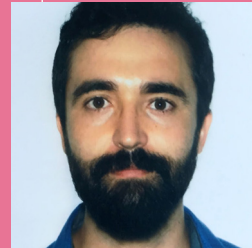


# Difficulty as Aesthetic: An Investigation of the Expressiveness of Challenge in Digital Games

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## ABSTRACT:

Difficulty is the personal experience of a subject facing resistance that prevents them from reaching a goal or desired state. It is an experiential part of everyone's existence. In digital games, difficulty is strongly linked with designed challenges and obstacles that must be overcome by physical effort, manual skills, coordination, and dexterity. But this widespread perspective is a reductionist categorization of the expressive possibilities of difficulty. Because as experiential, difficulty is aesthetic expression and therefore it is much more than the mere skill challenge. The difficulty experience that emerges from an opposing force between object and subject, between game and player, can be interpretive, poetic, narrative, ethical or atmospheric among other expressive forms. Understanding difficulty from these broad parameters, we pose it as an aesthetic expression, which forges multiple experiences at the intersection between mechanics, fiction, and the player's performance. This study analyses, drawing from philosophy, post-phenomenology, and game studies, some aspects of two contemporary games, *The Last of Us Part II* and *Death Stranding* from the view of difficulty as aesthetic experience perspective, considering the significant and discursive tensions beyond purely ludic and mechanical elements.

## KEY WORDS:

aesthetics, difficulty, digital games, emotions, experience, challenge.

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# Introduction

The standard and most widespread definitions of difficulty in digital games are intrinsically linked to game challenges. The digital game challenge is an artificial conflict defined by rules,<sup>1</sup> which in turn give the player the least efficient means to achieve a goal,<sup>2</sup> creating an unbalanced opposition between forces and results.<sup>3</sup> There are multiple obstacles that test the players mechanical (coordination, reflexes, stamina, perception) and, to a lesser extent, cognitive skills (knowledge, strategy, resolution). These skill-demanding challenges are coded in obstacles like combats with enemies and final bosses, platform ability sections and puzzles. Through challenges, the designer or *Invisible Gamemaster* (an abstract and authoritarian figure “that conflates the ruleset, the code, and the operations of the machine to act as the organizer and arbiter of play”),<sup>4</sup> seeks to provoke an emotional response in the player. This emotional response is usually associated with self-improvement, or *fiero*, an Italian word used by N. Lazzaro<sup>5</sup> to talk about triumph over adversity and an important part of her theory about the emotions in play. Facing a challenge

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1 SALEN-TEKINBAS, K., ZIMMERMAN, E.: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2004, p. 96.

2 SUITS, B.: *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1978, p. 34.

3 AVEDON, E., SUTTON-SMITH, B.: *The Study of Games*. New York : John Wiley & Sons, 1971, p. 7.

4 NAVARRO-REMESAL, V., BERGILLOS, I.: Press X to Recognize the Other's Suffering: Compassion and Recognition in Games. In NAVARRO-REMESAL, V., JOYCE, L. (eds.): *Culture at Play: How Digital Games Influence and Replicate Our World*. The Hague : Brill, 2020, p. 101.

5 LAZZARO, N.: Why We Play Games: Four Keys to More Emotion without Story. In *Proceedings of GDC Valut*. Oakland, CA : XEO Design, 2004, p. 3.

awakens in the player a need to overcome it, to triumph over adversity through effort, and thus maintain the player's interest. This is established in J. Juul's "paradox of failure",<sup>6</sup> where he explains that failure in digital games is necessary and actively sought by the player, since it acts as a motivator that keeps their interest. In paradoxical terms if a digital game does not have a challenge that can make the player fail, without being unfair, they lose interest. But this configuration of obstacle, failure, effort, and triumph is a reductionist vision of game complexities and their challenges.

In some recent studies, although they have a more complex approach to difficulty and challenge, they maintain the ludic centrality, and that limits thinking around these concepts. For example, T. Constant, G. Leveux, A. Buendia, and S. Natkin explain that "objective difficulty is estimated directly by observing gameplay variables and events, while subjective difficulty is a psychological construct of the player".<sup>7</sup> This denotes a nominal problem, because it's correct that difficulty is always a perception, a mental construction, but challenge is not objective. Even if we talk about a set of designed system elements that are objective, the challenge never is because a challenge always needs a subject, a player with a skill set and mutable intentions when faced with it. On the other hand, A. Denisova, P. Cairns, C. Guckelsberger and D. Zendle<sup>8</sup> propose another dichotomy between difficulty and challenge. They explain that the perception of the concepts itself describes difficulty as a negative, annoying, and frustrating experience, while challenge describes tasks or problems that, although they pose a challenge, are stimulating.

These challenge and difficulty definitions are very limited if we compare them with more theoretically developed media such as cinema and literature, where difficulty is attached to text interpretation due to its conceptual, narrative, affective or thematic complexity. Then, from a broader framework, it makes no sense to restrict the meaning of difficulty in digital games to the purely mechanical perspective, because it denies the ludofictional expressive potential. We must understand that a challenge can be interpretive or poetic, since it explores the formal and discursive singularities of games; it may be expressed as an ethical decision, by placing the player in a compromising situation, that blurs the diffuse moral contours of the fiction; they can also introduce the player into a narrative puzzle that they must unravel in order to understand it; it can also address complex themes from committed perspectives, build horror atmospheres that integrate the player into a dark environment that evokes sensations of horror movies and literature, break the implicit power fantasies of the medium to transform them into disempowerment fantasies or create experiences of vertigo, abandoning oneself to sensations and enjoyment. These examples describe different digital game challenges that translate into difficulty aesthetics, an experience that can cause suffering and negative emotions, a positive-negative experience<sup>9</sup> with expressive potential.

This study seeks to explain the singularities of difficulty in digital games as aesthetic forms. To do this, in the theoretical background I first explore the meanings of difficulty in ludofictions, focusing attention on how digital games explore paths beyond mechanical challenge (although without obviating it). Secondly, I stop at the significance of digital games as aesthetics experiences from a post-phenomenological perspective. After delv-

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6 JUUL, J.: *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Digital Games*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2013, p. 2.

7 CONSTANT, T. et al.: From Objective to Subjective Difficulty Evaluation in Digital Games. In JOSHI, A., DALVI, G. (eds.): *IFIP Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*. Cham : Springer, 2017, p. 108.

8 DENISOVA, A. et al.: Measuring Perceived Challenge in Digital Games: Development & Validation of the Challenge Originating from Recent Gameplay Interaction Scale (CORGIS). In *International Journal of Human Computer Studies*, 2020, Vol. 137, No. 1, p. 2.

9 JØRGENSEN, K.: When Is It Enough? Uncomfortable Game Content and the Transgression of Player Taste. In JØRGENSEN, K., KARLSEN, F. (eds.): *Transgression in Games and Play*. New York : Routledge, 2019, p. 153.

ing into the theoretical background, I analyse two contemporary digital games from specific aspects of difficulty aesthetics: *The Last of Us Part II*,<sup>10</sup> and *Death Stranding*.<sup>11</sup> With these two case studies, the text aims to nuance the meaning of digital games challenge and difficulty and expand its scope, locating some concepts that allows the creation of a language around this particular element of ludic aesthetics.

# Difficulty and Challenge in Digital Games

Difficulty is a relevant attribute to all aesthetic experience, as G. Steiner observes in poetry and art in the late nineteenth century: “What do we mean when we say: ‘this poem, or this passage in this poem is difficult?’ How can the language-act most charged with the intent of communication, of reaching out to touch the listener or reader in his inmost, be opaque, resistant to immediacy and comprehension, if this is what we mean by ‘difficulty’?”<sup>12</sup>

We can extrapolate Steiner’s words to digital games to broaden the meaning of difficulty as the resistance, opacity, and incomprehension of the ludofictional text. As P. Jagoda<sup>13</sup> states, the constant changes in media landscape at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present broadened the discussions about difficulty, in which digital games play a fundamental role. But this connection between digital games and difficulty are far from Steiner’s description. First, because challenge in digital games is usually approached from mechanical and cognitive obstacles and Steiner’s difficult perspective departs from interpretative and affective complexity. Second, games and digital games carry many prejudices because they are considered a frivolous and useless activity – meanwhile, others consider it a very serious, to the point of professionalising it. In order to refute this prejudice, and validate digital games against other expressive forms, some (academic, cultural, industrial) agents have searched for distinctive and pure digital games elements compared with other media. This position has meant the restrictive and simplistic perspective that reduces a cultural expression, its tensions, recesses and nuances, its aesthetics and content, to a single element: their ludic and mechanical signifiers.<sup>14</sup>

When we think of difficult games, we can think of classic games like chess, or *Dark Souls*,<sup>15</sup> the acclaimed dark fantasy digital game, but even though they are both considered difficult, their approximation on difficulty is dissimilar,<sup>16</sup> and for this reason the label ‘difficulty’ is insufficient, which makes it necessary to clarify the possible meanings. The experience of difficulty is more than the motivating vertex of the player’s interest, the search for personal improvement and domination of the system exercised by the win/lose

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10 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us Part II*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2020.

11 KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS: *Death Stranding (PlayStation 4 version)*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

12 STEINER, G.: On Difficulty. In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1978, Vol. 36, No. 3, p. 263.

13 JAGODA, P.: On Difficulty in Digital Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect. In *Critical Inquiry*, 2018, Vol. 45, No. 1, p. 199.

14 See also: KEOGH, B.: Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Digital Games. In *Journal of Games Criticism*, 2014, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1-26. [online]. [2021-05-28]. Available at: <<http://gamecriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1>>.

15 FROM SOFTWARE: *Dark Souls (PlayStation 3 version)*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Bandai Namco Games, 2011.

16 GILE, Ch.: *Different Kinds of Difficulty: Continuous and Aspirational*. Released on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2017. [online]. [2021-01-15]. Available at: <[https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ChristopherGile/20171205/310954/Different\\_Kinds\\_of\\_Difficulty\\_Continuous\\_and\\_Aspirational.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/ChristopherGile/20171205/310954/Different_Kinds_of_Difficulty_Continuous_and_Aspirational.php)>.

binarism.<sup>17</sup> This usual and widespread perspective is attached to a series of meritocratic dynamics infiltrated at the base of contemporary society<sup>18</sup> and flow, a positive psychology theory that explains that when faced with a correct challenge, the subject enters into a highly positive mental state as they have encountered a “challenging activity that requires skills” and “clear Goals and Feedback”.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, the challenge experience is understood only from its ludic and mechanical nature. And it can be measured, because being linked to the flow theory it can be measured in relation to the boredom experienced by the player if the challenge is very easy or frustration if it is very difficult. But boredom and frustration are emotions that we experience in our life and in the encounter with an artistic object, so rejection should not be the norm.

Taking up the idea of games and digital games frivolity, we find many approaches that take digital games as fun, an escape from harsh reality. But fun limits its conceptual and emotional complexity to a binary position: Is the game fun or not?<sup>20</sup> Certainly digital games have fun potential, but it should not be an obligation to adhere to it, or a demerit to focus on other types of emotions. Games and digital games are not necessarily fun experiences, nor are they only linked to positive emotions.<sup>21</sup> Even if we understand digital games as a safe space, it is not obligatory to offer only positive emotions. Digital games may be difficult, serious, disgusting and terrifying. In this sense, we understand that games and digital games can be difficult experiences that provoke negative emotions that make us suffer and complicate our existence, a *positive-negative experience*. The academic and historian B. L. Rothstein questions the puzzle nature and its tense relations with difficulty in similar terms and uses the concept of “unruly objects”<sup>22</sup> to define the puzzle objects that play with our perception, using conflicting instructions or hiding relevant information. That is, a puzzle made not to be understood that leads to interpretive failure. An unruly object refuses to satisfy the interpreter’s expectations and that, in this denial, make them focus their senses on seeking the solution to the problem. They are physical embodiments of difficulty that provide an interpretive challenge that overwhelms and brings the interpreter closer to the experience of the sublime: a challenge that surpasses the player while it attracts them. Difficulty, in this sense, is a conflictive emotion that makes meaningful ludofictional experience.

Although these system elements are part of the challenge, they are only essential to find a set of aesthetic responses. For example, in both *Dark Souls* and the platformer *Celeste*<sup>23</sup> their challenge focuses on the player’s ability and stamina, the first to survive the dark and oppressive world, the latter to overcome its intricate and precise platforming levels. *The Witness*<sup>24</sup> sets its obstacles as cognitive challenges creating a whole world where everything can be a puzzle, and *Baba Is You*<sup>25</sup> rewrites and expands its rules as levels are passed. These four examples describe different challenges based mainly on their mechanical components. But not all games follow these schemes, and even these examples cannot be separated from audio-visual, hermeneutic or thematic discourses: *Dark Souls* depends as much on player punishment as on its bleak atmosphere; *Celeste* builds its

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17 COSTIKYAN, G.: *Uncertainty in Games*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2013, p. 11.

18 PAUL, C. A.: *The Toxic Meritocracy of Digital Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2018, p. 2-3.

19 For more information, see: JUUL, J.: Without a Goal. In KRZYWINSKA, T., ATKINS, B. (eds): *Videogame/Player/Text*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 191-203. [online]. [2021-02-12]. Available at: <<https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/withoutagoal/>>.

20 JAGODA, P.: On Difficulty in Digital Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect. In *Critical Inquiry*, 2018, Vol. 45, No. 1, p. 222.

21 SICART, M.: *Play Matters*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2014, p. 4.

22 ROTHSTEIN, B. L.: *The Shape of Difficulty A Fan Letter to Unruly Objects*. Pennsylvania : Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019, p. 3.

23 MATT MAKES GAMES: *Celeste (PC version)*. [digital game]. Vancouver : Matt Makes Games, 2018.

24 THEKLA: *The Witness (PlayStation 4 version)*. [digital game]. San Francisco : Thekla, 2016.

25 HEMPULI OY: *Baba Is You (Switch version)*. [digital game]. Helsinki : Hempuli Oy, 2019.

level and challenge design as a metaphor for depression; The Witness is an investigation of the mechanisms of the gameworld through complex puzzles; and Baba Is You is a puzzle game that plays with its own rules and, therefore, with the meaning of the game itself.

Fortunately, this simplistic gaze has been questioned for some time, from the false dichotomy between hardcore and casual,<sup>26</sup> to the discussion around walking simulator genre<sup>27</sup> or between philosophical<sup>28</sup> and affective perspectives.<sup>29</sup> Following these studies, we can see how difficulty has a greater emotional development than the mere frustration-fiero cycles. Difficulty experience also can be something unpleasant or disgusting, a transgressive expression that may even pose an emotional risk<sup>30</sup> and suffering.<sup>31</sup> The “paradox of transgression” is an aesthetic experience “when we encounter uncomfortable, repulsive, or taboo content in aesthetic contexts such as games, we do not automatically reject it outright, but may instead accept its presence”.<sup>32</sup> This expressive form, at the same time, connects with the logics of the Kantian concept of the “sublime” since it expresses the encounter with “an overwhelming experience of something ‘larger than ourselves’”.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, difficulty in digital games can serve as an expressive resource for talking about contemporary problems. Some horror digital games are perfect fits with this statement, overlapping the ludofictional mechanisms of horror genre with the tools that the mind-game film uses to increase the difficulty of reading and understanding them<sup>34</sup> (tools like unreliable narrators, narrative dislocation, and low communicability), to build a complex discourse on identity, social and historical problems. *Silent Hill 2*<sup>35</sup> places the player in the role of a murderer suffering an identity crisis, since he does not remember that he is a murderer (an unreliable narrator), and who is tortured by the town for the committed sins. *Distraint*<sup>36</sup> uses the horror atmosphere to build a story about the problems of living in an ultra-capitalist society and how the protagonist (named Price) is able to sell his soul by evicting people with few resources for the (false) promise of promotion. The last example is *Detention*,<sup>37</sup> a game that uses horror atmosphere (with a lot of folklore) and mind-game film tools like unreliable narrator and narrative dislocation, to recount a historical and traumatic event in Taiwan: The White Terror, the repression of political dissidents and the subsequent martial law.

Difficulty in digital games depends on the designer’s interest and ideas and the player’s interpretation. The horror examples are difficult due their terrifying fictional settings that make advancement through its structure more complex than a non-horror digital game. In addition, we cannot ignore the interpretative possibilities assigned to each one and the player’s interest, and the succinct narrative complexity assigned to the mind-game film dynamics. At this point we need to introduce the aesthetic approach because a formal approach

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26 JUUL, J.: *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Digital Games and Their Players*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2010, p. 8.

27 CHANG, A.: *Playing Nature: Ecology in Digital Games*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2019, p. 42-43.

28 See also: GUALENI, S.: *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer*. London : Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.

29 For more information, see: ANABLE, A.: *Playing with Feelings*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

30 JØRGENSEN, K., KARLSEN, F.: Introduction: Playful Transgressions. In JØRGENSEN, K., KARLSEN, F. (eds.): *Transgression in Games and Play*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2019, p. 1.

31 MORTENSEN, T. E., NAVARRO-REMESAL, V.: Asynchronous Transgressions: Suffering, Relief, and Invasions in Nintendo’s Miiiverse and StreetPass. In JØRGENSEN, K., KARLSEN, F. (eds.): *Transgression in Games and Play*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2019, p. 28.

32 MORTENSEN, T. E., JØRGENSEN, K.: *The Paradox of Transgression in Games*. New York : Routledge, 2020, p. 4.

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34 LORIGUILLO-LÓPEZ, A.: La Comunicabilidad de lo Ambiguo: Una Propuesta Narratológica para el Análisis de la Ficción Televisiva Compleja. In *Signa: Revista de la Asociación Española de Semiótica*, 2019. Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 868.

35 TEAM SILENT: *Silent Hill 2 (PlayStation 2 version)*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Konami, 2002.

36 JESSE MAKKONEN: *Distraint (PC version)*. [digital game]. Kuopio : Jesse Makkonen, 2015.

37 RED CANDLE GAMES: *Detention (Switch version)*. [digital game]. Taipei : Red Candle Games, 2017.

reduces the experience elements to measurable factors when an experience is never measurable by the meanings that we can extract from it. All aesthetic experiences depend on both the experience object and the subject who experiences it. An aesthetic experience creates a dialectical space between both components, revealing its complexities and singularities.

# Digital Games as Aesthetics Experience

Aesthetics is a term that designates an object, an attitude, a judgment, a value, an experience, among other things,<sup>38</sup> is the philosophical branch that explains the pleasures derived from particular objects and experiences, their fundamental qualities versed in the experience of beauty and the sublime, in terms of the Kantian judgment.<sup>39</sup> Although we cannot ignore aesthetic approaches far from European centrality, such as the Asian approach, characterised – simplifying it greatly – by the sensitivity, ephemeral and transitory of beauty, above reason.<sup>40</sup> Within all aesthetic considerations, exists a cultural, artistic, or experiential object and a subject with a confronted relationship from which the aesthetic feeling springs. In this situation, the aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to the experience of the subject nor the formal properties of the object. The aesthetic experience creates a dialectical space between the two involved parts. Aesthetic appreciation is born “with the events and scenes that attract the attention of the man’s eye and ear, awakening his interest and providing him with enjoyment while he watches and listens”.<sup>41</sup> And this aesthetic appreciation has a value in the experience itself, since the subject “is stimulated, not only or mainly by curiosity, or by a tireless desire to reach the final solution, but by the pleasant activity of the excursion itself”.<sup>42</sup> Understanding difficulty in digital games as an aesthetic form implies valuing it as an experience that goes beyond the reward for overcoming a challenge. Then, we need to place the player’s performance and all the components of the system, both mechanical and fictional, at the centre of the discussion.

Everything has a value within the aesthetic experience. T. Smethurst and S. Craps explain that, with the debate between narratology and ludology now over, it is necessary to “harnessing the mechanical (ludic) and aesthetic (narratological and audiovisual) qualities of games together in order to produce an experience that must be analysed holistically, as something greater than the sum of its parts”.<sup>43</sup> That’s it, the ludic or mechanical elements of a game only makes sense in relation to the fictional world and audio-visual elements.<sup>44</sup> Following this trend, other academics have embraced the interpretive, poetic, affective, fictional, and audio-visual digital game elements, giving them the same value as the ludic system and mechanics. J. Sharp<sup>45</sup> collects these elements in a formal apparatus

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38 For more information, see: SHELLEY, J.: The Concept of the Aesthetic. In ZALTA, N. E. (ed): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford : Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020. [online]. [2021-05-15]. Available at: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/aesthetic-concept/>>.

39 SICART, M.: Darkly Playing Others. In MORTENSEN, T. E., LINDEROTH, J., BROWN, A. M. (eds.): *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*. New York : Routledge, 2015, p. 104.

40 HAN, B.-C.: *Buen Entretenimiento*. Barcelona : Herder Editorial, 2018, p. 66-71.

41 DEWEY, J.: *El Arte Como Experiencia*. Barcelona : Ediciones Paidós, 2008, p. 5.

42 Ibidem.

43 SMETHURST, T., CRAPS, S.: Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in The Walking Dead Digital Game. In *Games and Culture*, 2015, Vol. 10, No. 3, p. 270.

44 See also: KEOGH, B.: Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Digital Games. In *Journal of Games Criticism*, 2014, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1-26. [online]. [2021-05-28]. Available at: <<http://gamescriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1>>.

45 SHARP, J.: *Works of Game*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2015, p. 28.

and G. Tavinor<sup>46</sup> affirms that digital games have always needed a representational apparatus, although its values are minimal as in the first digital games. D. Vella<sup>47</sup> exposes the need for this representational apparatus as a value in fictional perception and, therefore, also of challenge. Vella confronts the jump's meaning in two different characters: Nathan Drake, the protagonist of the *Uncharted*<sup>48</sup> saga, conveys the danger and effort involved in each jump; while for Mario, from the *Super Mario Bros.*<sup>49</sup> saga, the jump conveys pure kinaesthetic joy. A. Anable<sup>50</sup> focuses her speech on digital games aesthetics as a network of affective connections that overlaps image, sound, mechanics, hardware, algorithms, and players. In other words, to understand the digital games expressive potential, it is necessary to understand the multitude of elements that participate in the ludofictional experience.

Continuing with some studies about digital games as an aesthetic expression, P. Jagoda<sup>51</sup> classifies them in three types of challenges: mechanical, affective, and interpretive. That's it, the usual approach to difficulty based on manual skills, the emotional complexity, and the hermeneutical problems. In another study, A. Mitchell, L. Kway, T. Neo, and Y. T. Sim explain that some "games are 'difficult' in ways not normally associated with games (difficult to know how to play, difficult to know what they mean, difficult to determine whether they are even games in the first place)".<sup>52</sup> As an extension of the affective and interpretive difficulty – and I would add the "paradox of transgression" from Mortensen and Jørgensen –, the authors explain some defamiliarizing gameplay forms that encourage player's reflection on ludofictional language in a similar way to poetry. Because of that, they name it as poetic gameplay. Accepting that all these elements are part of the game experience means that they also affect the challenge, and because of that, any hermeneutical, thematic, narrative, emotional or fictional element that fulfils this function is an obstacle and is therefore a difficulty source. But, unlike some ludic design elements that can be defined in a more 'objective' way<sup>53</sup> – the number and frequency of obstacles, the length of the level, or the complexity of a puzzle – these aesthetic challenges cannot be measured.

However, as we have explained, an aesthetic experience requires an object and a subject. Then, another axis of the ludofictional experience is the player's performance, the set of actions within a ludic context and with an intention. The player's performance describes the phenomenological perspective of the player, who is inside and outside the text at the same time and is an active performer and spectator of their own interaction, as C. Fernández-Vara<sup>54</sup> states. Then, the designer cannot directly create the game experience, but by designing the rules and setting the boundaries and agency in the world that the player inhabits, explores, and manipulates, the designer indirectly designs the experience.

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46 TAVINOR, G.: *The Art of Videogames*. Oxford : Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p. 34-35.

47 VELLA, D.: "It's A-Me/Mario": Playing as a Ludic Character. In YANNAKAKIS, G. N., AARSETH, E. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. Chania : Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games, 2013, p. 35.

48 NAUGHTY DOG: *Uncharted (PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4 versions)*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2007-2017.

49 NINTENDO EAD: *Super Mario Bros. (series)*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1985-2021.

50 ANABLE, A.: *Playing with Feelings*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2018, p. 122.

51 See also: JAGODA, P.: On Difficulty in Digital Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect. In *Critical Inquiry*, 2018, Vol. 45, No. 1, p. 199-233.

52 For more information, see: MITCHELL, A. et al.: A Preliminary Categorization of Techniques for Creating Poetic Gameplay. In *Game Studies*, 2020, Vol. 20, No. 2. [online]. [2021-02-15]. Available at: <[http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/mitchell\\_kway\\_neo\\_sim](http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/mitchell_kway_neo_sim)>.

53 FERNÁNDEZ-VARA, C.: *Introduction to Game Analysis*. New York : Routledge, 2015, p. 145-146.

54 FERNÁNDEZ-VARA, C.: Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance. In KRZYWINSKA, T., KENNEDY, H., ATKINS, B. (eds.): *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*. London : DIGRA, 2009, p. 6.



That is the “directed freedom”.<sup>55</sup> This dialectical space between freedom and limitation defines what the player can do (possibility), what the rules forces them to do even if they do not want to (obligation), what they cannot do even if they want to (prohibition) and what they can make even if the rules penalise them (penalty). A game always imposes immovable margins that the player must respect, mainly because they seek this type of resistance. The performance is also useful to describe how a text can be read differently on how the actor, or the player, embodies it and, therefore, its meaning can be different. The performance is a meaning creator process, where the rules establish limits that dictate a *restoration of behaviour* that describes “a negotiation between scripted behaviours and improvisation based on the system”.<sup>56</sup> With the performance, the player creates their own identity within the game situated in the interaction between their interests and aptitudes, the gameworld fiction, the mechanics, and the game context.

In addition, a game has a *ludic* and an *extra-ludic* interpretation,<sup>57</sup> that is the operative interpretation as a game and the hermeneutical interpretation as a cultural object with meaning that is related to Jagoda’s interpretive difficulty. This becomes the figure of the “emancipated player”<sup>58</sup> as it explains how the player delves into the possible meanings of a game. This type of player always adds an extra challenge by delving into the games discursive, metatextual, mechanical, or aesthetic meanings. That is why the player’s figure is so important for the aesthetics of difficulty in digital games, not because of the ability to overcome specific challenges, but also because they add value to their own experience. At the confrontation between the player’s performance and the ludoficción, the digital game experience and difficulty aesthetics are created. In the creation meaning process all the actors involved must be taken into account, that is, digital games as mediated experiences where multiple elements, both internal and external (players, hardware, software, physical and virtual spaces, among others), overlap.<sup>59</sup> The player interprets the challenge based on their expectations and previous experience but considering that it occurs within a specific socio-cultural framework that frames and qualifies the experience in the “videoludic feedback loop”.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, is necessarily a post-phenomenological perspective, since it allows us to place ourselves between the formal object of the experience, and the experiential and personal perspective of the player situated in a complex network of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors.

## Methodology and Aim

Difficulty in cultural objects, such as digital games, is ascribed to the effort and dedication to advance. This effort can be interpretive, narrative, affective, or thematic, not only mechanical, even when it is so relevant to the digital game’s media. For this analytical

55 NAVARRO-REMESAL, V.: *Libertad Dirigida: Una Gramática del Análisis y Diseño de Videojuegos*. Santander : Asociación Shangrila Textos Aparte, 2016, p. 318-319.

56 FERNÁNDEZ-VARA, C.: Play’s the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance. In KRZYWINSKA, T., KENNEDY, H., ATKINS, B. (eds.): *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*. London : DIGRA, 2009, p. 7.

57 See also: KARHULAHTI, V.-M.: Hermeneutics and Ludocriticism. In *Journal of Games Criticism*, 2015, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 1-23. [online]. [2021-02-15]. Available at: <<http://gamescriticism.org/articles/karhulahti-2-1/>>.

58 FARCA, G.: The Emancipated Player. In HUBER, W., BJORK, S., O’DONNELL, C., BIDARRA, R. (eds.): *DiGRA/ FDG ’16 – Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. Dundee : DIGRA, 2016, p. 2.

59 MURIEL, D., CRAWFORD, G.: *Digital Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Digital Games in Contemporary Society*. New York : Routledge, 2018, p. 109.

60 PLANELLAS LA MAZA, A. J.: *Possible Worlds in Digital Games: From Classic Narrative to Meaningful Actions*. Pittsburgh : ECT Press, 2017, p. 172.

process I have used a methodology based on play testing<sup>61</sup> and close reading, supported by all the theoretical background provided. But it is important to remark that in this aesthetic approach it cannot be confined within formalistic frameworks, since aesthetic appreciation is based on the sensations and interpretations of an artistic object and, therefore, goes beyond all formalistic methodology. The aim of the present analysis is focused on the aesthetic sensations of playing digital games, paying special attention to audio-visual, discursive, interpretive, affective, or poetic categories. That is, its non-mechanical elements. Therefore, it is supported by a firm theoretical background, in addition to adding some post-phenomenological theories applied to digital games.<sup>62</sup>

To test the expressive possibilities of difficulty with an aesthetic value, I propose two contemporary and popular digital games: *The Last of Us Part II* and *Death Stranding*. In neither of these two games is the high difficulty recognised as one of its remarkable characteristics. To test the value and utility of analysing digital games from an aesthetic point of view, it is important to use digital games whose main characteristics are not their challenge. The difficulty of the mechanical challenge in *Dark Souls* is widely recognised as one of its main values, so it is better not to use it for this analysis. Although it would be interesting to focus on its oppressive, dark, and desperate atmosphere to create a survival tale at the end of the world. Both case studies exemplify the complexities of digital games and how difficulty is revealed as an important aesthetic value that goes beyond the merely ludic.

## Case Study I: Imposing a Glance in *The Last of Us Part II*

From critical analysis, we must examine in detail how a media artifact works, which in digital games translates into how the virtual world is shown to us as players, who we are in it, how we express ourselves in the world and how our actions show us in it. All these are essential elements to think of digital games as aesthetic objects with complex discourses that are a source of interpretive and affective difficulty, even if the mechanical difficulty is relevant in the game. In *The Last of Us Part II* the player faces constant challenges from enemies, either directly or indirectly through stealth. But the way the game imposes a glance to the player provokes the main affective response and it stands as the main source of aesthetic difficulty.

In *The Last of Us Part II* the player takes Ellie's control, the co-protagonist of the first *The Last of Us*<sup>63</sup> and protagonist in the standalone DLC *Left Behind*<sup>64</sup>, in a revenge journey after Joel's murder. The plot twist is that for almost half of the game the player is forced to control the subject of his revenge, Abby. As players we are always forced to play being

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61 For more information, see: AARSETH, E.: *Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis*. In MILES, A. (ed.): *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*. Melbourne : RMIT Publishing, 2003, p. 1-7.

62 See also: GUALENI, S.: *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer*. London : Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.; KEOGH, B.: *Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Digital Games*. In *Journal of Games Criticism*, 2014, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1-26. [online]. [2021-05-28]. Available at: <<http://gamecriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1>>

63 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013.

64 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. [digital game]. San Mateo : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014.

another, even if we do not empathise with this virtual other, which can generate rejection, discomfort, or other negative emotions. The game, directed and written by N. Druckmann and H. Gross, explores the dramatic and affective tensions of being another and they write a speech about the banality of violence from an ambivalent double point of view. L. Anyó and Á. Colom<sup>65</sup> explore the complex emotional responses that this change of characters and points of view entails for the story and the player's affective response.

The game forces the player to take control of Abby despite the possible rejection that controlling Joel's murderer generates. A rejection that must be assimilated and overcome, as the player takes Abby's role for hours, coming to empathise with her despite not justifying Joel's cruel murder. In this sense, it's important to note that Joel's actions in the first game (the massacre he commits in the Fireflies hospital to save Ellie, who was going to be sacrificed to create a vaccine to face the virus that plagues the world) lead to Abby's revenge. Then, controlling Ellie, the player enters in a violence loop that leads her to commit atrocities similar or worse than those committed by Joel in the first game or Joel's murder committed by Abby. The Last of Us Part II writes a discourse about the banality of violence even when creating a conflict with the ludic design that forces the player to kill dozens of enemies. The double perspective reinforces this interpretation because Ellie's enemies in the first half of the game, are Abby's friends in the second, people with their own problems, with a life we know will end soon in a horrible way, because we are (also) its perpetrators. Although if the discourse about violence is conflictive, it is suggestive how Abby's character reflects the existential emptiness that remains after carrying out the revenge that has consumed the few last years of her life, and that we repeat in the skin of Ellie at the game's epilogue.

In addition to the fictional and narrative construction, the discourse about violence in The Last of Us Part II is sustained in an important detail, although it may seem minor due to the scope of the story: the camera. As M. Martín-Núñez states, the expressive potential of the camera frame requires "removing the control of the camera from the player to connect automatic cameras allows offering the most suitable shot to generate a certain sensation".<sup>66</sup> These automatic cameras "privilege audiovisual writing and dramatic tension"<sup>67</sup> and reveal the camera's expressive potential, framing the victims during the murders that the player commits. The game makes close combat and stealth the most plausible option for survival, and it is in short distances that the game reveals itself. The kills involve approaching the enemies from behind, grabbing their neck and stabbing or strangling them. These death scenes are designed to disgust and discomfort the player, because when they grab an enemy, the camera frames their suffering face, forcing the player to see a close-up shot of the enemy's last death throes. This camera framing imposes a glance to teach the player the horror of killing another, reinforcing its discourse with hyper-realistic images that make the enemies faces reflect their suffering in a very crude way. This repeated death scene is still unpleasant even when the player is used to it. Always considering the player performance and how they relate with the game, their identity within the game's directed freedom and their interpretative stance. This is important because violence, as well as the narrative and other fictional elements, does not affect all players, and their performance, in the same way. This affective form of difficulty, be involved at a fictional level, even makes the mechanic difficulty grow. This degree of involvement makes it difficult for the player to hurt others and to harm themselves as a fictional character.

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65 ANYÓ, L., COLOM, À.: Ambivalencia Emocional en The Last of Us. Las Emociones en los Videojuegos. Entre la Complejidad Narrativa y la Lealtad del Jugador. In *L'Atalante. Revista de Estudios Cinematográficos*, 2021, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 96-97.

66 MARTÍN NÚÑEZ, M.: Encuadros. Diseñar la Escritura Audiovisual del Videojuego. In NAVARRO-REMESAL, V. (ed.): *Pensar el Juego. 25 Caminos para los Game Studies*. Santander : Asociación Shangrila Textos Aparte, 2020, p. 83.

67 Ibidem.

The Last of Us Part II repeatedly and strenuously confronts the player with a difficult situation in which they are participant. Both by the violent images that we participate in, and the narration focused on two confronted characters, the player is constantly confronted with uncomfortable situations that construct a positive-negative experience. This narrative and discursive device takes the players into an interpretive and affective difficulty regardless of the selected difficulty level.

## Case Study II: The Disinterest and Boredom in Exploring and Inhabiting Death Stranding World

In open-world games the gameworld not only works as a space for separating the multiple points of interest of the maps, but also as spaces created to be explored and inhabited. These enormous worlds demand the player's attention to read and explore the terrain establishing a relationship with space, which can be abhorrent when the trip is just an excuse to extend the experience artificially. But it can also be significant when the journey pushes the player to experience it from an aesthetic point of view, to adopt a disinterested and contemplative perspective. The last Hideo Kojima's game, Death Stranding, is a good example of this formula because it makes walking transcendental, making the path not a trivial matter, but rather requires an effort to be traversed and attention to be read. Death Stranding presents a post-apocalyptic unreal world with an Icelandic landscape, even if supposed to be North America, and an abnormal climatic phenomenon named *timefall*, a toxic rain and snow that accelerates the passage of time, aging living beings and corroding materials. The entire gameworld surface is uninhabited except for the player, Sam Porter Bridges, and other porters like him, in addition to the *MULEs*, a terrorist faction obsessed with deliveries that try to steal the player's cargo, and some ghostly beings called *BT* or *Beached Things*, a symptom of this abnormal world that has merged the living and the dead. All these fictional elements are significant pieces that make Death Stranding's gameworld significant and not a mere proxy for all the game's missions. Kojima's game raises the travel importance by making the player worry about the cargo that they can transport from one point on the map to another.

As reviewer L. Thomas stated for The New Yorker, "the challenge comes less from trying to beat bosses or outmanoeuvre enemies and more from trying to cross a deep river, say, or balance a lot of unwieldy packages on uneven terrain".<sup>68</sup> Then, the game challenge lies in the environmental resistance that arises in the rugged terrain that the player must traverse, the abnormal climatic conditions and the enemy's presence that are best avoided by creating more complex but safe routes. This effort requires more patience and attention for reading and interpreting the terrain than mechanical skills, although it is also important. It's significant that some travels work as an extended and slow pace climax. The main travel in Chapter 6 forces the player to cross a mountainous area during a blizzard that blinds them and offers an extra resistance making it difficult to move through

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68 THOMAS, L.: *The Blockbuster Digital Game that Wants to "Make America Whole Again"*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019. [online]. [2021-02-15] Available at: <<https://www.newyorker.com/sports/sporting-scene/the-blockbuster-video-game-that-wants-to-make-america-whole-again>>.

the space. Another example takes place in Chapter 8, the journey to reach the chiral relay takes the player through rugged and unexplored terrain with a multitude of dangers that can take hours. The last example takes place in Chapter 10 and it is significant because the player must make the last travel that takes them across the map from one point to another in the opposite direction. These three examples establish the temporal relation between the player and the space that provokes an aesthetic response that demands physical and mental effort, making these long travels more climatic events than the boss battles.

Taking up the analysis made by L. Thomas, the journalist states that *Death Stranding* is considered by many players as boring for its lack of action. Or better explained, for its lack of a certain type of action (the action associated with third person action games), because walking is an action. Walking has been often trivialised and ignored in digital games, as the pejorative expression for designating the 'walking simulator' genre shows. But walking in *Death Stranding*, as well as walking simulators, is not boring in a negative way. Above all, boredom is not a negative emotion or the opposite of fun, it can be an ugly feeling ("amoral and non-cathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release")<sup>69</sup> but not an emotion to avoid. Boredom is an expressive and aesthetic form that can be pleasant, even fun.

Boredom as an aesthetic form is significant for providing slow rhythmic sensations, such as slowness, contemplation, or stillness. M. Heidegger speaks about profound boredom<sup>70</sup> as the experience of the existential time of things. This temporal conception of things can be related to 'catalytic narratives',<sup>71</sup> those fictions in which 'nothing happens' because they present their discourse without haste not governed by nuclear or climatic logic, or 'deep attention', that establishes a slowest and contemplative relationship with time, as a discourse against contemporary vital speed,<sup>72</sup> and the contemplation, calm exploration, temporal dilation and the non-economic sense of action of 'slow games',<sup>73</sup> that we may connect with the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, used by J. Juul<sup>74</sup> for talking about the contemplative attitude of the walking simulator genre. *Death Stranding* falls within these descriptions because attention and contemplation are important for exploring its huge scenarios, because walking is the main means of moving through the empty and silent terrain, and because it even has a mechanic for rest. The slow game and boredom are aesthetically significant because it allows a deeper relation with the game and for this reason is related to difficulty aesthetics.

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69 NGAI, S.: *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard : Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 6.

70 LEINO, O. T.: *Escape from C-D Road: On the Value of Boredom in Euro Truck Simulator 2 Multiplayer*. In DEBUS, M. (ed.): *Proceedings of Philosophy of Computer Games 2018 Conference*. Copenhagen : IT University of Copenhagen, 2018, p. 2.

71 GARCÍA-CATALÁN, S., SOROLLA-ROMERO, T., MARTÍN-NÚÑEZ, M.: *Reivindicar el Detalle: Sutilezas y Catálisis Barthesianas en la Ficción Televisiva*. In *Palabra Clave*, 2019, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 720.

72 MARSH, T.: *Slow Serious Games, Interactions and Play: Designing for Positive and Serious Experience and Reflection*. In *Entertainment Computing*, 2016, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 45.

73 NAVARRO-REMESAL, V.: *Meditaciones. Modos Zen, Contemplación y Lentitud en el Videojuego*. In NAVARRO-REMESAL, V. (ed.): *Pensar el Juego. 25 Caminos para los Game Studies*. Santander : Asociación Shangrila Textos Aparte, 2020, p. 136.

74 See also: JUUL, J.: *The Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of Digital Games*. In DEBUS, M. (ed.): *Proceedings of Philosophy of Computer Games 2018 Conference*. Copenhagen : IT University of Copenhagen, 2018, p. 1-17. [online]. [2021-01-15]. Available at: <<https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/aesthetics3/>>.

# Conclusion

There is no difficulty except by confronting subject and object. The philosopher J. Dewey states that a work of art “only has an aesthetic range when the work becomes the experience of a human being”,<sup>75</sup> although it is necessary to go beyond personal enjoyment. Then, game and player are essential pieces of the post-phenomenological act of playing and thinking about digital games. The main objective of this study is to introduce some aesthetic and non-mechanical concepts that allow us to detect specific phenomena like the difficulty aesthetic elements. This brings us an analytical tool that overlaps the mechanical elements, closer to the formalist analysis, with others that are more experiential and difficult to enclose, such as discourse, theme, narrative, atmosphere, or temporality. Difficulty as aesthetics is a construct that allows us to assess all these elements and add the player as a mutable performer, with intentions and involvement with the ludic text. The analysis of two digital games has shown the relevance of several aesthetic aspects that serve to support the theories that articulate this analysis. The Last of Us Part II shows how digital games impose a gaze that affects the player’s performance. The game insists on showing the horror of killing another (even though it may make mistakes at their insistence) and how that other has a life beyond their role as an enemy by forcing the player to play one of those enemies, to see it from their perspective. The suggestive interpretation about difficulty aesthetics in The Last of Us Part II is how the raw violence, the tragedy, and the change of perspective and characters create discomfort for the player. But the player must continue playing despite feeling uncomfortable using violence so harshly, being someone who they do not want to be and empathising with this person so hated or being incapable to prevent the esteemed character from losing their humanity. That is, the suggestive tensions generated by directed freedom.

Death Stranding makes walking between different points meaningful and transcendental. The mechanical difficulty meets the purely aesthetic experience as the player navigates the arduous terrain, searching for the best routes to get the cargo in good condition to its destination. The game slows down the pace that at which we are used to experiencing digital games and life, and this leads the player to establish a transcendental relationship, close to deep boredom, with the space and time of the virtual world. Death Stranding also gives importance to taking care of others and things, and the need to create a better society founded on collaboration and trust in others.

This study has drawn the expressive potential of difficulty as aesthetics in two relevant and popular contemporary video games which can be extrapolated to other video games, no matter what kind of challenge they pose. Furthermore, with these two case studies, to which we can add examples from a theoretical background, we detect some concepts, or motifs, that allows us to start a vocabulary focused on difficulty as aesthetics. Concepts such as: mechanical skills, effort as temporary dedication, survival in a hostile environment, puzzles, bleak and horror atmosphere, complex themes treatment (like depression, the banality of violence and revenge, trauma, problematics of our time like evictions or solitude), metagames (games that think about the meaning of games while playing), negative emotions (boredom, discomfort, horror, or sadness), narrative complexity (unreliable narrators, mind game film tools, narrative dislocation, or low communicability), the limited agency of directed freedom, complex discourses about politics and social issues, defamiliarization in Kantian terms, and transgression. This catalogue of concepts is just a hint towards a more exhaustive exploration of the motifs that articulate

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75 DEWEY, J.: *El Arte Como Experiencia*. Barcelona : Ediciones Paidós, 2008, p. 4.

difficulty as aesthetic experience<sup>76</sup>. Despite not delving into the meanings of each of these concepts, this list allows us to glimpse a broader vocabulary of difficulty in digital games than the “traditional arcade game”<sup>77</sup> model limited to concepts like goals, challenge, fun, progression, punishment, or rewards; and, to approach from an expressive perspective that allows us to explore in greater depth the complexity of digital games.

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76 For more information, see: TORRES, M. T.: *MPF Framework: An Aesthetic and Phenomenological Approach to Ludic Difficulty in Video Games*. In ZAGALO, N., VELOSO, A., COSTA, L., MEALHA, Ó. (eds.): *Videogame Sciences and Arts. VJ 2019. Communications in Computer and Information Science*. Cham : Springer, 2019, p. 32-45.

77 See also: JUUL, J.: *Without a Goal*. In KRZYWINSKA, T., ATKINS, B. (eds.): *Videogame/Player/Text*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 191-203. [online]. [2021-02-12]. Available at: <<https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/withoutagoal/>>.

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