enhance the heroes further, speeding up the leveling process.

### Grinding—a Versatile Game Design Pattern

Grinding is a design pattern that may be transgressive on several accounts. According to Zagal, Björk, and Lewis, grinding is “a way of coercing the player into needlessly spending time in a game for the sole purpose of extending the game’s duration” (2013, 3). This pattern resembles what Jaakko Stenros in chapter 1 of this volume calls *repetitive play*, which is composed of “routine and grind.” Stenros emphasizes that ordinary play is not always carried out in a playful mindset, but he also states that repetitive play may be transgressive when it is “lacking an element of playfulness.” This is in line with traditional theories of play, which emphasize that playing is a voluntary and autotelic activity (Csikszentmihalyi [1975] 2000). According to Johan Huizinga, play “is never a task. It is done at leisure, during ‘free time’” (1955, 8). Play is therefore also distinguished from work, a distinction that became more prominent after the Industrial Revolution, when work was increasingly moved from the household to the factory, physically and temporally distinguished from leisure time (Goggin 2011).

Today, work and play are again more intertwined, not least because of the convergence of work and leisure tools such as smart phones. In games, grinding is perhaps the game design element in which this boundary becomes most blurred. With this in mind, I focus on how grinding can increase the time spent on playing and reduce the autotelic aspect of playing.

### **Grinding in *Clicker Heroes***

The core gameplay in *Clicker Heroes* is grinding, which consist of clicking on monsters. The player can also activate power-ups and hire heroes to click on monsters on the player's behalf. Over time, the gameplay changes to more strategic thinking about which and in what order heroes should be upgraded to level most efficiently as well as about more advanced enhancement mechanisms (named "ancients"). The main reason for this change is that the hired heroes gradually outperform the player, making manual clicking superfluous. Keeping the gold coming in at a maximum pace requires grinding and frequent logging on, but because *Clicker Heroes* is an idle game, the player can also log on sporadically just to take the process a step further by spending accumulated gold, only with a few seconds or minutes of playing.

In the first phase of the game, the gameplay consists only of clicking and lacks other typical signs of being a game, such as a win state, a goal, or activities that require skills to perform them. But the game gradually introduces features that trigger more strategic thinking and a curiosity about what the underlying math is and how the mechanics function. The game is, in a sense, stripped down to its mechanics in that grinding and progression are the main attractions. On a player-run wiki comprising walkthroughs for various computer games, we read that: "You've been working hard to get to this point. Lots of clicking and patience. Now you can choose which path (or a mix) you want to go on as you continue in your adventure" (Wei Jie 2018). As the quote demonstrates, some players find grinding to be both quite laborious and adventurous. What can be inferred is that although grinding in its pure sense may be experienced as futile, very few contextual elements are needed to make it interesting.

### **Grinding in *FarmVille 2***

All gameplay in *FarmVille 2* basically revolves around clicking on items, either to start a process or to collect the result. A central game mechanic is the scarcity of resources, usually water, and the only way to avoid running out is to buy water with "Farm Bucks" or to receive water as a reward for tending the neighboring players' farms. The game gradually introduces more activities, such as fishing and mining, which means that the

playing sessions gradually become longer. However, the scarcity of resources will eventually bring the playing to a halt, usually after some minutes of playtime.

The player has to make decisions about which plants to grow, animals to feed, and buildings to erect as well as about what these resources should be refined into for selling. The number of alternatives quickly expands, and at level 15 the player can choose among more than 130 different crops and vegetables, 240 types of trees, 160 types of animals, and 1,000 cooking recipes. Although the basic game mechanic is cyclical and grinding is the most common design pattern, the game provides the player freedom to combine different game elements, and, therefore, the player also has, to some extent, power over the game's pace and rhythm.

While progressing, the game also gradually becomes more demanding and missions more complicated. On Zynga's official player forum (Zynga Player Forums n.d.), a search using the keyword *grinding* brings up complaints about the game becoming increasingly "more industrial, and competitive" and being boring due to the need for "grinding quests with ridiculous amounts of items." The same site also includes a great deal of praise of the game and the creators for the "fantastic job they do to keep this game the most entertaining one that I have ever played!" Among the aspects players often comment on is the ability to decorate the farm, often with items that requires a high level and a lot of playtime.

Compared to *Clicker Heroes*, *FarmVille 2* is a much more complex game, but it relies on the same basic gameplay: clicking on items and gradual progression. It has a resource-management element that some players find fascinating, but compared to resource-management games such as *SimCity* (Maxis 1989), its game mechanics are much simpler and do not allow for emergent growth. The attraction of the game seems to be the accumulation of resources, which, according to Nick Yee (2006), is an important motivation factor for MMORPG players as well.

### **Grinding in *World of Warcraft***

Grinding is also a core mechanic in *World of Warcraft*, especially related to leveling the avatar. For early versions of the game, it took close to 50 full eight-hour workdays to reach the maximum level of 60 (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, et al. 2006), but Blizzard has since then dramatically shortened leveling time, and various online sites offer guides on how to level using only a few days. However, grinding is now more closely integrated into the gameplay after a player reaches the maximum level of 110; for example, the player will at this point spend considerable time upgrading special weapons unique for each avatar class and ability specialization.

When the player wishes to level up in craft professions in *World of Warcraft*, such as leatherworking, cooking, and smithing, she needs to collect large amounts of materials, which usually involves grinding. Reputation grinding is another type in which the player solves quests or performs other activities that improve the avatar's alignment with different nonplayer character (NPC) factions in the game in order to get access to special areas or items. This will normally take several weeks to complete. In contrast to *FarmVille 2*, in *World of Warcraft* the player does not run out of resources but can literally grind forever. Players usually also have several alternative avatars (alts) that they level when their main character demands less attention, thus also increasing the time spent on grinding.

Grinding in *World of Warcraft* is often intertwined with long-term goals. One example is the requirements for the avatar to be able to use flying mounts on the new continent Broken Isles, which include exploring all areas of the isles, completing all the "story-line" quests, completing 100 different so-called world quests, and earning the reputation level *revered* with six different factions of NPCs. Most of these activities involve grinding, and although there are no time limits on these tasks, for a player making an average time investment, they are likely to take several weeks, if not months, to complete. This advancement process is also hampered by limitations on the number of quests the player has available each day. During my research period, in which I played approximately two hours a day for about four months and actively attempted to reach this goal, I did not complete the objective of being able to use flying mounts.

Compared to the grinding in *FarmVille 2*, the grinding in *World of Warcraft* is more varied and involves exploring, traveling, fighting (both alone and in groups), and learning about the lore of the game universe. Story-line quests are varied and captivating; for instance, they are filled with cutscenes and sessions in which the player has to reenact parts of the dramatic history on the isles from the position of past heroes. The general reliance on grinding prolongs many game objectives. As such, the objectives can be regarded as "unnecessary." It is, however, harder to judge whether the player will experience having "wasted time" because the grinding is tightly integrated into a variety of game mechanics and objectives.

### **Progress and Avatars**

Comparing these three games, we see that grinding is not one single activity. The games have very different interfaces and means to interact, meaning that how and what to grind naturally differ. More importantly, the context of the activity is quite different. In *World of Warcraft*, grinding blends together with activities that have other goals. Level

grinding, for instance, may be part of exploring new territories, earning gold, learning the lore of the game, or socializing with friends, often at the same time. In the larger context of the game, grinding is a vehicle for immersion and engagement.

If we look at *FarmVille 2* and *Clicker Heroes*, grinding is a more visible and dominating game mechanic, especially in the latter case. The social interaction is rudimentary, and the game universes are much simpler. In *FarmVille 2*, grinding is a main game mechanism, but because the game has limitations on resources, grinding will soon come to a halt. We might ask whether this design benefits the player. On one hand, it makes the playing less voluntary because the player cannot choose for how long to engage in a worthwhile playing activity. On the other hand, it may push the player out of the game or simply provide a nice break and prevent “coercing the player into needlessly spending time in a game” (Zagal, Björk, and Lewis 2013, 3).

Overall, the positive sides of grinding seem to be associated with achievement and progress. Much of the appeal of the level-based system for character progression popular in the role-playing game genre seems to be linked to the fact that characters can improve, much as a person would through the course of life (Zagal and Altizer 2014). The accumulation of power and resources and effective progress are also noted as central motivational factors for MMORPG players (Yee 2006), which explains some of the long-term loyalty found among players of *World of Warcraft*.

However, character advancement systems in tabletop role-playing games are also often used to describe progression elements in game genres that previously did not have them, such as first-person shooters (Croshaw 2009; Zagal and Altizer 2014). These elements are also found in *FarmVille 2* and *Clicker Heroes*, despite the fact that these games do not have any avatars to develop. Progression elements such as levels, points, and an increased array of choices therefore seem to hold value of their own. This valuation may be explained by a distinction made by the psychologist Jonathan Baron, who has stated that games can be sorted in two broad categories: those that can be won because of skills and those that can be won because of time spent, a difference that “may predict whether a player will be more likely to find competence satisfaction through blistering challenge or through patient earning of rewards” (quoted in Hilgard, Engelhardt, and Bartholow 2013, 10).

### **Play-by-Appointment Design—When Playing Becomes Routine**

According to Zagal, Björk, and Lewis, *play-by-appointment* design is a pattern whose darkness springs from the fact that players play at specific times or dates “as defined by the game, rather than [by] the players” (2013, 4). This type of design is found in

many other media—traditional television, for instance, where scheduling techniques are employed to encourage the viewer to develop routines revolving around certain programs, such as daily news or soaps, on a weekly basis (Syvertsen 1997). Correspondingly, play-by-appointment design is a way to encourage the player to integrate playing into everyday activities, sometimes with the result that the player puts aside other activities and social obligations (Karlsen and Syvertsen 2016). If the media activities become too demanding, other parts of life may therefore suffer as a result.

### **Play-by-Appointment Design in *Clicker Heroes***

*Clicker Heroes* does not employ play-by-appointment design in a strict sense but includes design with a similar effect. In the later stages of the game, the main game-play revolves around the game accumulating resources while the player is not playing. When the player returns, she will typically hire new and more powerful heroes and allocate some of the “hero souls” accumulated. The amount of money needed to hire heroes grows exponentially, so each new hero costs roughly ten times more than the previous one. This means that resources generated on one level will rapidly diminish the value needed to reach higher levels. This pattern invites frequent log-ons, wherein the player spends a few seconds or minutes to allocate resources, bringing the leveling process one step further. Because the game requires little time each play session, players typically play on the bus, during a coffee break, or before going to bed.

### **Play-by-Appointment Design in *FarmVille 2***

*FarmVille 2* has a large range of play-by-appointment schemes. Waiting time for harvesting crops ranges from 1 minute to 48 hours, and resources such as water are fully replenished in 90 minutes. At the beginning of the game, the player only has fast-growing crops available, minimizing the waiting time. The player gradually gets access to other, more time-demanding plants and crops, and, thus, the cyclical process gradually shifts from minutes to hours and days.

The game stimulates the player to schedule rendezvous with the game at certain hours—for instance, logging on and starting processes before going to bed and then harvesting or starting new processes in the morning. The use of events, quest chains, and the large number of expensive decorative items also present the player with long-term goals that may increase loyalty to the game.

### **Play-by-Appointment Design in *World of Warcraft***

The play-by-appointment pattern is integrated into *World of Warcraft* in several ways. One type of design implemented quite early in the game’s history is the so-called *daily*



*quest*, wherein the player solves the exact same quest day after day to advance skills or to acquire unique items such as cooking recipes. Although there once was a cap of 25 daily quests, the cap has been removed, and now, in principle, the player can complete several hundred daily quests. The total amount of quests available is currently around 9,500, and more than 400 of them are daily quests (*World of Warcraft Wiki* n.d.). The different crafting professions available in *World of Warcraft* also give the player the opportunity to create especially valuable materials at set intervals—once each day or each week, for instance—provided that she has the needed material.

In the *World of Warcraft* expansion *Mists of Pandaria* (2012), Blizzard implemented a *FarmVille*-style farm area, uniquely available for each player. Here, the players had access to a few plots where they could grow different plants usable for crafting professions such as cooking and alchemy. In the expansion *Warlords of Draenor* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014), this game feature was expanded to a garrison fully equipped with tanneries, gardens for gathering and creating resources, as well as NPCs with whom the player could trade. It also included a set of followers who could complete quests for the player. These quests could take from 30 minutes to 12 hours to complete, stimulating frequent log-ons.

In the latest expansion, *Legion*, the developers have replaced the garrison feature with a slimmer construction, the *class-order hall*, available for all avatars within the same class on a given game server. Here, the player also has NPC followers who can complete missions for her, with completion times ranging from a couple of hours to several days.

Reflecting the reliance on long-term goals, *World of Warcraft* also includes play-by-appointment patterns with larger time spans—for example, raiding dungeons that reset every Wednesday, giving the players the opportunity to defeat all raid bosses and acquire their loot on a weekly basis. Accordingly, raid guilds usually have a weekly schedule, with raids on set evenings every week. The game also has a calendar that keeps track of the dungeons that each player has accessed and when they will be refreshed.

Other play-by-appointment patterns include periodic events, such as the monthly “Darkmoon fair” and the annual “Feast of Winter Veil.” These events offer the player access to unique items, quests, achievements, and avatar titles. In sum, *World of Warcraft* includes play-by-appointment patterns that provide the player the opportunity to pursue goals on an hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis.

The three games include different types of game design patterns that encourage the player to return frequently and at specific intervals. This design is most explicit in *FarmVille 2* because most activities have a timer. *Clicker Heroes* has no explicit play-by-appointment design, but for the player to level fast, frequent log-ons are encouraged.

In *World of Warcraft*, the huge amount of different activities the player can engage in requires a substantial amount of time, and, for most players, completing these activities is just a means to get access to the really interesting aspect of the game—raiding. Advancement of crafting professions and logging on at least once every day to acquire certain materials may, for instance, be necessary to be able to craft high-level weapons or armor for raids. The overall effect is that the player is stimulated both to incorporate game activities into her daily routines and to develop long-term loyalty. Even in periods with little activity in the guild, the player will accumulate important resources by logging on frequently. This mix of different activities also caters to different strata of players: some prefer to log on to complete a few quests and to chat with friends, but others aim at reaching more demanding goals.

## Conclusion

The design patterns analyzed in this chapter illustrate the importance of seeing discrete patterns in a larger context. In the analysis, I have distinguished between two different types of context: the context of the discrete game design pattern in the overall game universe and the context of the overall gameplay experience from the position of the player.

If we look at discrete game design patterns, we see important differences between the three games discussed. The stereotypical grinding, which involves endless killing of the same monsters or other such repetitive action, is certainly part of these games, but there are many mitigating elements. Even in *Clicker Heroes*, where grinding is the key element in an otherwise simple game, it is embedded in more complex gameplay. Because the underlying math of the game is concealed, players experiment with different strategies for their progression.

Interestingly, in *Clicker Heroes*, the circularity of the gameplay is also a key element of the game because the player can “ascend” and start all over again. But instead of ending up on the exact same spot she was at before ascending, she is equipped with resources that make it possible to advance a little farther than during the previous round. The small variation in gameplay in *Clicker Heroes*, compared to *FarmVille 2* and *World of Warcraft*, seems to be enough for the player to find grinding worthwhile. It seems that the accumulation of resources and perhaps the curiosity about whether something more drastic will change if play is continued patiently are enough for the player to find the game intriguing.

However, perhaps more commonly, the repetitiveness of grinding may overshadow any attempts by the designers to conceal the cyclical design by embellishment and

small variations. In a given context, the grind may be experienced as a chore rather than play, as boring rather than fun, and as compulsive rather than voluntary. In the sense of not offering an experience of playfulness or freedom, or, in Stenros's words, in offering *repetitive play*, playing these games may arguably be transgressive.

But for game design patterns to be *ethically* transgressive demands more than merely being boring. One way is to look at the consequences of the game design: how much excessive playing affects the player. There is, arguably, a sliding scale where on one end the player logs on more frequently and plays for longer stretches than planned. On the other end of the scale and in the most severe cases, such design can contribute to compulsive and problematic gaming habits. The perpetual grinding on which MMORPGs are based, combined with their long-term play-by-appointment design, is arguably a pattern that contributes greatly to the amount of time spent on MMORPGs and may therefore be regarded as contributing to game addiction. It is in the latter sense that the game design can be considered unethical.

A limitation in this argument is that it is difficult, maybe impossible, to evaluate exactly what part of a game or what combination of design elements may cause problems or whether the main problem lies in the game at all. It may be just as important to see game design in an even larger context than is explored in this analysis because the motivation for playing a game, for investing time and changing routines, is seldom found in the game alone but is also found in the status and significance the game has in a social and cultural space.



## V Society



## 14 The American Arcade Sanitization Crusade and the Amusement Arcade Action Group

Alan Meades

In the current world of global videogame franchises, where games are often conceptualized, developed, and promoted from a North American perspective, it is useful to remember that what constitutes appropriate and transgressive play is neither universal nor static. Instead, notions of transgressive play are culturally and historically relative and products of a complex network of social, legal, and historic influences. This chapter explores some of the differences in attitude toward transgressive play by comparing the amusement arcade landscape of the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1980s, the processes by which claims of transgression were raised and decided upon, and the impacts of grassroots lobbying groups in these two countries. This comparison draws attention to differences in acceptable public play and to the ways that public concerns over play are handled in different ways despite a great deal of shared culture and language.

The processes that this chapter explores are difficult to trace directly because no single source offers a comprehensive history of attitudes to play and their evolution. As a result, this chapter makes use of a diverse range of sources, including game studies literature, period amusement industry and popular publications, and firsthand interviews with UK industry members. Fortunately, because the identification of transgressive play, as we shall see, calls for recognition and intervention from the public or figures of authority, there is a trail of public records in the popular press and governmental databases. The UK perspective on transgressive arcade play is therefore aided by government-commissioned research, searches of the Hansard British Parliament debates records (keywords: *arcade*, *Amusement Arcade Action Group*, and *AAAG*) and searches of the LexisNexis British newspaper database (same terms). Last, the chapter makes use of several other sources: resources collected for the Arcade Tales research project run from Canterbury Christ Church University (Meades 2015), which seeks to capture the social history of the British amusement arcade, specifically the George Wilson Collection of arcade photographs; interaction with British arcade players, workers, and owners; and

personal reflection on my own childhood and adolescence spent within arcades. The use of all of these sources aims to highlight the differences between conceptions of transgressive play, the continual processes by which play is contested within culture, and the necessity for localized accounts of play.

### Transgression and Transgressive Play

In his wide-ranging exploration of the subject, Chris Jenks simply and usefully describes transgression as “that which exceeds boundaries or exceeds limits” (2003, 7) and as such poses risk to individuals, communities, and authority of rule. Reflecting Jaakko Stenros’s discussion in chapter 1 of this volume, *transgressive play* may be understood as play that shares these same antagonistic qualities. It is play deemed *no good, offensive, dangerous, illegal*, and frequently *no longer play at all*. Like transgression, transgressive play is something to be challenged, regulated, and abolished to protect established boundaries and social norms. For transgressive play to be identified, behavior (and often the intent of the person playing) must be found in violation of a communally held set of expectations—a *normative frame*. The identification of transgressive play is therefore a process of comparison and identification, performance, and observation, and thus the visibility of play, *public play*, is of particular importance.

Although we might readily accept that normative frames are culturally relative and ever shifting over time, it is not always easy to visualize how this change might actually take place. From a sociological context, scholars such as Émile Durkheim ([1895] 1982) and Talcott Parsons (1991) offer some assistance with the notion of *boundary-maintaining systems*—the name given to mechanisms by which a challenge to societal norms leads either to the reinforcement of those rules or to the adjustment of boundaries of un/acceptability. Boundary maintenance is a communal and social activity, reinforcing the norm and collectivism (which Durkheim was especially allied to), but Durkheim also placed particular emphasis on the role of institutional systems and rituals in this process. These systems and rituals include the court of law’s function to dramatize wrongdoing so that it is easily identified, digested, and understood by society. Stanley Cohen (2011) later developed these ideas into the concepts “dramatizing evil” and “moral panic,” which reframe the process of boundary maintenance as exaggeration, manipulation, and exploitation by the capricious mass media. The negatively tinged notion of moral panic undermines the legitimacy of public concerns and the genuine transformative potential of transgressing boundaries, and it remains one of the dominant perspectives on the identification of transgression to this day. For



a discussion of boundary maintenance and transgression in games, see chapter 15 by Kelly Boudreau in this volume.

### **Play and Transgression in the Abstract**

As Stenros explains in this volume, many scholars have observed the apparent centrality and normality of transgressive, chaotic, or rule-ambivalent behavior within play. We encounter terms such as *games of order/disorder* (Sutton-Smith 1977), *countergaming* (Galloway 2006), *deludology* (Kücklich 2007), and *bad play*, or “extreme risk-taking (and risk-enjoying) ... which is harmful to the self or others; and play that is against the rules” (Myers 2010, 17). It is also useful to consider Richard Schechner’s (2013) term *dark play*, referring to play that interferes with or manipulates the metacommunicational signals that indicate the unreality of play and therefore set up play where not all players understand that they are playing. This definition presents play that is as confusing for those caught up in it as those observing it from afar, which contains significant potential for unpredictable, dangerous, and transgressive activities, where “actions continue even though individual players may feel insecure, threatened, harassed and abused” (Schechner 1988, 4). These theories indicate that play is therefore often transgressive, and actions that appear overtly transgressive may very well be motivated by play at their core.

As Stenros discusses, despite academic recognition of the links between transgression and play, Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne argue that there has been a powerful “idealization of play” that denies this connection: “the tendency to see play as necessarily voluntary (intrinsically motivated), of positive affective value, egalitarian, flexible and functional” (1984, 305). The idealization of play opposes any reading of play as transgression—it makes both concepts incompatible. From such a perspective, public play might be seen as the front line of the battle for establishing the meaning of play and the location where normative frames and the performance of play come into contact. By studying examples of apparently transgressive public play, we can better understand the processes by which instances of transgression are managed, what their impacts are, and how they are culturally and historically determined.

### **Moral Enterprise in the American Arcade**

The public emergence of videogames in the 1970s represents a period in which notions of appropriate and transgressive public play were contested. Across the globe, arcade machines brought videogames and their novel play practices into public scrutiny,

while the release of consoles did the same within the privacy of the home. Amusement arcades dedicated to videogame play sprang up wherever sufficient footfall might suggest profitability, and, on a smaller scale, videogames were installed wherever space could be found in bars, cafés, and shops. In the United States, the scale of videogame installation and expansion was profound; in 1982 alone, the number of arcade operators increased by a third, who made almost 1.8 million videogames available to the public (Cognevich 1983). Other countries saw different patterns of videogame installation and expansion. Countries in mainland Europe, for example, had a tendency toward installation of arcade machines in smaller numbers, such as in cafés, whereas the United Kingdom tended to install videogames in large arcades and on smaller sites. In the United States, the scale of the introduction of public videogames and of their visibility was a product of the specific economic and industrial landscape, including “exaggerated media exposure” (Cognevich 1983), optimistic projections of sector growth, the relative availability of machine hire–purchase credit, and a ready supply of machines manufactured by US companies, including Atari, Midway, and Williams.

The mainstream arrival of arcade videogames in the United States during the early 1980s prompted public outcry about the negative influence of videogame play—in other words, about *videogames as transgressive play*. By 1982, this concern had become so compelling that a number of cities had passed access limitations for individuals younger than 18; others banned arcades from the vicinity of schools and residential areas; and yet other cities sought to ban arcades altogether. These restrictions and prohibitions were largely the product of a grassroots protest movement dubbed “the arcade sanitization crusade” (Herz 1997, 42), which voiced concerns that the compelling pleasures of videogames led the vulnerable into addiction, deviance, and transgression. Concerned parents and community elders such as Ronnie Lamm, the “hatchet queen of the amusement center” (*New York Times* 1982), found national TV and radio platforms willing to air their grievances and called for arcade regulation, restriction, and government intervention. Although there had previously been public concern raised over the arcade game *Death Race* (Exidy 1976) (see Kocurek 2015), the arcade sanitization crusade did not voice apprehension of the influence of a specific game but rather of videogame play in general.

Ronnie Lamm was the figurehead of the arcade sanitization crusade movement, a 35-year-old mother of two and president of the Centereach, Long Island, Parent Teacher Association who boasted of having already been successful in “defeating 17 applications for [arcade] licenses in her area.” Lamm was featured on the *Today Show*, the *Phil Donahue Show*, and New York–area talk shows and was reported on in American

newspapers. Her comments in a *New York Times* feature offer a sense of the movement's objections, strength of feeling, and, indeed, Lamm's charisma and conviction:

These games are corrupting our youth. ... They mesmerize our children, they addict them and force them to mindlessly pour one quarter after another into the slots. We see 15-year-olds playing these games at 10:30 on school nights and during school hours. ... We hear unacceptable language and see antisocial behavior in the arcades. ... Only the bad kids go into them, and we worry about the young children not old enough to make value judgments. Those without strong moral codes can be drawn in. They don't know they are hooked. ... The game rooms teach gambling and breed aggressive behavior ... [and] many are operated by scum ... whose only interest is a fast buck. (quoted in Geist 1982)

Lamm's comments appeared to chime with broader public concerns, and throughout 1982 the American press featured stories of the transgressive nature of arcade videogame play. Other US citizens voiced fears of "problems with teenagers 'hanging out' or loitering," "teenage vandalism," "turf wars and motorcycle gangs and ... dope peddlers" (Edelman 1982, 15). All of these concerns were considered directly attributable to the addictive pleasure of the videogames. Videogames were seen to present "a direct influence on deviant behavior because kids steal money [and] are exposed to the sale of drugs, illicit sex, and the plans of vandals and/or burglars" (Ellis 1984, 55), all in an effort to pay for one more game. Ace arcade players, interviewed for their perspectives, inadvertently reinforced the building negative sentiment when they admitted to having spent \$600 or \$700 playing individual games ("Video Game History" 2008b, showing a clip from *Entertainment This Week* from 1982) or to dropping "one or two grades" at school while distracted by games ("Video Game History" 2008a, showing a clip from *30 Minutes* from 1982).

By late 1982, the US surgeon general, Dr. C. Everett Koop, appeared to signal the view of the medical profession and US government when he labeled videogames as "hazardous to the health of young people," with "adverse mental and physical effects." His summary—"There's nothing constructive in the games. Everything is eliminate, kill, destroy" (quoted in Mandel 1983)—was distributed widely throughout the United States by the Associated Press (Geist 1982). British novelist Martin Amis wryly captured the mood of the moment, describing those who had been seduced by arcades as "the punks, the blankies, ... vandals and no-hopers" (1982, 42). Loitering, aggression, wasted time, wasted money, addiction, physical harm, and academic decline—all of these individual negative associations contributed to a highly charged perception of transgression associated with the arcade. It was evident that videogame play was a concern to many, who deemed it in violation of the popular normative frame of play. It was transgressive play, posing risks to individuals, communities, and

ultimately the rule of law. At an abstract level, the arcade sanitization crusade did not simply constitute an attack upon the videogame and arcade but represented salvos of contestation against the character and purpose of public play and how it relates to society at large.

When looking back from the perspective of a time when videogames have become socially acceptable and economically significant, it is tempting to view the actions of the arcade sanitization crusade as a moral panic. I would caution against the use of this term, however, on the grounds that it has become too loosely applied and holds within it the suggestion that the concerns of the public were without merit. Academics such as Bill Thompson and Andy Williams (2013) have extensively criticized the popular use of the moral panic concept. They stress the highly specific nature of the term's origin as well as its all-too-often ignored characteristics and phases, and they raise methodological concerns over its original identification. Moral panic underplays the agency and autonomy of those concerned and overstates the influence of the media; thus, the term *moral panic* becomes shorthand for the assertion that *the population was manipulated by the media to become concerned by an issue of little actual consequence*.

Instead of regarding the arcade sanitization crusade as a moral panic, it is more useful to view it as a *moral enterprise*, where agents serving to protect the values that they hold dear identify an issue and lobby for public and institutional recognition. Moral enterprise places emphasis on the agency of the entrepreneurs, who use various strategies to seek affirmation and support; "moral entrepreneurs invariably exaggerate problems for publicity purposes" (Thompson and Williams 2013, 8) and emphasize risk and danger. This exaggeration is not by definition a mark of a moral panic but the entrepreneurs' way of effectively communicating their message. Their concern is genuine even if their lobbying is illustrated by the most extreme and incendiary examples.

The arcade sanitization crusade was a moral enterprise that raised the issue of videogames and arcades into public debate by proposing that they posed risks to players' health, academic performance, and civility. Furthermore, the movement also channeled a still contentious American association of play and organized crime and an almost total intolerance of gambling. These American concerns had originated during Prohibition and subsequent mob control of coin-operated gambling and amusements, and they resulted in the banning of fruit machines and pinball machines from many cities (see Herz 1997). The crusade also made use of a media network willing to voice and promote alarming and sensational news as well as of a small number of highly articulate, motivated, and photogenic community members. This group was not manipulated by the media but rather effectively used the media as a platform to promote its views and seek wider affirmation.

The use of the media by the arcade sanitization crusade raised public awareness of the issue, but its lobbying also coincided with the arcade crash of 1982, which saw the average weekly income per machine fall from \$140 to \$109 in one year (Cognevich 1983). This trend continued well into 1983. This crash particularly hit *operators*, who had used hire–purchase credit to obtain videogames that now failed to deliver their income obligations, and *manufacturers*, who saw the demand for machines reduced and customers default on payments. Within this economic context, the potential risk of negative public relations by being associated with the crusade’s claims, the application of restrictive ordinances, and the reductions in the numbers of customers that such ordinances would cause were deeply troubling.

Detecting the mood of the public and operators alike, the US arcade industry trade body responded through the publication of *A Community Relations Manual for the Coin-Operated Amusement Games Industry* (Edelman 1982), which was distributed to operators at the height of the crusade. The manual recognized that arcades were “facing a national grass-roots uprising” and told operators ways to foster “goodwill and public support in your community *before trouble starts*” (Edelman 1982, 1, emphasis added). The sense of threat was palpable: “Count your blessings, develop a community relations program, [c]onsider self-regulation ... [and then] [r]ead about how other operators also thought they were sitting pretty, until the city council suddenly took up a restrictive ordinance” (6–9).

These suggestions of self-regulation were made despite the US Supreme Court having ruled *against* efforts by the town of Mesquite, Texas, in 1981 to prevent minors from entering arcades. The Supreme Court judged these restrictions to be in violation of the Texas State Constitution and the US Constitution and ruled that the freedom to enter into a *pay-to-play* transaction amounted to free speech (*City of Mesquite v. Aladdin’s Castle, Inc.*, 455 U.S. 283 [1982]). This ruling signaled that the highest court in the United States deemed public videogame play an acceptable activity for minors or at least included in their constitutional rights.

The *Community Relations Manual* advised operators to present arcades as benign, family-orientated entertainment venues, suggesting they distribute press releases stating, “Our center attracts families” and is run by “house rules to make playing more fun for everyone” (Edelman 1982, 82). Many arcade operators followed this advice, and North American arcades swiftly recalibrated what they considered appropriate and transgressive play within their walls. Children were prohibited from playing in arcades during school hours; fighting, quarrelling, or smoking would result in ejection; and loitering and wear-and-tear were diminished by the prohibition of eating and drinking outside of nominated areas. Last, the manual suggested that arcades adopt a highly

flexible rule to regulate play, prohibiting “any other behavior inappropriate to a family game center” (Edelman 1982, 82). In creating these rules, the arcades responded to many of the concerns raised by the crusade.

The “family entertainment center” (FEC), a title adopted in preference to the now-tainted term *arcade*, was a space for benign and highly visible public play in line with the idealization of play. The juvenile FECs offered “pizza birthday parties[,] ... bumper cars [and] miniature golf” (George McAuliffe, quoted in Herz 1997, 52), with “video-amusement machines sitting alongside redemption-ticket and carnival games” (Williams and Mascioni 2014, 7). FECs became increasingly intolerant of anything potentially transgressive, and many focused explicitly on catering for children.

In May 1983, US president Ronald Reagan spoke out in support of the arcade industry, further idealizing play, asserting the educational role of the videogame. According to Reagan, “The Air Force believes these kids will be outstanding pilots should they fly our jets. ... Watch a 12-year-old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing Space Invaders and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrow’s pilot” (quoted in Cognevich 1983, 20). Reagan’s statements highlight the redrawn boundaries of acceptable and transgressive videogame play and the idealization of play and were a direct response to the crusade’s moral enterprise.

FECs and the newly regulated arcades of the early 1980s were deeply hostile to the adolescent videogame player. The presence of children and their observant supervisory adults made the FEC incredibly unattractive to teenagers and intolerant of any transgression (real or imagined). Each infraction (eating, drinking, smoking, loitering, swearing, fighting, etc.) could result in a ban. The eventual dominance of the FEC in the US arcade landscape comprehensively redefined public videogame play, and beyond the occasional niche arcade that focused on certain game types and play styles (such as New York’s Chinatown Fair fighting-game community), the FEC became the only way to encounter multiple arcade videogames.

### **Moral Enterprise in British Arcades**

When compared with the rapid growth of videogame arcades in the United States during the 1980s, the UK arcade landscape was one of slower expansion. Although the 1980s saw the arrival of videogame arcades in larger British cities and the installation of arcade cabinets (alongside fruit machines) in almost every fish-and-chip shop, café, or shopping center, the majority of arcade expansion took place at seaside holiday resorts. These seaside arcades were not new businesses but instead represented the development of already-existing entertainment venues, often run by “showmen” families who

had previously operated seasonal traveling fairs throughout the United Kingdom. The hubs of the British arcade videogame scene in the 1980s included Victorian holiday resorts such as Blackpool, Brighton, Bournemouth, and Margate.

It is important to trace briefly the sociocultural and legal origins of the British amusement arcade to contextualize attitudes toward appropriate and transgressive videogame play. The British amusement arcade is thought to have originated in the late 1800s, when traveling showmen offered public entertainment out of season in static “gaff shops” (Braithwaite 1997, 3). These early arcades contained not only traditional fair-ground games, shows, and entertainment but also coin-operated and automated amusements (shooting games, automated dioramas, and early Allwin gambling machines) (Costa 2013, 8–9). Gaff shops proved incredibly popular, and during the early 1900s arcades began to open wherever there were populations of potential customers.

The growth of arcades was further complicated by British attitudes and laws related to gambling, which many of the simple coin-operated machines, such as Allwins and Tivolis, could facilitate. Unorganized and unprofessional betting and low-stakes gambling had historically been a feature of British life, and although other European countries had legislated against these activities in the 1700s (Braithwaite 1997, 4), it was not until the mid-1800s that the United Kingdom began to reform gambling. According to scholar of gambling David Dixon, the emergence of a sophisticated and professional commercialized gambling sector in the nineteenth century, combined with pressure from “concerned groups and moral minorities,” was the driving force of change in the United Kingdom (1983, 5). The Betting Act of 1853 and the Street Betting Act of 1906 are now regarded as examples of “class discriminatory prohibition” (Dixon 1983, 3), seeking to criminalize the gaming and gambling forms most frequently adopted by the working classes while tolerating those forms regarded as the preserve of the wealthy (horse racing and gambling in private members’ clubs). Early arcades that featured gambling machines were on one level continuing established social norms related to unorganized gambling but were on another level in violation of laws introduced to protect the morals of the working class. Arcade operators running gambling machines on their premises were subject to fines, court summons, and the occasional temporary seizure of gaming equipment (the acts did not allow confiscation); however, it soon became apparent that the law was out of step with public attitudes and were increasingly difficult to enforce. By the onset of the First World War, the Metropolitan Police force regarded the enforcement of the Betting Acts as “a general threat to police–community relations due to popular antagonism” (Dixon 1983, 4), which forced the police into compromise and thus risked damage to the perceived rule of law: “In each neighbourhood, and sometimes street by street,

the police negotiated a complex, shifting, largely unspoken 'contract.' They defined the activities they would turn a blind eye to, and those which they would suppress, harass, and control" (Michael Ignatieff, quoted in Dixon 1983, 5). This negotiation represented a microlevel contestation of transgressive play: in one municipal borough the operation of five gambling machines in an arcade might be tolerated, but in another borough none would be, and so those players wishing to dabble in transgressive gambling needed only to identify the correct venues to attend. For readers from other geographical backgrounds, the oscillation between gambling and play may seem curious or incompatible, but from a British perspective popular leisure, such as the fair, contained entertainment, amusements, and gambling. The important social dynamic is that, for many, seeking pleasure, gambling, following the new laws, and *even breaking the law* became associated, and the subsequent unenforceability of the acts helps explain the United Kingdom's liberal position on low-stakes gambling and arcade play to this day.

In 1960, the British government introduced the since then many times revised Betting and Gaming Act, which effectively liberalized low-stakes gambling, making fruit machines and other gambling forms legal for use by people of all ages, provided the machines were operated to maximum stake and prize restrictions. This liberalization resulted in enormous expansion of the seaside arcade, which could now freely include profitable fruit machines alongside conventional amusements, while also attracting large holidaying crowds. It is these arcades that eventually accommodated videogames when they arrived in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, and thus arcade videogames were soon found alongside low-stakes gambling machines, which players of any age (including children) were entitled to use.

The arrival of videogames in UK arcades, as in their American counterparts, resulted in some degree of public concern. Although national and local press were slow to respond, concerned citizens lobbied their members of Parliament in a process of moral enterprise. As early as 1981, Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, then member of Parliament for South Ayrshire, raised his constituents' all-too-familiar concerns over "the increasingly harmful effects on young people of addiction to 'space invader' machines."

I have seen reports from all over the country of young people becoming so addicted to these machines that they resort to theft, blackmail and vice to obtain money to satisfy their addiction. ... They play truant, miss meals, and give up other normal activity to play "space invaders." They become crazed, with eyes glazed, oblivious to everything around them, as they play the machines. ("Control of Space Invaders and Other Electronic Games" 1981)

Lord Foulkes called for greater regulation; however, other members of Parliament, presumably conscious of the popular antagonism toward the 1906 laws, were slow



to develop the motion. Lobbying continued throughout the 1980s, often aligning closely with the US arcade sanitization crusade's concerns and with the model of moral enterprise, including the use of lurid stories of young players' theft, vice, sullen and listless behavior, and academic decline. This lobbying showed genuine concern over the increased visibility of videogames and arcades within some parts of society. It is interesting to note that when the issue was discussed in Parliament, distinctions were made between urban and seaside arcades. According to Baroness Ewart-Biggs, seaside arcades were "there to provide family fun and entertainment," whereas city arcades were "sleazy places[,] ... not much more than meeting places for criminals, prostitutes, drug pushers and the like" ("Local Government" 1982).

These calls for regulation and Ewart-Biggs's views, at least in relation to city arcades, are significant because they show that some members of British society shared concerns over transgressive play's risks to individuals and communities similar to those being voiced in the United States. The differentiation of seaside arcades, which one assumes channeled a long history of holiday license and frivolity, compounded with a largely seasonal and changing customer population, made the seaside arcade appear comparatively benign and minimized associated concerns of addiction or harm. Visiting arcades, videogame play, and low-stakes gambling were therefore appropriate at the coast but inured with transgressive qualities in the "sleazy" city arcades.

In 1983, the UK Amusement Arcade Action Group (AAAG) was founded (Moller 1987) and comprised concerned individuals, church groups, and 70 local authorities. In addition to the concerns voiced in the United States, the AAAG was also troubled by the presence of low-stakes gambling within arcades and other spaces where videogames were sited. The logic was that videogames were in themselves compelling and addictive and that the presence of the fruit machines, whether used to accumulate money to play games or for their own pleasures, offered an additional route to gambling, addiction, and vice. The AAAG lobbied members of Parliament on a frequent basis, calling for strict age restrictions for arcade entry and a strengthening of the local council's powers to oppose arcade development requests. Although the AAAG's political lobbying ensured that the issues were debated in Parliament, it had much less success in securing interest from national newspapers and making the issue into a popular concern. LexisNexis searches in major national British newspapers (keyword: *arcade*) show only two articles on the issue in 1984, none in 1985, and two in 1986; however, it is clear that the AAAG began to obtain some national recognition by 1987, with nine articles discussing arcades, videogames, and, most emphatically, the dangers of the presence of fruit machines, as illustrated by a *Sunday Times* article titled "Scandal of the Child

Gamblers: How a Boy's Addiction Made Him Try to Kill His Mother for Money" (Leopard 1987).

On the whole, public concern about arcades appeared to be a local issue, for those living close to arcades or in places where arcades were seeking planning approval, and were therefore the preserve of the regional press. For example, "one local newspaper in Brighton had run an anti-arcade campaign with a logo depicting the head and shoulders of a child trapped behind bars in the shape of a fruit machine" (Costa 2013, 20). Despite limited national support for the AAAG, the British Amusement Catering Trade Association (BACTA), the trade organization for the British gaming and amusement industry, regarded the group as a credible threat at the time, so much so that "the topic [of the AAAG] was one of the major issues" at the fourteenth annual BACTA convention in 1988 (Costa 2013, 20).

BACTA members were also concerned because in 1987, following four years of AAAG lobbying, the British government had commissioned a Home Office research study; due to be published shortly after the BACTA conference, the report based on the study was titled *Amusement Machines: Dependency and Delinquency* (Graham 1988). The study sought to assess the transgressive potential of arcade play upon the young, in particular the risks of dependency and the prevalence of "delinquent activities" among regular players. It explored each of the key arcade locations in the United Kingdom—city arcades, seaside arcades, and chip shops—and considered the impacts of videogames and fruit machines. The study's findings, given in the report, offer insight into the importance of coin-operated play within British youth culture at the time: "One in every three people aged between 10 and 16 plays fruit and/or video machines at least once a month. For boys, the figure is nearly one in two" (Graham 1988, 34). Despite this level of engagement with videogames, the report's author, John Graham, saw little evidence of addictive risks of either videogame or fruit-machine play:

Playing fruit machines, at least by 10 to 16 year olds, is a social and predominantly group based activity. ... It is about risk-taking, thrills and excitement, emotional highs and lows, and acquiring the respect and admiration of one's peers. And it is also about testing the boundaries of right and wrong, expressing one's emerging independence to the outside world and, ultimately, reaching toward adulthood. (Graham 1988, 35)

The report recognized not only the role of transgression as boundary testing within play but also the "lack of information or evidence" supporting the concerned claims about videogames and the potential risks of "unnecessarily restrictive" legislation (Graham 1988, 35). Furthermore, Graham assured the government that the existing voluntary measures adopted by BACTA member arcades (such as restricting access during school hours) were effective in reducing risks; that local councils *already had* sufficient

powers to restrict arcade development (on the grounds of municipal planning); and that addiction and delinquency could be avoided through more effective parental intervention in the home (1988, 36). Critically, the report's findings did not support calls for arcades to change what they did or for the government to intervene in the play within arcades. Following the publication of this report, the AAAG continued to lobby, but with reduced effectiveness. The majority of UK arcades adopted the BACTA code, but the experience within arcades remained largely unchanged for children, adolescents, and adults alike.

### The British Arcade

I grew up in the 1980s in a UK seaside town that had an arcade featuring more than 150 videogames, pinballs, fruit machines, and other amusements. Three miles to the north was the large tourist resort of Margate, which had a half-mile seafront strip housing some of the largest arcades in the country. Despite the suburban presence of computers and consoles, I chose to spend most of my childhood and adolescence in and around the arcades, and I became aware of the rules, etiquette, and the occasional joys of transgression.

The UK seaside arcade of this period was designed to facilitate a specific transactional process. Holidaying visitors were invited into the arcades by the noisy, physically impressive, and modern “feature cabinets” (such as SEGA's *Hang-On* [Suzuki 1985a], *Space Harrier* [Suzuki 1985b], and *OutRun* [Suzuki 1986]) located just inside the entrances. Visitors changed money into ten-pence pieces at the booths housed deep within the arcades, next to the attractive gambling fruit machines, penny-falls, and stuffed-toy cranes—all attractive to a cross-section of visitors. The visitors spent their money, gradually making their way toward the exits, where they were tempted by the spectacular feature cabinets to change up some money once more. Eventually, perhaps five pounds poorer, the visitors stumbled into the daylight with heads full of the pleasures of exciting videogames and the thrill of a gamble, perhaps to return later that week or during the holiday next year. The template of appropriate arcade play was therefore transient, changing, and inexperienced; money was paid for a period of amusement. This was the family fun and entertainment that Baroness Ewart-Biggs defended in the Houses of Parliament.

In addition to the nomadic visitors, the arcades were also inhabited by semipermanent resident populations, the *arcade locals*, unified to some extent by their continual presence and mutual use of the space. The locals included not only the stereotypical adolescent males who were obsessed with the games but also the fruit-machine

gamblers, the elderly bingo and penny-falls players, and the other colorful characters who coexisted with the visitors. Locals—*of which I was certainly one*—were the players who visited the arcades multiple times per week, often daily, and who remained in the arcades long after they had exhausted their funds. Being in the arcade, watching others play, learning strategies and tactics, and just being in the presence of technology were palatable attractions.

Loitering was by no means a passive activity; it was active and often fruitful. Locals learned play strategies from other players to extend play; found abandoned credits in machines; mined coin-reject chutes for money; pounced upon the sudden unprovoked shower of coins from a penny-falls machine; and socialized with other locals. The presence of low-stakes gambling (penny-falls and fruit machines) was also significant in the arcade dynamics, with many of the loiterers using fruit machines as mechanisms to increase funds and playtime. I frequently chose to gamble my final coins in a fruit machine instead of spending them on a videogame, and this gamble often paid off, especially if someone had pointed out that a certain fruit machine's coin box was nearly full and ready to "pay out." These modes of loitering, of learning the ways to get better odds on games and extend a visit, were transgressive ways of playing in the arcade because they deviated from the expected pattern of play. Sometimes arcade managers would warn, eject, or even ban locals if they loitered and watched too long, but generally their presence was tolerated.

There were other overtly transgressive activities within the arcade, including tampering with machines, extorting other visitors out of their credits or banked winnings, and committing myriad antisocial infractions, such as drinking, shouting, and fighting. Smoking was not considered an infraction; indeed, many players I have interviewed suggested the arcade was where they learned to smoke cigarettes. In general, infractions resulted in a temporary ban from the arcade but could result in a permanent ban or being reported to the police. This was something understood by the locals, and, for many, part of the pleasure of arcade play was to dip into transgression modes whenever possible, to break the rules when the manager was not looking, and to see how many rules could be bent or broken (as recognized in Graham's Home Office report).

Playing in an arcade became about navigating a complex ecosystem of rules, regulations, and etiquette as well as identities, groups, and power relations, always contextualized by tensions between appropriate and transgressive play. Arcade ecosystems supported many players and many ways of playing: appropriate play—*the rapid spending of money in machines in exchange for thrill, challenge, and fun*—but also transgressive play—*loitering, scuffles, fights, and gangs; opportunities for gambling; the tipping, pushing, or*

*exploitation of machines; and association with patrons who traded in all kinds of contraband.* The arcade enabled playful performance of roles and status, of gangs and allegiances on a social level, largely beyond adult view, in addition to the pleasures of playing videogames and gambling.

Unlike their American counterparts, which shifted toward the open and visible FEC model, UK arcades remained spaces offering partial invisibility and anonymity. Players could effectively become anonymous by the sheer physical bulk of holiday-making crowds during the summer season; and, out of season, the veil of driving rain meant that only the foolhardy or the sufficiently motivated would battle the blustery seafront to enter the arcade. The UK amusement arcade was (and still remains) partially detached from urban life, partly invisible—a space largely absent from outsider adult observation and interference. As partially invisible spaces, arcades were rarely documented, which likely had to do with protecting the privacy of gamblers but also with suspicion over the use of such photographs. However, now the absence of such visual documentation is felt.

As a result, our history of amusement arcades is based largely upon the occasional vernacular image captured and shared on sites such as the *Growing Up in Arcades 1979–1989* (2009) Flickr photostream and Ira Nowinski's (2013) San Francisco Bay Area arcade press photos. Although these resources are useful, they largely present an American perspective on the arcade and one lack the specificity of the UK arcade (the UK arcade machines and the social practices listed earlier). In the existing photographs of arcade play in the United States, we see smiling children, we see videogame players deep in concentration, and we see birthday parties with videogames in the background. What we do not see are the loitering, the gangs of adolescents, the mix of genders and age groups; we do not see the gambling, we do not see the character of a UK arcade, and we do not sense the furtive tingle of transgressive play. Simply put, this photographic evidence of arcade play fails to adequately document the range of videogame play in the United Kingdom.

In July 2016, however, Canterbury Christ Church University, in collaboration with the Arcade Tales project (2015), which I lead, obtained the George Wilson collection of arcade photographs (figures 14.1–14.4). The archive offers more than 400 candid photographs of British seaside arcades during the period 1980–1982, taken by a professionally trained photographer who was working as a bingo caller within UK seaside arcades ten miles north of my childhood haunts. Most importantly, the photographs capture some of the activities I have described here: the British arcade as a space for loitering, for gambling, and for adolescent aggression, risk taking, thrills, and excitement—distinctly different from its idealized American counterparts.



**Figure 14.1**

Herne Bay Arcades, United Kingdom, 1982. © George Wilson / SEAS Photography / Arcade Tales.



**Figure 14.2**

Herne Bay Arcades, United Kingdom, 1982. © George Wilson / SEAS Photography / Arcade Tales.



**Figure 14.3**

Herne Bay Arcades, United Kingdom, 1982. © George Wilson / SEAS Photography / Arcade Tales.



**Figure 14.4**

Herne Bay Arcades, United Kingdom, 1982. © George Wilson / SEAS Photography / Arcade Tales.

## Comparing US and UK Arcades

As noted in my opening statement, we now live in a world where North America has become the dominant origin of videogames, and, naturally, the games that are produced there do so in response to popular American normative frames and attitudes. As the discussion of differences between US and UK arcade videogame perception suggests, and even more so as the difference in attitudes toward adolescent and child gambling indicates, it would be wrong to assume that acceptable play norms are shared across regions, languages, and continents. Attitudes toward acceptable and unacceptable play do differ, and this difference affects what modes of play are to be publicly conducted or hidden from view and has bearing on our understanding of play.

Video gaming today has now largely shifted from the public sphere of the arcade to the semipublic realm of networked videogames. The UK arcade industry remains relatively buoyant, but videogames now represent a much smaller proportion of the entertainments available: redemption machines, low-stakes gambling, coin-pushers, cranes, and feature videogame cabs are the preserve of the contemporary British arcade.

We have seen how two different nations reached very different positions regarding transgressive play, despite very similar public concerns being raised through moral enterprise and the adoption of similar lobbying techniques. We have seen the ways that socioeconomic factors influenced how the calls of moral enterprise were received and responded to and ultimately the ways that these actions affected the perception of transgressive play. The easiest way to illustrate this process is to consider a five-year-old playing a fruit machine: this image will likely elicit a sense of concern or dissonance among most American readers, but not among British readers (certainly during the 1980s) because playing fruit machines was one aspect of the family entertainment defended in British Parliament. This example highlights that transgressive play is a culturally and historically relative concept and that different communities and strata of society are likely to hold deeply variable positions on what constitutes transgressive and appropriate play.

Where games are conceptualized, promoted, and then managed according to a single set of rules or expectations (such as an end-user license agreement), these differences in conceptualization of transgressive play hold potential for misunderstanding and the performance of transgression. The examples in this chapter might suggest that simply stating the rules, no matter how emphatically, is inadequate if the incongruity between rule and social norms is significant (such as was seen with respect to UK gambling laws during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries).



Furthermore, this chapter has offered insight into the processes by which changes to public attitudes around play are managed: not through moral panic but through moral enterprise, lobbying, and institutional response. The power to conduct this boundary maintenance and to redefine definitions of appropriate and inappropriate play are distributed throughout society and are not simply the product of media-orchestrated moral panics. In the case of arcade videogames in the United Kingdom and the United States, we have seen that the general public, trade bodies, courts of law, government bodies, and elected officials (even the president of the United States of America) contribute to this process and that the outcomes are unpredictable and influenced by a diverse set of factors, including (but not limited to) historic, economic, and cultural factors.

We might suggest that within the United Kingdom popular attitudes toward videogame play remain somewhat influenced by historic associations with gambling and play and the near century-long period when coin-operated play and law breaking were conceptually intermingled. Although it should be acknowledged that these influences may be slight, nearly impossible to trace, and likely eroded through the impacts of globalized media production, they remain an interesting way to approach the idea of localized attitudes toward transgressive play.

In the United States, the sanitization crusade's moral enterprise was sufficient to contribute to the redefinition of the character of public videogame play: it resulted in the rise of the FEC and the ostracizing of adolescent, adult, and problematic players. Even for those regular arcade players not directly ejected, the FEC's mix of videogames alongside bowling alleys, pizza, and kids' parties would have been anathema. Some may have found a lone arcade machine in a quiet bar, café, or shopping center that still met their needs, but more likely they embraced the subsequent iterations of home-console and computer platforms, in this way shrinking out of public view. When adolescents and adults were denied access to videogames and arcades in public venues, transgressive play—that which did not fit the idealized view of play—could be literally and metaphorically pushed into the shadows. Transgressive play thus must occur in the shadows, as a secret, in denial, all the while building in power, until it is made visible by the actions of another transgressor or moral entrepreneur.



## 15 Beyond Fun: Transgressive Gameplay—Toxic and Problematic Player Behavior as Boundary Keeping

Kelly Boudreau

Problematic and toxic player behavior in online games has been a rising issue over the past several years, with increasing severity and consequence—from derogatory use of language that negatively affects players' gameplay experiences to racial and sexist slurs and misogynistic behaviors during gameplay and more extreme cases of direct harassment online. Although there is no doubt that such behavior is harmful and at its extreme dangerous, understanding the different types of toxic player behavior and their underlying motivations is necessary to be able to connect actions to motivations, to recognize the differences in disruptive play, and to develop strategies for potential structural change. Different types of players may engage in toxic or problematic behavior in online games, and the term *toxic gamer culture* (Consalvo 2012) has been brought front and center. As such, it is important to understand players who identify as “gamers” and to explore the possible reasons behind the different types of problematic or toxic gameplay they engage in.

Current literature on toxic gamer culture and problematic player behavior addresses the problems this behavior causes (Mortensen 2016; Tang and Fox 2016) and the challenges faced in negotiating it (Consalvo 2012; Jenson and de Castell 2013), but there is less research on the underlying motivations (Suler 2004; Coyne, Chesney, Logan, et al. 2009; Blackburn and Kwak 2014) and on how toxic and problematic behavior may fit within the broader, historical frame of subcultures' and niche cultures' resistance to mainstreaming.

Within the frame of transgressive play—play that can be considered to “violate and infringe” on the play of other players (Jenks 2003, 2)—players who engage in toxic or problematic gameplay find ways to verbally express during gameplay their discontentment with other players through offensive and abusive slurs. They also find ways to manipulate and disrupt the gameplay and the enjoyment of other players, using the affordances of the game itself—for example, through grief play (Foo and Koivisto 2004), sabotage, and other forms of transgressive gameplay—to make the game unpleasant

and often intolerable for other players in order to drive them away. Existing literature that addresses this type of player-imposed transgression through grief play (Mortensen 2015) and treacherous play (Carter 2015b) focuses mainly on these actions as a form of fun for the instigating player, regardless of the results on the affected players. Furthermore, to transgress is also to “go beyond the bounds or limits set by the commandments or law or convention” (Jenks 2003, 2). Within the context of transgressive gameplay, the pushing of designed or social boundaries within the game is part of the pleasure and process.

Whereas other chapters in this anthology aim to look at transgressive game design that forces players to confront uncomfortable themes or ideologies (for instance, chapter 10) and transgressive gameplay in which players intentionally put themselves under distress or discomfort (for instance, chapter 2), this chapter falls among those that focus on transgressive practices in gamer culture (for instance, chapters 5, 6, and 7). Specifically, this chapter looks at the ways in which players engage in transgressive gameplay with the distinct purpose of disrupting other players' gameplay experiences.

Grounded in literature on social deviance (Dubin 1959; Rubington and Weinberg 2015), subcultures (J. Williams 2011), boundary keeping (J. Williams 2009), and resistance to mainstreaming (Copes and Williams 2007; Woo 2015), this chapter focuses on identifying types of transgressive gameplay derived from game affordances that negatively affect other players—not in the name of fun but in the name of boundary keeping because the transgressing players (possibly) perceive ownership over the game space and broader game culture. It is broken down into four sections. The first is an introduction to the history and definitions of subculture and identity construction based on community and leisure interests as well as on subcultures' resistance to mainstreaming. The second section discusses theories of gaming culture and gamer identity, situated within the frame of subculture theory. The third provides definitions of different types of toxic and problematic gameplay through examples of boundary keeping. And the last offers a discussion on how recognizing player motivations behind toxic and problematic gameplay can inform a deeper understanding of the social aspects, challenges, and ramifications of the mainstreaming of subcultures. In doing so, we can begin to address specific types of toxic and problematic player behavior as forms of boundary keeping at the individual and structural levels.

### **Defining Subculture**

There are many overviews of the history and development of the term *subculture* (Arnold 1970; Jenks 2003; Gelder 2005; Blackman 2014). This section provides a brief,

contextualized history of the idea that it is possible to classify a particular group of digital game players who identify as part of a subculture framed by the term *gamer*.

### **(Very) Brief Beginnings**

The history of theories of subcultures is varied, broad in scope, and nuanced in detail, but the main purpose of this section is to provide a context for the term *subculture* within the frame of this chapter. The meaning of the term has been in flux since it was first used, with its origins often in question (Blackman 2014). In 1932, Edward Sapir wrote, “Every individual is in a real sense representative of at least one subculture which may be abstracted from the generalised culture” (236). This broad use of the term, simply to identify different cultures (i.e., ethnicities, social classes, etc.) within the larger scope of society, has come back in various forms over the past century. J. Milton Yinger further iterated the notion that the term *subculture* is “often used to point to the normative systems of groups smaller than a society to give emphasis to the ways these groups differ in such things as language, values, religion, and style of life from the larger society that they are part” (1960, 626). This is how the term is most commonly understood within the media and general population.

As the concept of subculture evolved within the American sociological tradition in the late 1920s, the Chicago School of Sociology shifted from the broader use of the term as the identification of separate cultures within a geographical area to a focus on understanding deviance and resistance from the dominant cultural norms (Blackman 2014). Shane Blackman states that “within criminology and sociology the concept of subculture has defined deviants as ‘subnormal,’ ‘dysfunctional,’ ‘delinquent,’ ‘resistant’ and ‘consumerist’” (2014, 496). Under the influence of social and psychological theories, subcultures were often understood as class based and defined through different forms of “deviance” from or resistance to the norm.

In the early 1960s, aiming to disentangle the complexity of the meaning of the term *subculture*, which at the time tended to focus both on the “wide variety of norms to be found in many societies” as well as “on the normative aspects in deviant behavior” (Yinger 1960, 625), Yinger proposed the term *counterculture* to call attention to aspects of conflict within culture. Counterculture was intended to be used “wherever the normative system of a group contains, as a primary element, a theme of conflict with the values of total society, where personality variables are directly involved in the development and maintenance of the group’s values, and wherever its norms can be understood only by reference to the relationships of the group to a surrounding dominant culture” (1960, 629). The term *counterculture* thus focuses on the conflict between the subculture and the dominant culture as opposed to simply pointing to “other” cultures. In the subsequent discussion of transgressive play and boundary keeping in

online gameplay, we will see that there is a tension between the self-appointed “othering” of a gamer subculture and the view of that subculture in the broader mainstream of players and culture.

### **Subculture Association, Identification, and the Internet**

A look at more contemporary research on subcultures reveals that there has been a shift from the more traditional focus on youth and geographic proximity as criteria for membership in a subculture to theories that focus on subcultural identification—that is, identification with an ideology, value system, fashion, culture, or way of life that helps shape the individual’s identity. The most common examples of this type of subculture can be seen in the areas of sports (Donnelly and Young 1988; Green 2001) and music (Kruse 1993). Geographical proximity is not necessary because the association with the subcultural norms and the construction of identity lies in a collective participation in the lifestyle that is associated with a hobby, leisure interest, or genre of music. In adopting the norms and behaviors prescribed by these communities, the individual feels part of the subculture. Understanding the participation and association with a subculture, whether geographically located or through digital means, connects to the ways in which we create our identities.

With the advent of the Internet, online spaces give individuals who are geographically dispersed a space and place to come together based on a broad range of interests and ideologies. The Internet allows for more fluid participation within a subcultural community (Roberts 2016); individuals can belong to several different, related forums and websites, where they can meet up with people who share their hobbies, interests, or ideologies. Each site often has its own culture and community, with both stable and transient members. Through online interactions with others in virtual communities, individuals have the ability to create and develop a sense of self (Papacharissi 2010). According to the broader definition of subculture presented earlier—that it is a culture within but “other” than the dominant one—it is possible to accept identification with a subculture as that which helps shape the subculture. In other words, participation is not necessarily a requirement to belonging, as long as the individual identifies with the ideas, norms, and values of the subculture, which, when internalized, become part of his or her identity. With the Internet, individuals who share a common set of beliefs, regardless of being separated by distance, can feel that they belong to something larger than themselves, even if they feel disassociated or excluded from the dominant culture within which they currently live.

If we view the “essence of subculture [as including] the ideas of distinctiveness, commitment, autonomy, and like-mindedness within a particular group” (McArthur

2009, 60), the concept “subculture” can be used in a much broader manner than it was earlier. J. Patrick Williams shifts the discussion by stating, “Internet forums simultaneously function as a subcultural resource, a form of subcultural expression, and a medium for subcultural existence for young people outside music scenes” (2011, 194). The same can be said for other online spaces generally and videogames specifically when seeking definitions and spaces of gaming cultures and gamer subcultures that go beyond the realm of youth.

Online spaces often offer a certain level of anonymity, often called the *online disinhibition effect* (Suler 2004), and power can be found within this anonymity. This is not to say that it is solely from behind the veil of anonymity that an individual feels the ability to participate in deviant behavior. Rather, the duality of the online/offline subculture can become a complex issue when those who may feel marginalized in their everyday lives suddenly have power in the digital space. They may tend to overcompensate for the lack of power and control they experience in their usual physical surroundings.

Interestingly, it can be argued that online spaces create an echo chamber of ideological, cultural, and behavioral norms in that individuals usually join only those sites and online communities of their choice (Boutyline and Willer 2011). If the only communities that an individual interacts with online are ones that align with his own worldview, then he becomes part of a segregated (sub)culture. As such, the power dynamic (potentially) shifts: what was a subculture in a physical (offline) space has the potential to become a dominant culture in an online space. Because participants in the online community are not tied or limited to their geographical locations, more people can be united over the same tastes, hobbies, or politics. From this perspective, it could be argued that these online spaces become the dominant culture online. The coming together of many likeminded people in a fixed location (certain sites on the Internet) creates pockets of cultures independent of each other. This process has the potential to affect the way individuals behave as part of a dominant culture online as opposed to how they would behave as a member of what is perceived as a subculture in the offline world—fundamentally creating a tension between normative and nonnormative behaviors for the same person in different spaces.

This understanding of subculture does not inherently include and is not defined by deviant behavior or an aim of resistance. Rather, it is framed by a sense of belonging where one would otherwise feel excluded. With the understanding that much more nuanced work has been done on the meaning and aims of defining subculture—from countercultures (Yinger 1960) to post-subcultures (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003) and neotribes (Bennett 2005)—the objective here is to address cultures that form in

response to social and psychological factors that motivate individuals to develop a sense of identity and belonging in the larger society within which they live. In achieving this objective, it will help to contextualize and understand the motivations behind different types of behaviors that occur in the name of the group.

Though subcultures were traditionally most often centered around ideologies or socioeconomic contexts, offering a sense of “belonging, status, normative guidelines and, crucially, a rejection of dominant values” to contrast against the “outsiders” (Hodkinson 2007, 3), contemporary subcultures are often “commodity-oriented subcultures” (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003, 8): for instance, bikers (Willis 1978), snowboarders (Humphreys 1997), and windsurfers (Wheaton 2000). Acknowledging that subcultures can develop through shared identification with a hobby or consumer product is important when considering how videogames and videogame culture may be read as a subculture in the context of identification with the (once-niche) consumer market.

We can carry over two main ideas from the diverse terminology, definitions, and contexts concerning subcultures: (1) at its broadest understanding as individuals grouping together based on any number of commonalities, a subculture exists within a larger culture; and (2) although not all subcultures are deviant, they primarily consider themselves “other” from what they perceive as the mainstream and, as such, often participate in some form of inclusion/exclusion boundary keeping (Bryson 1996; Langseth 2012; Roberts 2016).

### **Inclusion/Exclusion Boundary Keeping**

A subculture is only “sub” as long as it counters or conflicts with the mainstream, dominant culture. To maintain its identity, a subcultural group performs a range of different forms of boundary keeping through various tactics that delineate inclusion and exclusion to its members and outsiders. For many subcultures centered on leisure or commodity-oriented themes, a common challenge is to resist against mainstreaming. This resistance is vital to the subculture’s identity as a culture that is “othered” from the dominant leisure or consumer culture. The commodification or mainstreaming of a subculture often creates a clash between those who consider themselves “authentic” members and those whom the authentic members consider outsiders, even if both groups enjoy or consume the same thing.

Relying on “symbolic” and “social capital” (Bourdieu [1986] 2011), members can maintain access, belonging, and internal hierarchy within the subculture. Tactics of inclusion and exclusion include policing language and specialized terminology, “enforcing subcultural boundaries through the creation of conflict with undesirable



users” (Roberts 2016, 8), performing expertise and skill (Langseth 2012), and using fashion and style (Araste and Ventsel 2015). With increased media exposure and commodification of typically niche hobbies or lifestyles, these common forms of boundary maintenance act to separate the “authentic” members from the “imposters,” as can be seen in body-modification communities, windsurfing groups, and the increased popularity of the skinhead lifestyle. Language policing, skill/expertise hierarchies, and fashion as boundary-keeping tactics are common to subcultural communities, and we can see them used individually and multiply as well as consciously and subconsciously in the geek and digital game communities to varying degrees (Consalvo and Paul 2013; Reagle 2015). This chapter explores transgressive gameplay as another tactic used to maintain boundaries.

### Gaming (Sub)Culture(s) and “Gamers”

With the growing popularity of, access to, and types of videogames, a wide and diverse range of people have become videogame players. As such, many different game (sub)cultures have formed around different player communities, genres, and even platforms. This multiplicity then begs the question of how the term *gamer* is defined and what value the term adds to discussions of games, game cultures, toxic and problematic behavior, and transgressive play as boundary keeping. To define what “gamer” subculture relates to and means within the current, broader game culture, it is helpful to distinguish the differences between the various gaming subcultures and to attempt to understand the possible roots of deviant and transgressive behaviors in digital gameplay. By highlighting what the term *gamer* means according to those who self-identify as gamers, it is possible to work toward some understanding those who participate in toxic or transgressive gameplay.

To address which subsection of players identify as gamers, it is necessary to acknowledge the different groups of players that exist within the broader, dominant “game” culture. In their introduction to a special issue of *GAME* on videogame subcultures, Marco Benoit Carbone and Paolo Ruffino outline the issue of trying to identify a singular gamer culture by listing the many different elements and contexts of videogames around which cultures are formed. They conclude that within “constellations of gaming practices” that “bring us far from actual identification with any stereotype or unique profile” (2014, 7), there remains a group of individuals, however small and however truly unified, who identify with and cling to a specific strand of game culture mythos that typically defines “gamers” as young, white, male, and socially awkward (Kowert, Festl, and Quandt 2014; Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2016).

It could be further argued that the content of many mainstream videogames offers those who may feel themselves to be outside the dominant culture an opportunity to engage with that culture on their own terms. As John Sanbonmatsu explains, “Videogames are thus potent conduits of the dominant ideologies, myths, and norms of society (i.e. those most conducive to maintaining the status quo in unequal social and property relations)” (2011, 428). And with the growth of the Internet, people who may feel isolated by and because of their gaming habits from people in their immediate, geographic location can come together online, which gives them the sense of belonging to a larger community of like-minded individuals. However, along with this search for community online come questions concerning gate keeping and definitions of belonging.

Indeed, research has explored the idea of gaming as culture (Steinkuehler 2006; Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006) and subculture (Downing 2011). There are individuals who very actively create their identity around the activity of digital gameplay and around the culture and lifestyle of gameplay and who maintain the boundaries of that culture through skill and expertise level, language and inside knowledge, and even the use of fashion cues. As Steven Downing points out, “Identity is also an important component of subculture, especially when the subculture is digital; this is because, in the digital realm ..., avatars and pseudonyms are used, and games exist as the primary link between members” (2011, 752). Although identifying labels and body modifiers are commonly accepted among other subcultures that engage in boundary-keeping activities and behaviors that negatively affect others, there remains a push against the identifying label *gamer* because of its negative connotation and its relationship to the toxic and problematic.

Undeniably, *gamer* is a contested word filled with social, cultural, and political baggage. Leigh Alexander’s article “‘Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience. ‘Gamers’ Are Over” (2014) addressed the need to move past the “gamer” stereotype as the main media target in discussions of videogame playing and to encompass the broader scope of players who actually play and love videogames. However, there remains a community of players who consider themselves part of the “subcultural” group “gamers.” It could be argued that a shift should be made to a more neutral, inclusive term such as *player* to reflect the growing diversity of those who play games, but the term *gamer* remains an important identifier to many who play videogames, for a variety of reasons. As Joe Baxter-Webb points out,

Despite the growing acceptance of videogames as a medium, terms like “gamer” are still sometimes taken to denote some sort of insider status. To some, “gamer” still describes some sort of specialized type of person, not just everybody who plays games—a view we’ve seen played out

recently in the #gamergate [*sic*] furor (which, at its heart, seems to be about who the “real” gamers are and what games should be about). (2014)

To those who embrace and identify with the term *gamer*, it signals an affiliation with a particular group of people who not only share a passion, skill, and knowledge but also identify with a particular kind of (consumer) lifestyle. Some individuals' adoption of digital games has been in response to social exclusion from the dominant cultures they grew up in or are still a part of (Selnow 1984) or is an attempt to identify with the mediated narratives of what it means to be a “gamer” (Meikle and Wade 2015) in order to define themselves and to feel part of a larger culture. Players who identify with the leisure activity of gaming as a primary, defining aspect of their lives and who construct their identity around the artifacts and culture of digital games and games' peripheral, related interests consequently participate in subcultural methods of “othering” and resistance (as described in the previous section), even within the broader culture of games. Carbone and Ruffino point out, “It is true that at the discursive level, gamers have been described according to a consistent type of media consumers. The gamer has often been characterized as belonging to a broad group of ‘geeky,’ or ‘techy’ individuals, both by the ‘dominant’ culture or media, and by gamers themselves, as a means of asserting and affirming their identities” (2014, 8).

Defined by their skill, knowledge, and consumption of videogames, players who identify as “gamers” within the broader gaming culture have come to value gaming as part of their identity. As such, anything (or anyone) that appears to infringe upon that identity is seen as an outsider. If those who identify as gamers have done so as a result of isolation or social exclusion in their everyday environment, the mainstreaming of games and their growing inclusivity may provoke fear of being shunned (again) from the broader social culture. If videogames are the place where “gamers” have found solace from their isolation within or exclusion from the broader dominant social culture, it could be argued that as videogames become more diverse and mainstream, everyone may be perceived as a “gamer,” a state of affairs that dilutes and threatens the “real” gamers established identity. There is no more in-group where they can feel they belong—or, rather, they may feel as if there is no longer a place for them—even if they consider themselves the “original” members of the subculture, as has been the case for many other subcultures that feel invaded by imposters through mainstreaming (Donnelly 2008; Ross 1996). As Baxter-Webb articulates,

Miroslav Dymek (2012) argues that the videogame industry is a “subcultural industry.” In his view, this is an appropriate description, because people still tend to associate a specific type of person with the label “gamer,” and because many hardcore gamers take an antagonistic stance toward the “casualization” of the gaming industry (44–47). This is similar to the way that subcultural music/fashion scenes tend to dislike the commercial mainstream. (2014)

Although the growth of the gaming industry is a good thing because it allows for new players to engage and identify with digital games through more inclusive narratives and gameplay opportunities, those who identify with the more niche aspects of gaming culture, where they feel they belong, may see this growth as a perilous shift away from the community and culture they identify with and so may feel that they are being marginalized in the process. Regardless of whether they are actually being marginalized, those who consider themselves gamers see their culture being changed, and they are reacting to it (Todd 2015). In response to the casualization and subsequent mainstreaming of gaming, members of the particular “gamer” subculture are pushing back against what they may see as infringement, using a range of boundary-keeping tactics, which is common subcultural behavior. However, some gamers have responded more aggressively than others, engaging in harmful forms of boundary keeping, including toxic behavior such as online vulgarity, direct harassment, and “doxing” (Consalvo 2012), or the illegal broadcasting of an individual’s private information. Although these gamers’ gate-keeping actions may differ in purpose and severity from those taken by other subcultures, the resistance to mainstreaming is often at the core of these actions.

### **Boundary Keeping and Transgressive Play**

The aim of this section is to define and differentiate boundary-keeping tactics through transgressive gameplay from other types of transgressive play discussed in other chapters in this book. Furthermore, it separates these tactics from more problematic and harmful toxic behavior broadly stemming from other motivations. Motivation, target, and behavior are often difficult to disentangle, however. The intentions behind the use of certain tactics are not always clearly indicated, and there may be instances where the player is subconsciously performing boundary work, but that distinction is beyond the scope of this chapter.

In her article “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Games Studies Scholars,” Mia Consalvo states that “the rage we see expressed by threatened individuals and groups seems to be based on at least two factors—sexist (as well as racist, homophobic and ageist) beliefs about the abilities and proper place of female players, and fears about the changing nature of the game industry” (2012, para. 8). These reactions can in part be contextualized within the frame of subcultural boundary keeping according to perceived skill and expertise, as previously mentioned, but it is rage that leads to the much more harmful deviant and damaging behaviors. Boundary

keeping within a subculture is a tactic used to maintain membership according to the group's values, norms, and rules, letting in only those who pass the various "insider" tests that challenge the newcomers' skill, knowledge, and understanding of those rules and norms.

Within videogame culture, we commonly see such challenges on online, game-affiliated message boards, such as those for the popular online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), where it takes only a few seconds to find threads with titles such as "How Geeky Are You?" or "How Many Legendaries on Your Main?" by which players gauge each other's "in" status based on their answers. A more negative example, described in Mia Consalvo's chapter in this collection, is the case of Twitch streamer Kaceytron: when she misuses gaming terms or demonstrates a lack of gameplay skill, those who consider themselves "insiders" are quick to correct her with mocking comments and insults. Both tactics work to maintain the inclusion/exclusion boundaries for this subculture as well as other subcultures that use online forums (Roberts 2016). Even if there is not one specific leader within the group, the collective responses shape the group's norms and rules and reinforce its boundaries.

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are inherently social games played with large numbers of players both cooperatively and competitively. In-game communities are formed based on a wide variety of factors, including player-character traits such as skill level determined by character level, gear, and character specifications; the player-character's familiarity and guild affiliation; and "real"-world friends and acquaintances who come together to play the game. Each of these factors has inherent mechanisms to reinforce subcultural expectations, rules, and norms within the gamer culture, even if many MMOG's boast a diverse player base.

Within these in-game communities are individuals who vet other players through active transgressive play, in which they manipulate these other players' gameplay as a form of inclusion testing and boundary keeping, often without the other players' knowledge. Unlike other forms of transgressive play, this manipulation of gameplay is not done for the pleasure of instigating discomfort but rather for the maintenance of the boundaries of what these gamers perceive as their subcultural space. As such, within the game, these players use a range of different tactics to make other players, specifically those they think do not belong, feel unwelcome. Unlike in other examples of leisure-based subcultural boundary keeping, in the case of videogames each game has its own set of rules and mechanics that the player can engage with and exploit for their own purposes.

### Boundary-Keeping Tactics

Among the different types of transgressive play seen throughout this collection, not all of them are used as a boundary-keeping tactic. This section aims to look at different types of problematic gameplay that are facilitated through game design. In this vein, one of the most common transgressions written about from the perspective of games is *griefing*, typically defined as the act of ruining another player's game experience through antisocial behavior (Carter 2015b, 195). It could be argued that the behavior is only antisocial to the extent that it shuts down positive social exchanges between the griever and the victim(s) because, in fact, the act itself involves (and requires) more than one player and as such is fundamentally social. That is to say, even though griefing is a negative experience, it engages, whether positively or negatively, with other players (also see the discussion of one-sided social play in chapter 1). In the griever's act of boundary keeping, his goal is to communicate a type of structural hierarchy of who belongs in the game and who does not—at least from the “gamer's” perspective.

Within griefing in general, we can find more specific tactics afforded by certain games. One of the tactics is *ninja-looting*, defined as stealing the items off the corpse of an enemy nonplaying character (NPC) that was killed by another player. Though it is said to be impossible to “ninja-loot” in some games, such as *World of Warcraft*, there is still the issue of trust among players with respect to item distribution after combat. Other games, such as *Lineage II* (NCSOFT 2003), have no mechanism in place to prevent players from simply taking items off the corpse of an enemy character that was killed by another player-character. MMOGs are communities bounded typically by server capacity, so the social consequence of ninja-looting is typically high, often resulting in the looter being blacklisted from group raids. However, when ninja-looting is used as a type of boundary keeping supported by the “in-group” of players, there may be no broader consequences for the looters. For the player who has been cheated, the lack of consequences against the looter could clearly demonstrate a hierarchy within the game's community, demonstrating those who have power within the group and those who do not and thus clearly demarcating subcultural inclusion and exclusion.

Similarly, *kill-stealing*, or *ks'ing*, occurs when a player attacks the enemy NPC that another player is in the midst of attacking. If the kill-stealer deals more damage to the NPC, the game rewards them with the kill, giving them the points for the kill and the ability to loot the body. The points and rewards are typically given to the player-character that performs the most damage to an enemy NPC. Although most games allow players to heal only other player-characters, in some games, such as *Lineage II*,

a player-character can heal an enemy NPC. The kill-stealer heals the NPC just enough to keep it alive so that it can attack the other player-character. Once the NPC kills the other player-character, the kill-stealer will typically have only a few remaining hit points left, but enough to enable them to deal the last bit of damage to the enemy NPC in order to receive the experience points and items without doing any of the work. Although perfectly acceptable within the design of the game, this kind of grieving is often seen as toxic gameplay that has the potential to drive a player away from the game permanently. In games, such as *World of Warcraft*, a more powerful player can easily outdamage a lower-level player and thus steal the enemy NPC from that player. Both types of kill-stealing can serve as boundary keeping in different ways. In *Lineage II*, less-skilled and lower-level players are often not aware of the ability to heal enemy NPCs, so a gamer can demonstrate a level of knowledge and skill within the game that the victim may not have. When kill-stealing is done by a higher-level player in *World of Warcraft*, it clearly communicates a hierarchy within the game.

Both ninja-looting and kill-stealing are clear examples of the ways in which it is possible to erect boundaries through game affordances. In many MMOGs, however, a way to make ninja-looting and kill-stealing impossible through the game mechanics is to only allow the player-character that is rewarded with the kill to loot the body.

Finally, another type of grieving is *training*, defined as making enemy NPCs aggressive to your character and leading them in a trainlike queue to a player who does not appear equipped to handle the mob, which results in the other player-character's death (and sometimes to the instigator's death if she does not have a way to escape the angry NPCs). Among all the other forms of grieving used as boundary keeping, this one has the potential to harm both the instigator's and the victim's characters. However, the use of training makes clear that a player is not welcome in a particular area, whether because the player is too low in level or the instigating player feels a sense of ownership to the area, and thus wishes to denote a clear in/out status. This often happens when the area in question is a "camp" for a rare enemy or item drop. In such cases, the area is shared in rotation with a group of "in" players. Anyone who is not part of the in-group is not welcome, and training is a clear way to express that exclusion.

Unlike in some forms of grieving and perhaps other forms of transgressive play, the player who engages in boundary keeping often integrates these activities into their normal gameplay as they work toward achieving their own in-game goals. The instigating player may not view their actions as disruptive to their own immediate goals within the game because they are necessary to maintain the (sub)culture and its hierarchy.

Unlike other types of transgressive play in which players create moments of discomfort within their gameplay or aim to disrupt other players' play purely for their own pleasure, the type of manipulative play that aims to maintain boundaries is not rooted in enhancing the player's own pleasure but rather in what the player may see as a case of survival as a member of a subculture (whether real or perceived).

### **Insiders and Outsiders**

In the context of the broader work on subcultures, boundary keeping through transgressive play can be differentiated from other forms of toxic and problematic behavior when the targeted player is defined in terms of a (perceived) lack of skill/expertise and knowledge of the rules and norms of gameplay. The aim is not specifically to target female players or other minorities (as we see in much of the literature on toxic gamer behavior) but rather to target players who do not deserve to be in the gamers' game space. When an unskilled player who does not know the rules and norms of gameplay comes into view, gamers feel their culture and space being infringed upon. Rightfully or wrongfully, they may see anyone who is new as an unwelcome outsider. In the case of MMOGs, players engage in these kinds of boundary-keeping activities often based on in-game criteria—often forgetting that they once were not experts in the game or members of the (sub)culture they now claim as their own. It should be noted that although some new players may encounter this form of boundary keeping, many others have a positive play experience when learning to play a new game, and there are many expert players who are supportive of newcomers. border

Distinguishing between transgressive play as boundary keeping and more malicious transgressive activity (toxic behavior motivated through rage, for example) can be further complicated because, at times, the lines between transgressive play for pleasure, subcultural boundary keeping through play, and toxic gamer behavior can be fluid and depend on the way in which an act is perceived by other players. Although we may now understand that some players engage in transgressive behavior simply to maintain the boundaries of their subculture and thus delineate their own identity, it is clear and should be reiterated that engaging in persistent grieving to the point of the harassment of any single player in or out of the game is unacceptable. The aim of transgressive play as boundary keeping is to deter players considered to be outsiders from staying in the game, but it should not be done at the cost of an individual's well-being. Following subcultural theory, if the "outsider" responds to the tactics within the rules and norms of the subculture while demonstrating skill and knowledge, they may be welcomed into the subculture, perhaps under some provisional "new member" conditions.



## Conclusion

Boundary keeping in types of games other than MMOGs is manifested differently, depending on the affordances of the particular genre and game. Because this chapter is concerned with how players use transgressive play of the game to demarcate sub-cultural boundaries between players in the game, it does not consider single-player games. However, it would be beneficial to explore subcultural boundary keeping in other genres and game-related spaces (and beyond) in order to address the wide range of issues that arise from problematic and toxic player behavior.

Despite the growth in diversity in types of players and game content, there remain players who identify as “gamers” and consider themselves to be part of a subculture. Many who identify as gamers do so because of a sense of isolation and difference from the communities in which they were born or live. Feeling as though the hobbies and interests that shape their identity are not part of the dominant culture, they find a sense of belonging among others who share their knowledge and expertise. As the games industry continues to grow, the gaming subculture is giving way to gaming as part of the dominant culture, and the term *gamer* is beginning to give way to the broader, more inclusive term *player*, so it is reasonable to expect some resistance from those who consider themselves members of a special subculture of gamers.

By disentangling the motivations behind disruptive behaviors and understanding the differences between subcultural boundary keeping through transgressive play and more harmful toxic player behavior, we can begin to consider different ways to address problematic and toxic gamer behavior. Whether through game design, as we have seen in the case of Blizzard’s design choice not to allow ninja-looting, or through the continuing growth and mainstreaming of digital games, socialization and the redefinition of expertise (Toft-Nielsen 2016) will redraw the boundaries of inclusion.



## Contributors

**Fraser Allison** is a PhD candidate at the Microsoft Research Centre for Social Natural User Interfaces, hosted at the University of Melbourne's Interaction Design Lab. His research takes a human-computer interaction perspective to study player experiences and behavior in digital games. Fraser's doctoral research examines conversational interactions in digital games, focusing on how they are experienced by players and how the design of conversational artificial intelligence characters influences player responses. Fraser's other research looks at the use of natural user interfaces to mediate interactions between players in online games, including modalities such as voice communication and gaze tracking. Prior to his doctoral studies, Fraser acquired almost a decade of experience in research consulting, focusing on understanding the drivers of consumer behavior.

**Kristian A. Bjørkelo** is a folklorist interested in contemporary online culture and extremism, on which he has written two books and a handful of articles, in addition to writing role-playing game supplements. He has taught social media and communication at the University of Bergen and is currently pursuing a PhD as part of the Games and Transgressive Aesthetics project, where his focus is on gaming forums and how gamers are handling transgressive gameplay experiences.

**Kelly Boudreau** is assistant professor of interactive media theory and Design at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology. With a background in sociology, film studies, and games studies, she focuses on games, culture, and players in digitally mediated ludic spaces, with the topics of her research ranging from different forms of sociality and gameplay to player/avatar hybridity developed through the networked process of play and toxic and problematic behavior in digital gameplay.

**Marcus Carter** is lecturer in digital cultures in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. He is also an honorary research fellow in the Microsoft Research Centre for Social Natural User Interfaces at the University of

Melbourne and current president of the Digital Games Research Association of Australia. His research bridges human–computer interaction and game studies to examine player experience and behavior in digital and nondigital games, and his prior work includes studies of the games *EVE Online*, *Minecraft*, *DayZ*, *Warhammer 40,000*, and *Candy Crush Saga*.

**Mia Consalvo** is professor of communication studies and Canada Research Chair in game studies and design at Concordia University. She has most recently published the book *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Context* (2016), about Japan's influence on the videogame industry and game culture. She is also the coauthor of *Players and Their Pets* (2015), coeditor of *Sports Videogames* (2013), and author of *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (2007). Consalvo runs the mLab, a space dedicated to developing innovative methods for studying games and game players, and she has served as director of the Centre for Technoculture, Art, and Games at Concordia. She has given more than 100 presentations at professional as well as academic conferences, including regular presentations at the Game Developers Conference. She is the former president of the Digital Games Research Association and has held positions at MIT, Ohio University, Chubu University in Japan, and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

**Rhys Jones** is research associate assisting with the game stream of the Multimedia and Entertainment Technology program at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research interests include videogame fandom and spectatorship, especially the phenomena of Let's Plays and eSports. He has authored conference papers on room-escape games and sociopolitical representations in videogames. He is one of the organizers of Global Game Jam Hong Kong as well as of RETRO.HK.

**Kristine Jørgensen** is professor of media studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. She holds a PhD in media studies from the University of Copenhagen and is the author of *Gameworld Interfaces* (MIT Press, 2013) and *A Comprehensive Study of Sound in Computer Games* (2009). She is currently project leader and principal investigator of the research project Games and Transgressive Aesthetics, funded by the Research Council of Norway, and is the director of the MA and BA degree programs in media and interaction design at the University of Bergen.

**Faltin Karlsen** is professor of media studies at Kristiania University College, Norway. He is a qualitative media scholar working in the fields of media studies and game studies. He has conducted studies of users of various media, most prominently online games. His research currently revolves around intrusive media technologies and coping strategies among users. He holds a PhD in media studies from University of Oslo and is the

author of *A World of Excesses: Online Games and Excessive Playing* (2013), which explores excessive gaming practices from a sociocultural perspective.

**Tomasz Z. Majkowski** is assistant professor at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, where he teaches and studies popular culture, especially sci-fi and fantasy fiction, fairy tales, digital games, and fan culture. He devotes most of his time to analyzing mainstream AAA games, focusing primarily on Bakhtin-inspired tropes of the carnivalesque and parody as well as postcolonial perspectives on digital culture and the intersection between videogames and national cultures. Since 2017, he has also been the chair of the Game Studies Research Centre at Jagiellonian University.

**Alan Meades** is principal lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom. He grew up on the East Kent coast, spending many happy years in amusement arcades, where he first developed his interest in games and play cultures. He has spent the past fifteen years studying transgressive play and videogame play cultures, including glitching, modding, and hacking. His monograph *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games* (2015) contains one of the first ethnographic accounts of videogame glitching communities, and his creative practice includes the generation of artwork through game glitching. Meades is also a graphic designer, user-experience design consultant, filmmaker, and, most recently, comic book illustrator. He has been a researcher in residence at Dreamland amusement park Margate, and his latest project, *Arcade Tales* (<http://www.arcadetales.co.uk>), seeks to document the social significance of the British arcade through oral history accounts. He has restored and archived the only known version of the *Ken Sei Mogura: Street Fighter II* arcade game. He holds a PhD from Brunel University, an MA in electronic arts, and a BA in interactive arts.

**Torill Elvira Mortensen** has been associate professor at the IT-University of Copenhagen since July 2010. Before that, she was associate professor in media and communication at Volda University College, Norway, from 1991 to 2010. Her PhD dissertation is a study on text-based games, and much of her research and publications are on the use of games and social media in general. Mortensen was on the board of Norsk Tipping, the government-owned Norwegian lotteries from 2011 to 2015; served on the board of the Digital Games Researchers Association from 2006 to 2010; and was a founding member of the journal *Gamestudies*. She is the author of *Perceiving Play: The Art and Study of Computer Games* (2009) and the primary editor of the collection *The Dark Side of Gameplay: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (2015).

**Víctor Navarro-Remesal** holds a PhD in game studies and is a lecturer at the Universidad Pontificia de Comillas in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, where he teaches courses on interactive narrative, videogames, and animated cinema. His research interests include

freedom and ethics in videogames, *gêmu* or Japanese games, and the preservation of videogames. He has published articles and book chapters on these topics and is a coauthor of *Game & Play: Diseño y análisis del juego, el jugador y el sistema lúdico* (2015) and the author of *Libertad dirigida: Una gramática del análisis y diseño de videojuegos* (2016).

**Holger Pötzsch** is associate professor of media and documentation studies in the Department of Language and Culture at UiT Tromsø, Norway. He holds a PhD in media and documentation studies and an MA in peace and conflict studies. His main research interests are war films and war games, the role of culture and technology in bordering processes, and the material aspects of digital technologies. Pötzsch has published in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*, *Games & Culture*, *TripleC*, *Memory Studies*, and others. He currently coordinates the international WARGAME network.

**John R. Sageng** is an independent researcher who has written about the nature of action in videogames. He is the main founder of the Game Philosophy Initiative and the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, and coeditor of the book *The Philosophy of Computer Games* (2012). He is also the editor in chief of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Games*

**Tanja Sihvonen** is professor of communication studies at the University of Vaasa, Finland. She holds a PhD in media studies from the University of Turku, Finland, and specializes in digital media, computer games, and participatory cultures on the Internet. She is currently studying gameplay streaming, algorithmic agency, and the political economy of social media.

**Jaakko Stenros** is a game and play researcher at the Game Research Lab at the University of Tampere, Finland. He has published five books and more than 50 articles and reports on topics such as pervasive games, play and playfulness, live-action role play and role play, social network games, and queer play. Stenros has also taught game studies and Internet studies for almost a decade and has collaborated with artists and designers to create ludic experiences. He lives in Helsinki, Finland.

**Ragnhild Tronstad** holds a PhD in theater and digital media studies from the University of Oslo (2004). She is professor II in the Department of Art, Design, and Drama at OsloMet–Oslo Metropolitan University as well as senior adviser in the Research Department of Kulturtanken/Arts for Young Audiences Norway. From 2010 to 2014, she worked as a senior researcher on the project YOURban: Social Media and Performativity in Urban Environments, leading the subproject PLAYUR on urban forms of play.

Her publications span a diverse range of topics, from theatricality and performativity to play and gaming, interactive and robotic art, and design and cultural sustainability. Recent works focus on the aesthetic aspects of play and gaming, the persuasiveness of play, and mediations of presence in performative and interactive arts.

**Hanna Wirman** is assistant professor at the School of Design at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where she leads the MS study stream in game development. Her research interests include marginal and critical ways of playing and making games, such as the design and research of animal play. Wirman serves on the boards of the Digital Games Researchers Association and the Chinese Digital Games Researchers Association and is the director of Global Game Jam Hong Kong.





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