



## TRANSGRESSION IN GAMES AND PLAY

JORGENSEN, K., KARLSEN, F.: *Transgression in Games and Play*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2018. 318 p. ISBN 978-0-262-03865-2.

Michal Smrkal

The word “toxic”, or rather “toxicity” is nowadays often used, especially in connection with games and gaming communities. League of Legends, World of Warcraft, or Rust, are just a few of many examples that even a less experienced player can name. As games emerge as the new champion of a new perspective for both entertainment and storytelling, another, much darker side becomes more visible. But, what does it actually mean to be toxic? This volume, *Transgression in games and play*, tries not only to answer this particular question, but rather create new ones along with a set of several possible directions where answers can be found. The book was written as part of the Games and Transgressive Aesthetics research project in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen, and was financed by the Research Council of Norway. As such, its perspective is broad and ranges from discourses in sociology, philosophy, to cases directly rooted in media and game studies. This is certainly not a limiting approach.

The topic of transgression is split into five parts – concepts, practices, emotions, content and society. Each of these parts contains several contributions to this topic from various angles. Specific contributions offer case studies of transgressive play, how gameplay practices can be at once playful and violate social etiquette at the same time; investigate players’ emotional responses to game content; or simply examine the aesthetics of transgression in gameplay. The context of societal gameplay is emphasized very heavily, as it is beyond any doubt one of the most important aspects of modern game design. Yet, the actual and personal player experience is not forgotten. The book offers several cases of the contextual understanding of content and practises usually framed as simply problematic. Each of these contributions presents a case, that the games themselves are boundary-crossing, which means that to consider them as only “play” or “fun” can be hazardous. Games, as any other form of art, can include transgressive or upsetting content, the most visible being excessive violence and nudity, actions still experienced as socially and personally taboo.

What can be seen as positive is the overall agreement that the games and game makers themselves are often not directly responsible for solving these ethical and aesthetic conundrums. As other types of art makers, they are even somewhat expected to be, at least, partially transgressive. Yet there is also a certain level of expectation to provide boundaries within them. Even if the transgressions demand the lack of any of these boundaries. This is the paradox, one of many, presented inside the book. What is to consider, is that this norm-breaking can have a positive influence on the player. A victim of griefing (a concentrated effort to sabotage the gameplay experience of other players) can decide to behave in a different manner and become a helpful member of the community. On the other hand, he can embrace this type of behaviour and align his gameplay goals with those of his griefer or ganker (player who intentionally kills other players, who are in a

disadvantageous position, i.e. engaged in a fight with an NPC). Which one will prevail? This is where the developer could, or maybe should, step into the play (pun intended). To set at least basic boundaries for such behaviour and encourage the player to “take the high road”, can be more beneficial for the game system in the long run, than the easier road of imminent transgressive behaviour.

Yet, it is not as easy as it may look. The transgressive experience in games is much more than that. It is not only influenced by the choices allowed by the game systems, but more often inside the human experience which is brought by the player from outside. How can a game developer influence that? For this, each of the 15 contributions offers a personal, special look at this problem. The result? By its nature, the transgression in its artistic, or even if you like, its business, form is polarising. As these aspects can and certainly will scare away players, distributors and even developers themselves, there are others which will happily engage in this type of activity. Transgression can be a seductive marketing tool in an oversaturated market.

One of the most important approaches to this problem lies in the basic understanding of what transgressions are. Transgressions act as an expanding barrier, a paradox of repulsion and attraction. The overstepping of boundaries becomes a chore and a relaxing enjoyment at the same time. It often starts to exist, brought by the players themselves from the outside world, where the mundane experience begs acting, not thinking, about the consequences. The choice appears to be nesting inside the rules sets and game mechanics, yet the expanding fractal of the transgression itself is always centred around the player himself. And this is probably the most important part of the whole project. The personal experience brought into the book by each of its contributors, not only as scientists and academics, but also as players, the followers and breakers of norms, transgressors themselves, frightened and amazed at this artistic experience acting as a mirror. Are the other players any different?

There are no final answers in the book, and this is what makes it interesting and a worthwhile read. The shared experience makes it more approachable, to think and to talk about the experience inside the game systems and how it changes us. Or is it the other way around? If there is any final thought of this book, it is most probably this – Am I playing the game, or is the game playing me? And the answer? Yet to be found.

### Author of the review

**Mgr. Michal Smrkal**

*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava  
Faculty of Mass Media Communication  
Námestie J. Herdu 2  
917 01 Trnava  
SLOVAK REPUBLIC  
michal.smrkal@ucm.sk*