



# Acta Ludologica

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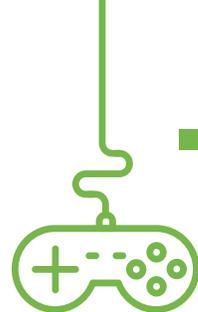
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# Journal Orientation

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Acta Ludologica is a scientific journal in the field of games and digital games. The journal contains professional scientific reflections on digital games; it also offers academic discourses on games, especially media and digital competencies, creation, design, marketing, research, development, psychology, sociology, history and the future of digital games and game studies.

Acta Ludologica is a double-blind peer reviewed journal published twice a year. It focuses on theoretical studies, theoretical and empirical studies, research results and their implementation into practice, as well as professional publication and scientific reviews of digital games.

## Acta Ludologica

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## Identity in the Cyberspace of Digital Games

Our everyday life shifts more and more into the cyberspace of digital media, a significant segment of which is represented by digital games. The cyberspace of digital games, which develops together with the advancing possibilities brought by digital media, offers a high standard of not merely entertainment, but also more serious forms of games, for example educational games. It is implicitly assumed that the online world of digital media has an effect on the human. But what effect does it have on a human's identity? What are the possibilities and what are the risks?

What is real identity? Real identity in a human is shaped by these four dimensions: 1. human body – external dimension (physical); 2. memory, mind, conscience, subconsciousness, 'me' – internal (mental); 3. social dimension – interpersonal relationships; 4. cultural – epoch dimension. Real identity is generated at the intersection of the physical, mental, social and cultural dimensions. Within it, the most important seems to be the mental identity, as it is where the identity core – the 'me' of a person – originates. A human's identity cannot be understood as something permanent and supertemporal, but dynamic and flexible in the continuity of development of the body, mind, society and culture. The real identity of a human therefore resembles more the so-called Wittgenstein's Eye, which becomes the object it sees, than the a priori given Cartesian Cogito.

How is identity changing in the cyberspace of digital games? The highest degree of virtualisation will be taken by an avatar, as a representation of a player in the cyberspace of digital games, because we can freely create an avatar using some of the quite extensive programmed features. To understand identity, for example the in digital games *The Sims* or *World of Warcraft*, it is important to realise two main means of constructing the player's avatar: 1. The first approach features 'static', figurative constructing of a player's representative. This construction is based on the many possibilities given by the game. Thus the avatar becomes a rich reflection of the player's individual and collective ideas, dreams, idealisations but also stereotypes.

2. The second approach features 'dynamic' planning, graduation of the story and especially social interactions in which the identity of the player's avatar is developed. Social interactions are most

commonly realised between the player and the computer, but the defined rules of the game evoke reality very strongly, with real relationships between people. The player can construct their ideas and dreams that can never be fully constructed in real life.

The player's identity in the cyberspace of digital media can be changed or developed hand in hand with the changing degree of virtual reality. Strong identification with an avatar in a digital game cannot come without any influence on our real life and real identity, since it leaves its traces in our thinking, in our memory, which is transferred via neuroplastic changes in our brain. Thanks to digital games we realise more clearly that also our real identity is constructed, changeable and multiplicable. Multiplication of identities in the cyberspace of digital media can be very exciting and enriching and thus makes digital games a very attractive commercial product. On the other hand, we need to learn to keep a distance and critical attitude to such an environment, because excessive multiplication and experiments with identities can also represent a risk for a human's identity.

The contributions in this issue more or less also deal with the problem of the relationship between the online and offline worlds. The first article by S. Shin examines the digital game as a uniquely positioned medium for imagining a better world and themselves and, subsequently, facilitating a shift in cultural attitudes in a politically progressive manner. The study from Ł. P. Wojciechowski and A. J. Shelton describes the creative potential of the specific functionality of photo modes in digital games. In his study, D. Jukić claims the true character of the game is manifested in the self-pleasure of relieving the individual but also in the imagination and beauty that the game provides. The article by M. Horrigan explores nulltopia, the non-space between one world and another, in relation to digital games. The contribution by K. Jancovics discovers the many layers and methods of the horror genre, from spatiality through focalization to temporality. L. Škripčová, in the last article, examines the segment of digital games in relation to media convergence.

All contributions including interviews and reviews represent a valuable benefit to the knowledge of the world of digital games, and I recommend them to all readers who are interested in this topic.

**prof. PhDr. Slavomír Gáliik, PhD.**

*Acta Ludologica's Advisory Board*

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# The Rise of the Cottagecore Game: The Modernity of Digital Gaming and Content Consumption

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Seunghyun Shin is currently a second-year PhD student at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He received a bachelor's degree in English from the University at Albany, SUNY and a master's degree in English from the University of Vermont. His research interests include 20th century American literature, Modernism, contemporary literature, poetry and poetics, critical theory, aesthetic theory, and game studies.

## ABSTRACT:

The main aim of this article is to demonstrate that contemporary gamers commit to a political nature of consuming digital game contents to facilitate cultural renewal. In illuminating how the rise of the cottagecore game at the turn of the 2020s has not only been driven by this cultural renewal but also intensified its major trajectories, the study contradicts critical assertions about the inimical relationship between gaming and real life which still remains in mainstream culture. This study aims to continue advancing the practice of game theorists who have shifted academic interest to the relevance of the digital game as a medium by conceptualizing the practice of enjoying a digital game as 'consumption' in the fashion defined by K. Marx. Building upon what might be termed an open-world game suggested a contradicting concept of playing a digital game, this study takes *Harvest Moon* as one of the early examples which inspires the swarming number of cottagecore games in the late 2010s and *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing* as representatives of the rise of the cottagecore game, the study will illustrate how the rise of the cottagecore game reveals modernity of contemporary gamers who share a vision of digital game as a uniquely positioned medium for imagining a better world and themselves and, subsequently, facilitating a shift in cultural attitudes in a politically progressive manner.

## KEY WORDS:

consumption, cottagecore, digital games, game studies, Marxism, modernity.

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# Introduction

Whether players are enjoying the agricultural life in *Stardew Valley*<sup>1</sup>, settling in their island in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*<sup>2</sup>, or crafting their own worlds in *Minecraft*<sup>3</sup>, the sprawling cottagecore aesthetic is a common feature of many digital games from the 2010s onwards. While some of these projects do invite players into the imagined virtues of simplified and romanticized agricultural life in their own logic by thematically retreating from the trappings of urban life, some of the cottagecore games endeavour to be a space for players in the digital era to embody the modernity stemmed from the Marxist sensibilities, which is a continuous orientation of the Modernist injunction to "Make it new".<sup>4</sup> In the case of *Stardew Valley*, although the game does provide subsidiary quests and milestones that guide players to make certain achievements – such as shipping every crop, earning a specific amount of money, crafting items, and completing the museum collection – it ultimately does not provide a specific objective to finish the game but invites players to roam around Pelican Town that was marketed in such a way that players' expectations were geared toward an experience grounded in the pastoral lifestyle and narratives. Inspired by *Harvest Moon*<sup>5</sup>, which contributed to a departure from

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1 Remark by the author: The game was developed solely by the individual.; CONCERNEDAPE: *Stardew Valley*. [digital game]. Seattle, WA : E. Barone, 2016.

2 NINTENDO EPD: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2020.

3 MOJANG: *Minecraft*. [digital game]. Stockholm : Mojang Studio, 2009.

4 See also: BLEDSOE, E. M.: 'Make It New'. In ROSS, S. et al. (eds.): *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*. London : Routledge, 2016. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/make-it-new>>.

5 AMCCUS: *Harvest Moon*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Pack-In-Video, 1996.

the traditional gaming experience that provided specific objectives to players – such as clearing multiple stages and beating the final boss – one element that *Stardew Valley* shares with other cottagecore games is having players encounter no objective to finish the game but a virtual world in which they can interact. While such cottagecore games approach players' interactions with the agricultural lifestyles and narratives differently, it is not uncommon for players to do whatever they want in that virtual world without worrying about their real life or otherwise come across non-player characters (NPCs) who live with them in the pastoral settings.

This essay takes up the rise of the cottagecore game to understand the cultural and normative influences that drive gamers and developers in the networked world to facilitate cultural renewal of *consuming* a game and how they are exemplified by an equivalence of the ways in which players enjoy cottagecore lifestyles in games to modernity and Marxist sensibilities. This understanding of cottagecore games has two stakes. First, it calls into question the traditional consensus among the conservatives which very often dismisses digital games as a waste of time distracting from social progress or real life. Although game theorists in the last two decades – such as E. Aarseth, J. Murray, T. Apperley, G. Frasca, E. Vossen, J. Juul, O. Leino, and J. Stenros – have successfully made visible some important limitations of the conservative perception dominated by the traditional 'do-games-induce-violent-behaviours studies', the perception still remains strong in the mainstream culture in which digital games are very often seen as the interests of the vain and out of touch.<sup>6</sup> Second, it allows us to continue advancing the textual analysis of a game to the relationship between gamers and digital games which has made the digital gaming culturally prominent in the twenty-first century. There was an incredible development of academic digital game studies over the last two decades that shifted the academic interest to the relevance of the digital game as a new medium and the presence of gamers has been significant. The cottagecore games that this study explores exemplify the ways in which contemporary gamers orient themselves to the position of consumer and digital games as resources; players of these games do not so much renounce the pastoral tradition and the idealized virtues of the simple lifestyles as put the spirit of modernity to new use in exploring how they could diversify the ways in which they could enjoy the games both within and outside the game world.

The following two chapters discuss how the rise of the cottagecore game derived from the so-called open-world genre and exemplify the complex modes of consumption and production of digital game contents in the 2020s. The significance of the open-world genre that formally foregrounds the political nature of playing a digital game is presented first, followed by analysis of *Harvest Moon*, *Stardew Valley*, and *Animal Crossing*. Through research on *Harvest Moon*, one of the early examples of digital games that present the pastoral narrative and romanticized agricultural life, and the ways in which contemporary gamers consume *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing* in the 2020s, the following chapters illustrate how the cottagecore – aesthetic borne out of the World Wide Web and among teenagers to young adults in the late 2010s while being inspired by the pastoral tradition and romanticized agricultural themes – has evolved into a genre in the digital game industry which reveals the modernity and Marxist sensibilities of gamers in the 2020s.

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6 FRASCA, G.: Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology. In PERRON, B., WOLF, M. J. P. (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2003, p. 243.

# Ultima and Harvest Moon: The Open-World and the Cottagecore Game

To discuss the significance of the open-world game, the first task involves exploring how it challenges the traditional conception of gaming that remains dominant in mainstream culture. In classical terms, gaming is the art of demonstrating a competition to satisfy a specific objective. Either against another player or the artificial intelligence (AI) previously programmed in a specific algorithm, players compete to satisfy the objective. Many digital games developed before the 1980s, such as *Pong*<sup>7</sup> and *Space Invaders*<sup>8</sup>, have stages that guide players to compete against more elaborately-designed AIs while supporting the player versus player (PvP). This conception of gaming meshed comfortably with the domestication of digital games as a commodity that had an objective for its consumers to fully enjoy the content – every stage was a small, virtual world for game developers to squeeze their imagined objects into traps, puzzles, enemies, and bosses so that every game therefore had a finale, so-called *game-over*, that had no more contents available for players. Implied here is a critical assumption that the game is and ought to be considered as an organic whole, with no undigested elements; moreover, there should be specific ways for players to perform better either than the AI or the others; and they must find those ways to perform better. E. Aarseth's description of games is apropos: "Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld). [...] In addition to these three components, there is the player's active knowledge of the game, in the form of strategies and performance techniques, and mental topographies, as well as written guides and other paratextual information about the games".<sup>9</sup>

E. Aarseth's ontology was especially influential on the early game theorists in the 2000s, and we have inherited this set of assumptions from him that allow us to conceptualize the ontology of every digital game. Players make unilateral changes in so-called gameworld by their gameplays and the most primitive rule for them in the early digital games was that competition in a small gameworld consists of multiple stages.

Although players and game theorists have never demarcated cottagecore game with any canonized definition, the 1980s and 90s saw the emergence of what foregrounds the rise of the cottagecore game, which might properly be termed an open-world game – that is, a game that takes place in a world that not only has its own culture and history, but also lets players 'explore another life' as R. Garriott put it.<sup>10</sup> Much of the work of modern game developers as diverse as S. Miyamoto, V. Megler, and J. Le Fay can be placed in the tradition of this game development that aims to let players explore another life. As S. Addams remarks in *The Official Book of Ultima*, the hallmark of R. Garriott's *Ultima*<sup>11</sup> is the sense of reality that suggested a new model for the three aspects of the game. R. Garriott wanted "every item in the world – every ring, every knife, every fork, every spoon, every plate,

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7 ATARI: *Pong*. [digital game]. Sunnyvale, CA : Atari, 1972.

8 TAITO: *Space Invaders*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Taito, 1978.

9 AARSETH, E.: Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation. In WARDRIP-FRUIJN, N., HARRIGAN, P. (eds.): *First Person: New Media as Story*. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2004, p. 47-48.; Remark by the author: Hereafter, we apply E. Aarseth's terminology of the three aspects: rules, gameworld, and gameplay.

10 ADDAMS, S.: *The Official Book of Ultima*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Greensboro, NC : Compute Books, 1992, p. 93.

11 GARRIOTT, R.: *Ultima*. [digital game]. Davis, CA : California Pacific, 1981.

every bottle in Britannia – to exist according to the laws of real-world physics”.<sup>12</sup> In this world built according to the laws of real-world physics, R. Garriot provides players multiple ways to do things. Elaborating on this realist gameplay in *Ultima*, he says: “My philosophy is that once you get people compelled enough to sit down and play the game, the whole way you make a game successful is by giving them enough unique ways to do thing. First let them deal with pulling levers and things like that for awhile. Then after they’ve mastered that, you give them something else to do, like getting through doorways by blasting them down with a cannon. Next you give them a monster-finding quest, followed by logic problems to figure out. You pace it that way. Assorted activities and the diversity of activities are what makes a game rich in my mind”.<sup>13</sup>

The realist worldbuilding in *Ultima* designated to provide a gameworld for exploration and interaction rather than competition suggested a new model for developers to reinvent the gameworld to the ‘open-world’ in which players go wherever they want, do whatever they want, and interact with the imagined objects, items, enemies, and NPCs in whichever way they want. This pursuit of formal realism in R. Garriot’s development of *Ultima* underpins the open-world game that challenges the general trend of understanding gaming as an art form which demonstrates a competition for a specific objective. Looking at the numbers of worldwide eSports viewers, according to C. Gough, “there are expected to be over 318 million eSports enthusiasts worldwide by 2025, a significant increase from the 215.2 million in 2020”,<sup>14</sup> we note that competition still remains popular in the conception of gaming in mainstream culture. Competition is one thing, interaction, quite another; the popularity of eSports in the twenty-first century relies heavily on the former dominant concept of gaming as an art of demonstrating a competition, whereas interacting with NPCs, objects, and monsters in another world is distant from performing better than either the AI or other players to *win* the game but rather makes itself an immense practice of exploring another life. Everyday life is shaped by interaction, an active process, depending on the context of the actions and individual differences – such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, etc.<sup>15</sup> Interactions made within such open-world games, at least when players deal with imagined people, objects, and the world, become a tool for players to voluntarily explore another life while enjoying the feeling of tension and the consciousness that what they do in the game is different from their real life. They discharge internal energies for an essentially denotative surface by interacting with the world within the game, in characters, objects, narrative, balancing the joy of interacting with the imaginative world that provides a different life from the ordinary and the consciousness that they are still physically in the real world. This reveals that gameplay of an open-world game suggests the political nature of interacting with the imagined world. Whatever a player chooses to do, purchase, wear, and interact with is a reimagination of their life and identity. This later becomes true for not only players who particularly enjoy an open-world game like *Ultima* but also everyone who reimagines their life by playing any game with open-world elements.

We can reflect here; diversified modes of interaction become a key to the understanding of what might be termed an open-world game, and the *political gameplay*<sup>16</sup>,

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12 ADDAMS, S.: *The Official Book of Ultima*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Greensboro, NC : Compute Books, 1992, p. 83.

13 Ibidem, p. 97.

14 GOUGH, Ch.: *ESports Audience Size Worldwide from 2020-2025, by Type of Viewers*. Released on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2022. [online]. [2022-07-27]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/490480/global-esports-audience-size-viewer-type/#statisticContainer>>.

15 For more information, see: GOFFMAN, E.: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, NY : Anchor Books, 1959.

16 Remark by the author: How an open-world game unfolds is up to players and they do not need to be top-tier gamers to necessarily reimagine their life and identity by interacting with the imagined world. In this sense, gameplays in the open-world game are the simulation of their political interactions with the imagined world within the game that remains empirically unreal but imaginatively real.

therefore, complicates the concept of gaming. This at least seems to be the case in a time when certain types of open-world games are already in use for purposes other than entertainment. For example, there were college courses in 2021 which included *Assassin's Creed: Origins*<sup>17</sup> and *Red Dead Redemption 2*<sup>18</sup> as part of their course material and Microsoft also introduces *Minecraft* as a game that “prepares students for the future, building future-ready skills like creativity, problem solving, and systems thinking, and nurturing a passion for play”<sup>19</sup> particularly by providing the open learning environment that gives “the freedom to experiment, encouraging self-expression and problem-solving”.<sup>20</sup> Over the last decade, a handful of scholars have attempted to theoretically distinguish such educational aspects of digital gaming – such as T. Apperley and C. Walsh who claimed that a player’s subjectivity makes gameplays accumulated into so-called ‘gaming capital’ in a classroom and adolescent life.<sup>21</sup> The critical accounts of such scholars contribute to our understanding of the popularity of open-world games in the contemporary gaming community and the ways in which the emergence of the open-world game as a genre complicated the concept of digital gaming. Things are easier for open-world games nowadays than in the 1980s; the open-world impulse in the game development has become widespread and it is easy to find open-world elements in many triple-A games released in the 2010s – such as *Grand Theft Auto V*<sup>22</sup> and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*<sup>23</sup>. While it is remarkable that the prominence of such open-world games inspired by R. Garriot’s Ultima appeal to contemporary gamers who prefer exploring another life and wandering around the gameworld and doing whatever in whichever ways they want rather than strategically playing in specific ways to either compete or digest every content of the game, it is important to note that the cottagecore game – one that provides us in the digital era an opportunity to explore the cottagecore lifestyles in the gameworld – extends this concept of open-world gaming by making politics and aesthetics fit into the everyday lives in it.

Cottagecore games, it should be said, have no founder, no contested inception, no signature spokespersons claiming their cultural capital; their origin is not limited to the commercial success of either *Stardew Valley* or *Animal Crossing*. Although cottagecore itself was coined and started to be popularized online in the late 2010s, what might be termed a cottagecore game has a long history. To tap into the discussion of how the cottagecore aesthetic has evolved into a specific subgenre of the digital game, we may refer to *Harvest Moon*, which is one of the earliest games that invite players to explore the life of a farmer in the pastoral narrative. Inspired by his childhood in the countryside of Japan

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- 17 UBISOFT: *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. [digital game]. Montreal : Ubisoft, 2017.; See: CRAIG, J.: *Egyptologists Use Assassin's Creed: Origins To Teach History*. Released on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2021. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.thegamer.com/egyptologists-assassins-creed-origins-teach-history/>>.
  - 18 ROCKSTAR STUDIOS: *Red Dead Redemption 2*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 2018.; See also: MURRAY, S.: *American University to Offer History Course Based on Red Dead Redemption and RDR2*. Released on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2021. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.thegamer.com/american-university-to-offer-history-course-based-on-red-dead-redemption-and-rdr2/>>.
  - 19 *Game-Based Learning with Minecraft*. [online]. [2022-11-26]. Available at: <<https://education.minecraft.net/en-us/discover/impact>>.
  - 20 HÉBERT, C., JENSON, J.: Teaching with Sandbox Games: Minecraft, Game-Based Learning, and 21st Century Competencies. In *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 2020, Vol. 46, No. 3, p. 3-4. [online]. [2022-11-26]. Available at: <<https://cjl.t.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/27990/20516>>; *Welcome to Minecraft: Education Edition!*. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://education.minecraft.net/how-it-works/why-minecraft#21st-century-skills>>.
  - 21 For more information, see: APPERLEY, T., WALSH, C.: Researching Digital Game Players: Gameplay and Gaming Capital. In XIAO, Y., TEN THIJ, E. (eds.): *IADIS International Conference Gaming 2008*. Lisbon : IADIS, 2008, p. 99-102.; APPERLEY, T., WALSH, C.: Gaming Capital: Rethinking Literacy. In JEFFERY, P. L. (ed.): *AARE 2008 International Education Research Conference: Changing Climates: Education for Sustainable Futures*. Brisbane : AARE, 2008, p. 1-11. [online]. [2022-07-27]. Available at: <<https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2008/wal08101.pdf>>.
  - 22 ROCKSTAR NORTH: *Grand Theft Auto V*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 2013.
  - 23 NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.

and the game series *Derby Stallion*<sup>24</sup>, the developer of *Harvest Moon*, Y. Wada, says that he wanted to make “a non-competitive and non-combative game [when] a lot of games... involve competition or combat”.<sup>25</sup> Although *Ultima* and other early open-world games had suggested diversified modes of interaction by the time Wada began to develop *Harvest Moon*, combat even now still remains dominant in the modes of interaction. We can reflect here; by aiming at abolishing competition and combat, Wada extends the experimental, political gameplay of the open-world game to exploration without any combat. As a result, *Harvest Moon* combines a farm simulator and an adventure-RPG with mini-games. In the game, the player becomes a young man who maintains the farm he inherits from his grandfather. While doing so, the player interacts with villagers, builds relationships with them, attends festivals, and gathers with other NPCs in the bar at night to drink and talk. The pastoral narrative elements – such as talking to villagers, maintaining relationships with them, eventually marrying a townswoman, and attending the local events – correspond to cottagecore aesthetics when such non-competitive modes of interaction allow the player to explore the romanticized rural life in the countryside. In addition, there are other non-combative modes of interaction – such as clearing land, planting and harvesting crops, raising livestock, foraging, hand-crafting materials, and selling harvests – that provide him an opportunity to reimagine his life and invoke an idealized pastoral fantasy. The point here is not simply to say that such elements imply that *Harvest Moon* romanticizes the rural life of a farmer but rather to suggest that given the freedom to creatively allocate time between tasks, the pool of possibly interesting and novel derivative playthroughs multiplies. Although the primary objective is to maintain a farm, it becomes subsidiary when the player is allowed to decide whether he would be the busiest man in the village. Even if the player does not make any achievement as a farmer, he still has an additional ending for his playthrough and narrative. By claiming the player’s agency in satisfying the non-competitive and non-combative objective – exploring agricultural life – *Harvest Moon* acquired a rapid following for its innovative gameplay. Here, we do not, of course, declare that *Harvest Moon* has been therefore one of the first sandbox games. Tracing the history of sandbox games is out of the point. What is important is that *Harvest Moon* demonstrated a different set of values than those espoused by the former reductive assumption that the digital game has limited rules and objectives which bind the player’s creativity in his gameplays.

Here, the player’s agency and creativity that the gameplay of *Harvest Moon* highlights become the penumbra of cottagecore aesthetic presented in the open-world game. If we compare this achievement of *Harvest Moon* to a student who takes an exam: the traditional competitive games consist of multiple-choice questions that require singular answers from players to avoid traps and slay monsters; the open-world games suggest that there could be multiple-choice questions that have answers more than one; while the cottagecore elements of *Harvest Moon* ask players to write the question on their own and its answer in an essay format. That is, it exemplifies how politics and aesthetics could fit into everyday lives in a gameplay. In this sense, we can claim that *Harvest Moon* could be regarded as the forefather of cottagecore games and the fusion of cottagecore aesthetic and the political gameplay of open-world genre suggests that gameworlds are also political as they become a space for players to creatively write their own questions and answers.

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24 ASCII, PARITYBIT, LAND HO!: *Derby Stallion (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo: ASCII et al., 1991-2020.

25 WADA, Y.: *Classic Game Postmortem: Harvest Moon*. Paper presented at Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2012 with subtitle Game Design. San Francisco, CA, presented on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2012. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1016368/Classic-Game-Postmortem-Harvest>>.

# Appropriation and Convergence Culture: Modernity of Stardew Valley and Animal Crossing: New Horizons

However, we encounter a problem here, one which every gamer and developer always faces. No gameworld could ever be a perfect imagining of a new world. Every context of a digital game is noncategorical and it is important to note that contexts may create conditions of experience regardless of the game developer's purpose. The player's exploration of the gameworld must be separated from reality by abandoning claims to it and rather taking the world as it seems; yet, experience and appreciation are inseparable and the latter always entails subjective judgments. For example, as cottagecore romanticizes the agricultural life by idealizing the pastoral fantasy, it valorizes the look of a traditional wife. The traditional wife here – thin, well-dressed, and always willing to please her husband – is both an aesthetic and a set of cultural norms. The look of female NPCs in Harvest Moon is not so different from this, and this is not the pastoral impulse to imagine a simple lifestyle, but nostalgic acquiescence which flattens the complexities of the past. In light of how this kind of inevitable problem entailed by the experience of exploring another life that is empirically unreal, but imaginatively real has been dealt with, it is important to notice that there have been two specific divergent trajectories which consumption and production of a digital game have followed since the 1990s and the rise of the cottagecore game in the late 2010s has specifically intensified: (i) digital game appropriation, and (ii) convergence culture.

First, given the low-key reception of the digital game appropriation as a characteristic of fandom, it is worth pointing out that, the transformation of appropriation into a new paradigm for consumption of a digital game has been crucial for the rise of the cottagecore game. Consider how the ways in which gamers enjoy a digital game have varied over the last two decades – such as watching how other gamers play by streaming live on Twitch, creating user-created-contents, including fanarts, modifications, and guides. Such variations of consuming a digital game imply that gameworlds have evolved into a space for players not only to either compete or explore another life but also to appropriate and reproduce. That is, gamers consume digital games by appropriating and reproducing their individual experiences in various ways – such as engaging in cosplays, purchasing goods, and sharing creative and transformative plays online. This indicates that contemporary gamers consume digital games within both gameworlds and the real world. At the same time, we also need to consider the enormous cultural changes for the gaming community brought by the new mode of consumption. By treating appropriation as a mode of consumption, we can suggest that the term 'convergence' could be used to describe the set of practices by which consumers actively engage in production and recreation of content. Although the definition of the term has a dynamic history over the last thirty years, a handful of scholars have deployed it to argue that media content could be made both by producers and by the scores of fans and consumers inhabiting digital networks.<sup>26</sup>

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26 For more information, see: HARTLEY, J.: *Facilitating the Creative Citizen*. Released on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=5036>>. JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY : New York University Press, 2006.

The digital game is an important site for the study of this convergence culture because fans and modders have been significant to the production of novel material. Historically, as D. Kushner observes in *Masters of Doom*,<sup>27</sup> there has been a long history of fan involvement in modding and fans have been making their own creative modifications at least since the days of *Doom*<sup>28</sup>. Whereas the technical accuracy in the 1990s was not always suitable for fans and modders to creatively work, the convergence culture of contemporary gamers who are accustomed to the digital game appropriation which encompasses a set of participatory practices makes the game industry a powerful force for the post-production process. To this end, many contemporary games are designed to incorporate this new mode of consumption as the creative and compositional energies of gamers have become more culturally prominent.

In light of all this, we can suggest that contemporary gamers iterate the spirit of modernity and Marxist sensibilities through the set of practices which the digital game appropriation and convergence culture encompass. To amend K. Marx's dictum, "[a]ll that is solid melts into air" modernity is an orientation of recognizing that everything can melt into air so that it is being a part of the material world in which the making of the new is practical, theoretical, and even ideological.<sup>29</sup> The "ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating" capitalist market hosted socio-political and cultural processes of innovating the old during the early twentieth century, processes that led artists and writers to radically alter tradition if not to break with it completely – industrialization, urbanization, mass movements, demographic changes – and those processes ultimately gave Modernists self-conscious power to experiment and change the world by their own.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary gamers situate the digital game appropriation and convergence culture in the 2020s within this context of modernity. Digital games become the context, and they experiment with forms along with cultural processes of innovating the old conceptions – such as reimagining life, recreating gameworlds, and appropriating their personal experiences. Here, the spirit of modernity makes the new modes of consumption and production of the digital game as political as the gameplay. Dreaming of different and ideal digital worlds, fans and modders of digital games help the gaming community to imagine how they might make the real world a better place. What they choose to modify in the gameworld is a reimagination of the world around them and themselves. Over the last two decades, this political nature of participatory culture which pushed the boundaries of consuming digital game content by making the traditional creative barrier between players and game developers – in other words, consumers and producers-porous was crucial for the ascending visibility of the creative cultural production from all sectors of society.

As a result, we have entered a new age of digital game consumption and production. Gamers do not simply either compete or explore another life within a gameworld but reconstruct it into where they can possibly reimagine the ways in which they could make the real world better. The rise of the cottagecore game in the late 2010s not only exemplifies this new age but also intensifies its cultural trajectories. Although there are numerous cottagecore games released in the late 2010s and the early 2020s resulting from the rise of the cottagecore game – such as *Cozy Grove*<sup>31</sup>, and *Littlewood*<sup>32</sup> – the achievements of *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing* are remarkable for the rise of the genre, and

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27 See also: KUSHNER, D.: *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture*. New York, NY : Random House, 2003.

28 ID SOFTWARE: *Doom*. [digital game]. New York, NY : GT Interactive, 1993.

29 MARX, K: The Communist Manifesto. In BEER, S. H. (ed.): *Marx and Engels the Communist Manifesto*. Norwalk, CT : Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955, p. 13.

30 BERMAN, M.: *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. New York, NY : Penguin Books, 1988, p. 15.

31 SPRY FOX: *Cozy Grove*. [digital game]. Seattle, WA : Spry Fox, 2021.

32 YOUNG, S.: *Littlewood*. [digital game]. Orlando, FL : SmashGames, 2019.

this research features both here as exemplary of this new age. Inspired by Harvest Moon and other predecessors, Stardew Valley has provided more than fifteen million players a chance to build a farm, own a home, raise livestock, wear peasant costumes, fall in love, slay monsters in the local mines, and ultimately reimagine their lives and identities by exploring the romanticized agricultural life in Pelican Town.<sup>33</sup> By combining a farm simulator and an action-adventure RPG into one cute, pixelated package, the game extends the gameplay suggested by Harvest Moon. The player explores the life of a farmer in an idealized countryside; he could either be the busiest man in the town and run a big business to help restoring the local community centre or work with a mega-corporation to turn it into a warehouse. Because of such aesthetic and narrative elements, R. Watts evaluates the game as “the quintessential cottagecore game”.<sup>34</sup> R. Watts’ remarks are valid; however, similar to Harvest Moon, Stardew Valley is not a perfect imagining of a new world. Like cottagecore, Pelican Town, the gameworld of Stardew Valley, is built upon traditions that are unknowingly harmful to certain players. For example, the characters of the game are overwhelmingly white – there are only two black characters in the whole town – and there are no people from other ethnic or racial groups. Encouraging diversity and thoughtful appreciations of politics in gameworlds are not just an escape from capitalism but a way of cultivating a gentler and more egalitarian world for everyone. In this sense, Stardew Valley, as a cottagecore game, faces the same problem which one of its predecessors, Harvest Moon, had two decades before. Here, it is important to notice that Stardew Valley was designed to be a different game from Harvest Moon, when the developer of the game, E. Barone, who is more well-known by his nickname ConcernedApe, developed the game with XNA – which does not use any language but C#. By developing the game with XNA, E. Barone accommodates and encourages the post-production participatory practices of fans and modders who seek to make the gameworld fit their own vision of a better world. As a result, compared to many other games, modding is overwhelmingly common practice among the players of Stardew Valley because it is easy for players who were not used to such participatory practices to get involved in the process of reimagining an ideal digital world. Mods such as *Diverse Stardew Valley* remedy the diversity issue by adding more racial, ethnic, and gender diversity to Pelican Town.<sup>35</sup> Such mods imply that players enjoy the game by not only exploring the romantic fantasy of living off the land and being harmonious with nature but also recreating it into a better world they imaginatively seek.

Similar to Stardew Valley, Animal Crossing: New Horizons has made remarkable achievements which played a significant role in the rise of the cottagecore game. According to the financial data available on Nintendo’s official website, despite its exclusive availability for the Nintendo Switch, Animal Crossing had 38 million copies sold as of March 2022.<sup>36</sup> The game is a life simulator; the player explores the life of a settler who moves into a deserted island which provides not only open space for placing items and decorating but also natural resources that they could collect for the DIY (do it yourself) crafting. By catching bugs, fish, and plants, swimming in the ocean, raising trees and flowers, and communicating with other animal villagers, the player explores the cottagecore fantasy as a settler who lives off the land. Because the game is exclusive to Nintendo Switch,

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33 NUNNELEY-JACKSON, S.: *Stardew Valley Crosses 15 Million Sold as Creator Focuses on New Game*. Released on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2021. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.vg247.com/stardew-valley-15-million-sold>>.

34 WATTS, R.: *How to Turn Your Stardew Valley Farm into a Cottagecore Fantasy*. Released on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2022. [online]. [2022-11-29]. Available at: <<https://www.pcgamer.com/how-to-turn-your-stardew-valley-farm-into-a-cottagecore-fantasy/>>.

35 *Diverse Stardew Valley (DSV) – Seasonal*. Released on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2019. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.moddrop.com/stardew-valley/mods/580603-diverse-stardew-valley-dsv-seasonal>>.

36 *Top Selling Title Sales Units*. Released on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022. [online]. [2022-03-31]. Available at: <<https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/software/index.html>>.

compared to *Stardew Valley* or *Minecraft* which fans and modders have been running rampant with the aesthetic, the game does not have such an easy system for the beginners in modding and other participatory practices. Instead, the game is designed to focus on customization and co-op play that could alter the participatory practice. According to H. Nogami, producer of *Animal Crossing*, fashion, for example, is designed for a specific reason: “it’s completely natural for people to want to dress up, or want to buy new clothing items” to “show off for their friends”.<sup>37</sup> There is a wealth of customization options available for the player – not only fashion and other appearance options of the player’s character, but also terrains and partitioning of the island – and as R. Frushtick lauds this unrestricted creativity that allows for the player to design the island, it makes the gameworld as a “true representation of the player who created it”.<sup>38</sup> As the co-op mode enables to interact with other players, the interaction between different players in the co-op mode substitutes for the social interactions in the real world – such as meetings, trips, as well as talk shows, protests – and the player’s vision of a better world and themselves, to this end, could be not only personal but also interpersonal. For this reason, we can reflect that *Animal Crossing* as a cottagecore game extends the political nature of enjoying the cottagecore game into an interpersonal practice which provided an ‘escape’ for players from the COVID-19 pandemic to the idealized world that allows international social interactions.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion: The Rise of the Cottagecore Game

As this new age witnesses the modernity of the ways in which gamers consume cottagecore games, the creative practices once present only in fan communities in the past will expand to gamers as a whole. It is not hyperbole to say that enjoying a digital game in this age, therefore, has the potential to be called ‘consumption’ in the fashion defined by K. Marx. In today’s digital world, which is filled with online media services, DIY movements, and other user-based content production initiatives, neither competition nor exploration, originated from either the personal value of a player or that of the players’ practices in their communities, could solely define gaming. Consuming digital game content encompasses personal, political, and interpersonal practices. Given new technologies, gamers are all potential creators, appropriators, and modern consumers who imagine how they might make the real world a better place. The textual productivity from such consumers who are technologically empowered allows them to transcend the traditional distinctions associated with access to creative practices. *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing*, and other cottagecore games have intensified this textual productivity of consumers who are important meaning-makers. One might still ask how a player’s imagination could fully represent a better world. However, the process of making a better world is through the imagination

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37 WEBSTER, A.: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ Deserted Island Was Designed to Shake Up the Series*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020. [online]. [2022-03-20]. Available at: <<https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/20/21188006/animal-crossing-new-horizons-design-interview-aya-kyogoku-hisashi-nogami>>.

38 FRUSHTICK, R.: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons Is a Much-Needed Escape from Everything*. Released on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/3/16/21178911/animal-crossing-new-horizons-review-nintendo-switch>>.

39 WEBSTER, A.: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ Deserted Island Was Designed to Shake Up the Series*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020. [online]. [2022-03-20]. Available at: <<https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/20/21188006/animal-crossing-new-horizons-design-interview-aya-kyogoku-hisashi-nogami>>.

of a world that we can think of as better for us all. In this sense, what originated the rise of the cottagecore game is not contemporary gamers' dreams of self-sustainability outside of capitalism. The origin of the rise of the cottagecore game is the revolutionary potential of what people imagine with their modernity and Marxist sensibilities.

U. K. Le Guin argued that "[t]he imagination is an essential tool of the mind, a fundamental way of thinking an indispensable means of becoming and remaining human".<sup>40</sup> Contemporary gamers seek epic meaning in the imagined world and their imagination is a process of becoming and remaining human in the world. The rise of the cottagecore game, and its rationale, formalizes such assumptions about the cultural goods and political value of reimagining a life by exploring another in the gameworld. In this sense, the rise of the cottagecore game is particularly powerful because it exemplifies the modernity of contemporary gamers who are in that process and how they are coming together with the potential to clash against the reductive views of digital games as mere commodities. Fan culture is converging with mass culture and the role of gamers, in other words, consumers, is also converging with creative roles. The intersecting energies here – the cultural and normative influences which have driven the rise of the cottagecore game, modernity and the Marxist sensibilities of contemporary gamers, and gaming as exploring another life – which subsequently contest the traditional cultural attitudes toward gaming in a politically progressive manner, provide an apt context for a quote from S. Miyamoto which exemplifies the nature of consuming a digital game within and outside the gameworld: "players are artists who create their own reality within the game".<sup>41</sup>

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40 LE GUIN, U. K.: *Words Are My Matter: Writings about Life and Books, 2000-2016, with a Journal of a Writer's Week*. Easthampton, MA : Small Beer Press, 2016, p. 4.

41 NARCISSE, E.: *The Mythology of Mario: Q&A With Nintendo's Legendary Shigeru Miyamoto*. Released on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2010. [online]. [2022-11-08]. Available at: <<https://techland.time.com/2010/11/08/shigeru-miyamoto-legendary-nintendo-designer-speaks-on-the-mythology-of-mario/3/>>.

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# The Creative Remediation and Promotional Use of Photographic Modes in Digital Games

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## ABSTRACT:

From photoblogs to mobile phone cameras, digital technology is rapidly and fundamentally changing the cultural practice of photographic representation. Across games and gaming communities, the aesthetics of screenshots and the aesthetics of photographs are increasingly intertwined. The latest photographic modes in digital games mimic real photographs by incorporating controls that are found in physical cameras and allow for great creativity, yet yield some limits and potential issues. The aim of this explorative study is to describe the creative potential of the specific functionality of photo modes in digital games, the intent and development of the tool, promotional uses, and the limits of the emerging art form of virtual photography.

## KEY WORDS:

digital game, photographic mode, remediation, screenshot, virtual photography.

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# Introduction

In general, the process of taking photos has already been integrated into digital games as interactive mechanics where players can encounter it even without an active interest in photography. For example, *Martha is Dead*<sup>1</sup> is a digital game based on photography and the process of making photographs (photo development). In *Life Is Strange*<sup>2</sup>, the players must take photos of the main character, Max Caulfield, at the right times and in the right places. Since the shots are all predetermined, the players have no opportunity to take bad photos, thus Max's images are always technically and compositionally perfect. In *Dead Rising*<sup>3</sup>, The journalist Frank West takes photos to obtain specific rewards – the gorier, scarier, and sexier the photography, the more prestige points it brings. In a sense, Frank is a mercenary with a camera instead of a gun, making this a different type of first-person shooting (FPS) digital game. From a mechanical point of view, firing a gun in an FPS digital game and pressing the shutter of a camera in a 'first-person shutter' digital game are not so different.

A slightly different example of incorporating photographic processes into digital games is related to the genre of simulation digital games, so-called simulators. These digital games simulate various activities, processes, things, and 'life' of human and non-human beings. Often used as secondary educational tools as advised by M. Prensky,<sup>4</sup> simulators are found in various contexts and areas (from healthcare to government) or being directly developed as *serious games*.<sup>5</sup> An example is *Birding Simulator: Bird Photographer*<sup>6</sup>

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1 LKA: *Martha is Dead*. [digital game]. Watford : Wired Productions, 2022.

2 DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT, DECK NINE: *Life Is Strange (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Square Enix, 2015-2022.

3 CAPCOM PRODUCTION STUDIO 1: *Dead Rising*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 2006.

4 PRENSKY, M.: *Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA : Corwin Press, 2010, p. 156.; See also: PRENSKY, M.: *Digital Game-Based Learning*. New York, NY : McGraw Hill, 2001.

5 For more information, see: MICHAEL, D. R., CHEN, S. L.: *Serious Games: Games That Educate, Train, and Inform*. Boston, MA : Thomson Course Technology PTR, 2005.; FELICIA, P., EGENFELD-NIELSEN, S.: *Game-Based Learning: A Review of the State of the Art*. In EGENFELDT-NIELSEN, S., MEYER B., HOLM SØRENSEN, B. (eds.): *Serious Games in Education – a Global Perspective*. Aarhus : Aarhus University Press, 2011, p. 21-45.

6 Remark by the authors: The development of the game is in its final stages. Demo version of the game is already available on the Steam platform.; See: T-BULL: *Birding Simulator: Bird Photographer (demo version)*. [digital game]. Wrocław : T-Bull, 2022.

an in-development 'first-person shutter' and exploration game, offering a wide range of professional photography equipment and observation equipment. Players can swap lenses and binoculars, and set all parameters on virtual cameras that are identical to physical cameras to take pictures of unique and rare bird species in different parts of North America.

The digital age has proliferated the number of skilled photographers primarily through self-phone cameras, and other types of technology. The average person is now fairly confident in their ability to take pictures specifically using a filter app allowing any picture to look professional. Technology is getting better and automating various technical aspects of photography. Despite these technical changes the individual or photographer is still required to frame the picture. They changed the ontology of the image from an indexical understanding of the image to an algorithmic computation, thus changing the syntax of the image as text.<sup>7</sup> The photograph became an algorithmic open-ended image. Across games and gaming communities, the aesthetics of screenshots and the aesthetics of photographs are increasingly intertwined, in many cases making it difficult if not impossible to determine which is a screen shot and which is a photograph.

In-game photography, also known as *virtual photography*, is a new form of media art that consists of taking screenshots of digital game worlds. These screenshots of unique situations that happen while playing the digital game, such as displaying found objects or capturing and sharing visually appealing shots of the landscape that the player encounters while exploring the digital game come from the game's specific functionality of digital game photo modes. These images often perform the same function as photographs in the physical environment: they point to events and happenings, documenting the seen gaze. Recording the virtual world with this technique fulfils the author's intention as photographs in a real environment: they expose the events of a person and document the author's momentary interest and point of view.<sup>8</sup> Photography within digital games presents possibilities and opportunities for representation and expression that are unique to the genre. To this end, the ability to remediate the digital game camera and manipulate a point of view is essential. According to J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin, new media transform older media, retaining some of their features while discarding others. It is "the formal logic by which new media transform earlier media forms".<sup>9</sup> The tool gives players creative control over composition and subject matter, and thus allows the photographer to make creative choices in the work. This is significant because it allows players to create original works even within existing works that do not appear in other media (Picture 1). This remediation of photography is found both in technical and cultural fashion within the digital game. Historically conventions and entire narratives related to the camera have played a role in some digital game genres, but increasingly a more literal transposition of photography is coming into play.

The aim of this explorative study is to describe the creative potential of the specific functionality of photo modes in digital games, the intent and development of the tool, promotional uses, and the limits of the emerging art form of virtual photography. As more gamers explore the photo mode to create stunning photography this will become more closely defined. There is a potential for digital game photography to even become its own genre. There are many reasons why the photo mode has captivated players. Primarily it allows gamers to see the game world in a brand-new way and provide the opportunity to take a closer look at the surroundings created for the game. These two factors allow gamers to appreciate games in a way that has never been done before. This is one step to

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7 LÁB, F.: *Postdigitální fotografie*. Prague : Karolinum, 2021, p. 19.

8 POREMBA, C.: Point and Shoot, Remediating Photography in Gamespace. In *Games and Culture*, 2007, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 50.

9 BOLTER, J. D., GRUSIN, R.: *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2000, p. 273.

promote brands using images in brand promotion which has arguably become one of the most valuable assets. This can create images specific to a digital game product allowing user generated content as well as SCO techniques to promote these digital games in a unique and relevant manner.



Picture 1: Virtual photography from the game Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Source: the screenshot taken by Ł. P. Wojciechowski in the digital game: NINJA THEORY: Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. [digital game]. Cambridge : Ninja Theory, 2017.

## Creative Potential of Virtual Photography

Like many other creative arts, virtual photography often starts as an amateur hobby. Like other non-committal creative pursuits, photography can become an immersive activity that sparks passion in people and can lead to more serious semi-professional and even professional work. Virtual photography evokes the same passion and can lead to more serious pursuits. Virtual photographers are most often a group of gamers who do not work directly in digital game development but are a group of enthusiasts who present their impressions of the digital game through the virtual art of the digital game, as well as visual interpretations through their own digital art. Virtual photographers often draw on the compositional principles of traditional photography, painting and illustration, and graphic design, and use a variety of tools to achieve their artistic goals. Professional 'screenshotter' P. Levälähti (using the nickname Berdu) says: "(Like any hobby) it's fun, it's something you can better at, and it has a community around it. Of course, there are personal goals and demons – chasing the high of getting a good shot and rarely being happy with the results".<sup>10</sup>

The work of the virtual photographer relies on the work of others, yet ultimately provides a unique interpretation of that creative work. The creation of the shots is an expression of gratitude to all the artists who have participated in the creation of these virtual

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10 QUILLFELDT, T.: *Virtual Photographers Prove That Video Games Are Art*. Released on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021. [online]. [2022-05-15]. Available at: <<https://www.lacedrecords.co/blogs/news/virtual-photographers-prove-that-video-games-are-art>>.

worlds. Virtual photographers explore deep into corners with a photographic gaze that reveals images that remain unrevealed in the digital game's predicted storyline or ignored after focusing on the main 'dictated' plot. These places catch the eye, and the virtual photographers take a very sensitive and detailed approach to the shots they want to catch (the repetitive backtracking to the point of interest of the shot is no exception). They concentrate on capturing exactly the right direction of gaze and facial expression to convey the atmosphere of the environment, but most importantly the emotions that the character carries with them within their role. In some cases, however, it is necessary to find a rare Shutterbug moment (like brief moments during ghost attacks; in the *Fatal Frame*<sup>11</sup> series, where cameras are not tools, but weapons used to fight the lost spirits). These moments are fleeting and hard to find, but they are crucial.

The latest photographic modes mimic real photographs by incorporating controls that are found in physical cameras. Features such as focal length, aperture, exposure, and colour grading allow photographers to use many of the same techniques and principles as in the real world when composing images in-game. These tools provide more room to be creative. C. Taljaard (nicknamed CHRISinSESSION), a virtual photographer, finds "having more control of things like tilt control and in-game weather is what pulled me towards virtual photography in the first place. The more control, the more creative freedom you have to express yourself".<sup>12</sup> Some digital games like *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales*<sup>13</sup> and *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*<sup>14</sup>, as part of a photography mode through the substitution of locating and tilting simple light sources, are moving towards more control over lighting, for example by adding customizable spotlights. This can also be through adjusting basic colour grading in *Days Gone*<sup>15</sup>, controlling the pose, grimace, and positioning of a character in *Cyberpunk 2077*<sup>16</sup>, or as in *God of War*<sup>17</sup> adding a smile to a character displaying permanent anger. Other examples come from *Ghost of Tsushima*<sup>18</sup>, where gamers can control aesthetic elements of the environment, or in *The Last of Us Part II*<sup>19</sup>, which has tools supporting the creation of a motion blur effect. These elements, which may vary from digital game to game, represent a unique component of the mode. There are various YouTubers who lecture and explain the rules of photography that also apply to physical photography, by using examples such as these.

In real photography, there is a concept developed by the photographer considered to be the founder of modern photojournalism, H. Cartier-Bresson, called the 'decisive moment' (*un moment décisif*).<sup>20</sup> It is the critical moment when everything is in place and the split second before and the split second after are not the same. This moment forms

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11 KOEI TECMO. GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE, NINTENDO SOFTWARE PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT: *Fatal Frame (series)*. [digital game]. Yokohama : Koei Tecmo et al., 2001-2014.

12 QUILLFELDT, T.: *Virtual Photographers Prove That Video Games Are Art*. Released on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021. [online]. [2022-05-15]. Available at: <<https://www.lacedrecords.co/blogs/news/virtual-photographers-prove-that-video-games-are-art>>.

13 INSOMNIAC GAMES: *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020.

14 RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT: *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : Electronic Arts, 2019.

15 BEND STUDIO: *Days Gone*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.

16 CD PROJECT RED: *Cyberpunk 2077*. [digital game]. Warsaw : CD Project, 2020.

17 SANTA MONICA STUDIO: *God of War*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.

18 SUCKER PUNCH PRODUCTIONS: *Ghost of Tsushima*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020.

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

20 Remark by the authors: It is based on the 17th-century idea of the cleric and memoirist Cardinal de Retz: „There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment [...] and the masterpiece of good ruling is to know and seize this moment".; See: O'HAGAN, S.: *Cartier-Bresson's Classic Is Back – but His Decisive Moment Has Passed*. Released on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2014. [online]. [2022-05-20]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/dec/23/henri-cartier-bresson-the-decisive-moment-reissued-photography>>.

the demarcation line and shapes the difference in whether the shot makes an impression. Pressing the shutter of a camera and firing a gun in a digital game are not so different mechanically, as S. Sontag pointed out, “[t]o photograph people is to rape them by seeing them as they are never seen, to make them into objects that can be symbolically appropriated. Just as the camera is a sublimation of a weapon, to photograph someone is a kind of subliminal murder – a gentle murder, fitting for a sad and frightening time”.<sup>21</sup> According to E. Frankel, visual art editor of Time Out, an artwork’s ability to reflect the human condition comes down to what idea it expresses and how it is expressed, “[i]t doesn’t matter if a work of art is a photo taken in a digital game or an actual turd in a tin can [as in a famous 1961 work by Italian artist Piero Manzoni], what matters is what the work is saying”.<sup>22</sup>

## Intent and Expansion of Photo Mode Development

While the primary component in digital games is the narrative and specific gameplay roles, developers have capitalized on photo modes as a novel way to attract new players. Originally created to allow players to pause the game at any point (sometimes except for so-called cut scenes, short scenes that are not playable but develop the story) and immediately explore the environment, photo modes have evolved. Virtual photography increasingly resembles real-world photography but comes with the huge advantage of being able to visit places one could never visit in real life. As S. Sontag suggests, photography constructs people as tourists in other people’s realities (and in their own realities), and virtual realities are fast becoming as legitimate as the corporeal world as sites of photographic voyeurism. If traditional photography allows us to reify our physical world in this sense, the same process extends to these gamer images.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in the designed space of the digital game, these images can to some extent, transfer the power to construct reality from the creator of the virtual world to the player, allowing the player to capture and reframe the experience.

In recent years, a proliferation of major digital game releases offering photo modes has led to economic and cultural phenomena. Economically speaking, photo modes have created various new employment opportunities. New positions in a variety of gaming companies and virtual communication companies are easy to find, with positions titles such as Game Capture Artist with an average salary from 70,000 to 100,000 USD. Furthermore, as with many other creative arts, virtual photography is showcased at various museums such as the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland, beginning in 2016. At that time, artists approached screenshots much as they would in the real world. This led to more experimentation “with photos that would have been impossible to take in real life or that drew attention to the simulated nature of the virtual world (glitches in the graphics, weird geometry, images of places the player wasn’t supposed to see...)”.<sup>24</sup> Today, localized art exhibits showing pieces that span the boundaries between virtuality and reality are

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21 SONTAG, S.: *On Photography*. New York, NY : Rosetta Books LLC, 2005, p. 10.

22 HOBBS, T.: *Are These Stunning Photos of Imaginary Worlds a New Artform?*. Released on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2021. [online]. [2022-06-17]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210521-are-these-stunning-photos-of-imaginary-worlds-a-new-artform>>.

23 For more information, see: SONTAG, S.: *On Photography*. New York, NY : Rosetta Books LLC, 2005.

24 DASSA, N.: *The Imaginary Worlds of In-Game Photography*. Released on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2022. [online]. [2022-06-18]. Available at: <<https://www.blind-magazine.com/stories/the-imaginary-worlds-of-in-game-photography/>>.

commonplace, as with L. Sang, who has held exhibitions in Spain, London, and Los Angeles. Thus, the photo mode in digital games provides a new art form that resembles real-life photographs in a variety of ways.

Additionally, while digital games have created a strong sense of cultural identity due to the space for people to share their own experiences, learn from each other, and make friends, photo modes have elevated that identity. Nowadays, artistic digital-game photography communities can be found across the internet such as the Instagram community *GamerGram*, which allows players to share their screenshots. There are also numerous dedicated virtual photography hashtags, online magazines, aggregators on social media platforms, as well as apps such as *Captis*. Therefore, the emerging art form has created and enhanced a sense of community globally.

## Promotional Use

Overall, developers are seemingly comfortable with these creative activities of the players, as the resulting images and user-generated content serve to accentuate the visual artistry. It is also free and to some extent an example of viral marketing. From a marketing perspective, the potential of user-generated content benefits almost any field but is especially true in the case of a medium as visually dependent as gaming. Allowing the ability for players to capture moments onscreen through photo mode and share them across their personal channels is a cost-efficient method of promotion. Developers promote the images to receive free exposure to their digital games on social media and the web for a variety of tangible benefits.

One benefit resulting from sharing virtual art is that it can draw consumers in who may not have an interest in gaming but may recognize the creative aspect of photo mode. To this point, Guerrilla Games, Santa Monica Studio, and Sony XDev collaborated with virtual artists to establish the *Annual Virtual Photography Awards* in 2020. A panel of judges consisting of digital game photographers, still photographers, and digital game industry professionals determines winners based on artistic merit, technical ability, and interpretation of the yearly theme. Another example is Sony, which created a “share of the week” where virtual photographers take part in weekly themes in games that correspond to that week’s theme and have the best shots promoted at PlayStation.Blog, as well as on Sony Instagram and Twitter. Other promotional events are executed through individual games. A National contest such as the *Days Gone Photo Mode Contest*, by Bend Studio (a developer for Sony PlayStation), is an example. Other tangible benefits to sharing photos are economic, such as the increased likeliness for players to pay longer and pay for skins or other downloadable content (DLC). Additionally, technical advances are displayed which can be a differential when it comes to pitching future projects.

Photo mode also opens new lines of communication between developers and consumers. As an example, Guerrilla Games, through consumer social media account monitoring, found that fans had noticed a glitch regarding how the protagonist’s hand in *Horizon Zero Dawn*<sup>25</sup> was positioned in a scene. Guerrilla Games fixed the glitch and was able to promote both the fix and the art to their benefit. Based on these examples, the promotional use of virtual art stemming from the use of photo mode in a variety of digital games currently assists developers in their marketing efforts.

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25 GUERRILLA GAMES: *Horizon Zero Dawn*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2017.

# Limits

In some cases, the addition of photo mode tools has been curtailed to avoid a potentially negative image because of bad publicity. In *Cyberpunk 2077* a quest within the storyline contains religious aspects and a man is crucified alive. The authors wanted to save the creation of blasphemous memes with the heroine 'V' under the cross but knew it would be controversial. Therefore, the creators blocked the possibility of using photo mode in advance. In the same digital game, after turning on photo mode, no children are near the main character, and players are unable to photograph them. This was done to stop the reappropriation of the material and to avoid a potential backlash regarding negative publicity.

One potential future limitation concerns the idea of copyright. While we have shown that the developers are generally accommodating towards the art stemming from their games, even using it to promote their products because it is economically advantageous, that may change. Copyright is an issue that neither digital game developers nor various courts have strictly determined to date. In the United States, for example, digital game images are copyrighted by the developer. Although the end user controls the digital game and action, the developer owns the images. If the image is transformed into something entirely new, 'fair use' laws may apply. However, if a commercial gain is expected, fair use does not apply. Unlike a photograph, where the picture is of a real object and the new manifestation of it is created through an individual's creativity, virtual photography saves an image that was already rendered by software using proprietary and copyrighted elements. While virtual photographers may argue that the photo is a new creative angle from the digital game content, this argument has not been tested in the courts. The developer Capcom sought to address this in *Resident Evil Village*<sup>26</sup>. While the digital game incorporates photo mode, the virtual photograph is branded with a 'copyright belongs to Capcom' stamp. Currently, many major digital games do add this limitation, but a major studio like Capcom doing this raises the visibility of the potential copyright issue and highlights the key difference between traditional and virtual photography. To conclude, while gaming developers and corporations currently see sharing of the virtual art from photo modes in digital games as a benefit, the issue of copyright may need to be adjudicated in the future.

## Conclusion

Photography modes have made virtual photography an emerging art form. The latest photographic modes mimic real photographs well by incorporating controls that are found in physical cameras and allow recognized techniques when screenshotting in digital games. Such tools provide users with artistic control and creative possibilities. The proliferation of digital games with the photo mode tool has led to cultural and economic phenomena. While developers may have originally intended photo modes as a new way to get players to share screenshots of the digital game on social media (and get it trending) the practice has led to the birth of a truly new art form. Using the aesthetic means of digital technology, this art form has led to the creation of promotional sites that, among other things, serve as a form of participatory marketing of a particular

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26 CAPCOM: *Resident Evil Village*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 2021.

digital game when communicating in the mass media space, as it shows the visual spirit of the digital game (parallel with other presentations of the digital game, such as trailers). This hobby generates a community with common interests, which in turn creates a background for competitiveness even with rewards in the field of virtual art. It establishes and presents games at an art level; it can turn general public opinion away from reducing digital games to uncreative and useless pastimes. Therefore, this photo mode (as opposed to the camera as part of the game mechanics and story element, which is embedded in the game itself but usually does not represent a pure artistic focus) can serve as one of the tools in the practical teaching of photographic skills (included competitions), but also as a form of media that creates social relations and dialogue. These photo modes lead to screenshots that can convey what the player will see in the game. They allow pictures to fully convey what the player will see in the game providing expectation and excitement for potential players.

Future studies investigating the online communities of virtual art through an anthropological lens may lead to a deeper understanding of the humanistic component of digital games, and virtual art specifically. Additionally, a study linking the sharing of visual art to gameplay could be done to determine if and how much longer digital games with photo mode are played would lend additional information to this trend. Lastly, understating quantitatively the tangible economic benefits of sharing photos relating to DLC could be a future line of research, and provide a deeper picture of the new art form of virtual art.

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# Why Do We Play Digital Games? Anthropological-philosophical- pedagogical Aspects

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## ABSTRACT:

This study focuses on aspects of media pedagogy and philosophical anthropology in digital games and seeks to answer the question as to why we play digital games. Digital play is viewed as an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon according to I. Kant's Analytic of the Beautiful and is interpreted, analysed, and compared with the anthropological dimension of play. According to I. Kant, the main element of beauty is disinterested liking. Digital games have been observed in such a judgment of taste. We will observe the phenomenon of play based on I. Kant's understanding of the aesthetic concept of play and C. Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology. The paper presents the phenomenon of play from the aspect of aesthetic pedagogy, but also asks why we like games and what is aesthetic in them that causes pleasure. The aim of this study is to analyse the phenomenon of games from the context of digital games and to show how different anthropological, philosophical, and pedagogical aspects mutually complement and intertwine. The research question of why we play digital games opens the possibility for new reflections and understandings of the world of games, the concept of beauty and the meaning of games for humans. The complexity and multidimensionality of the game phenomenon is also observed according to E. Morin's aesthetics in which the artistic and aesthetic dimension of digital play is discussed. The concept of play is philosophically relevant, and through the study we approach J. Huizinga's aspect of the seriousness of culture and E. Fink's play of the world. In the aspects of social life such as metaphors and imagination, play imposes itself as communication. The true character of the game is manifested in the self-pleasure of relieving the individual, but also in the imagination and beauty that the game provides. The game, as such, represents an aesthetic attitude towards life and it is at its core an imitation in the space of the imaginary.

## KEY WORDS:

digital game, game aesthetics, game structure, game world, media pedagogy.

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# Introduction

Digital games are often associated with entertainment, leisure, youth, and subculture. But they are much more than just fun, free time and stereotypes about introverted individuals who spend hours and days in dark rooms with headphones. Digital games are studied from an interdisciplinary aspect: anthropology,<sup>1</sup> philosophy,<sup>2</sup> theology,<sup>3</sup> psychology,<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 PFEILSTETTER, R.: Gamifying Anthropological Theory Teaching. Critique, Learning and the Video Game Civilization. In *Disparidades. Revista de Antropología*, 2020, Vol. 75, No. 2, p. 5. [online]. [2022-11-03]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.3989/dra.2020.016>>; GOLUB, A.: The Anthropology of Virtual Worlds: World of Warcraft. In *Reviews in Anthropology*, 2014, Vol. 43, No. 2, p. 142.; MALABY, T. M.: Digital Gaming, Game Design and Its Precursors. In HORST, H. A., MILLER, D. (eds.): *Digital Anthropology*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. London : Routledge, 2012, p. 302.
  - 2 KŁOSIŃSKI, M.: Games and Utopia. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 12.
  - 3 DE WILDT, L., AUPERS, S.: Playing the Other: Role-Playing Religion in Videogames. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2018, Vol. 22, No. 5-6, p. 869-871.
  - 4 HODENT, C.: *The Gamer's Brain: How Neuroscience and UX Can Impact Video Game Design*. London : CRC Press, 2018, p. 9-12.; CONTRERAS-ESPINOSA, R. S., SERRA, A., TERRÓN, J. L.: Games and ADHD-ADD: A Systematic Mapping Study. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 23.; HODENT, C.: *The Psychology of Video Games*. London : Routledge, 2020, p. 7-19.

sociology,<sup>5</sup> marketing,<sup>6</sup> pedagogy,<sup>7</sup> semiotics,<sup>8</sup> and the impact of play on health.<sup>9</sup> There are doctoral dissertations, proceedings, books, and scientific journals on digital games. All of this points to the fact that the games are, despite of their fun role, serious.

However, digital games are also a cultural phenomenon of modern society. The very idea of humanity is expressed in the urge to play. The concept of play is anthropologically important. In fact, the concept of game is crucial because the idea of human existence is expressed in the game. The virtual and the actual are not blurring, nor do they pull apart from one another.<sup>10</sup> The game is older than culture.<sup>11</sup> The game is based on showing reality in images, shapes and meaning. The lived moments are transformed into art forms. From this aspect, we understand digital games as a culture. The connection between the digital game and culture is understood as a higher form of the game.<sup>12</sup>

The connection between digital games and culture is understood as a higher form of game. According to J. Huizinga,<sup>13</sup> game is a free act. If it comes from pleasure, it becomes a need. According to T. Eagleton,<sup>14</sup> we can see the game as the culture of life, where the game is a factor of culture.<sup>15</sup> One of the biggest problems with the phenomenon of digital games stems from a misperception of understanding games. Digital games are primarily considered a medium for recreation and entertainment, and it takes time for such a perception to change and to start viewing digital games as a form of art.<sup>16</sup> Of course, not all digital games are art, but some characteristics, such as aesthetic pleasure, recognizable style, emotion, and intellectual challenge<sup>17</sup> make digital games works of art.

In this sense, certain digital games such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*<sup>18</sup>, *A Plague Tale: Innocence*<sup>19</sup> and *Heavy Rain*<sup>20</sup> have elements of art. Game studies can also be understood as a way of understanding the common values of gaming culture, or culture in a broader

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- 5 MURIEL, D., CRAWFORD, G.: *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*. London : Routledge, 2018, p. 62-73.; SHAW, A.: What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies. In *Games and Culture*, 2010, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 414-416.
  - 6 BANYTE, J., GADEIKIENE, A.: The Effect of Consumer Motivation to Play Games on Video Game-playing Engagement. In *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 2015, Vol. 26, No. 8, p. 507.; MAGO, Z.: The Concept of Timelessness Applied to Advergimes. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 30.; JUKIĆ, D.: To Brand or Not to Brand: The Perception of Brand Image in the Digital Games Industry. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 27.
  - 7 MIŠKOV, J.: Motivation with Game Elements in Education Mediated by E-Learning Resources. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 28-30.
  - 8 PEOVIĆ VUKOVIĆ, K.: *Medij i kultura: ideologija medija nakon decentralizacije*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2012, p. 187.; JUKIĆ, D.: Marketing Semiotics in Digital Games: Myth's Analysis in *The Walking Dead* and *Heavy Rain*. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 15.
  - 9 CLARK, N., SCOTT, P. S.: *Game Addiction: The Experience and the Effect*. Jefferson, SC : McFarland Company, 2009, p. 91-115.; GRANIC, I., LOBEL, A., ENGELS, R.: The Benefits of Playing Video Games. In *American Psychologist*, 2014, Vol. 69, No. 1, p. 71-73.; GRIFFITHS, M. D.: Does Internet and Computer "Addiction" Exist? Some Case Study Evidence. In *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2000, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 216-217.; CHAK, K., LEUNG, L.: Shyness and Locus of Control as Predictors of Internet Addiction and Internet Use. In *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2004, Vol. 7, No. 5, p. 562-567.; BARANOWSKI, T. et al.: Playing for Real: Video Games and Stories for Health-related Behaviour Change. In *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 2008, Vol. 34, No. 1, p. 74-76.
  - 10 BOELLSTORFF, T.: Rethinking Digital Anthropology. In HORST, H. A., MILLER, D. (eds.): *Digital Anthropology*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. London : Routledge, 2012, p. 56.
  - 11 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 9.
  - 12 JUKIĆ, D.: Digital Game as an Artistic Mimesis and a Cult Brand. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J., PROSTINÁKOVÁ HOSSOVÁ, M., SOLÍK, M. (eds.): *Megatrends and Media: Home Officetainment*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2021, p. 537.
  - 13 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 14.
  - 14 EAGLETON, T.: *The Idea of Culture*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 41-46.
  - 15 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 10.
  - 16 JUKIĆ, D.: Digital Game as an Artistic Mimesis and a Cult Brand. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J., PROSTINÁKOVÁ HOSSOVÁ, M., SOLÍK, M. (eds.): *Megatrends and Media: Home Officetainment*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2021, p. 533-534.
  - 17 DUTTON, D.: *The Art Instinct Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. London : Bloomsbury Press, 2009, p. 58.
  - 18 CD PROJEKT RED: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. [digital game]. Warsaw : CD Projekt, 2015.
  - 19 QUANTIC DREAM: *Heavy Rain*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010.
  - 20 ASOBO STUDIO: *A Plague Tale: Innocence*. [digital game]. Paris : Focus Home Interactive, 2019.

sense.<sup>21</sup> It is precisely this broader sense of culture and art that allows us to understand games as a higher form of cultural studies.<sup>22</sup> In fact, game studies are a broader form of cultural studies that implies an interdisciplinary approach. The topic of this study will try to answer the questions that are always in the subtext of play and culture. Anthropological, philosophical, and cultural research into the origins of the game will provide us with a better insight into understanding the culture of the game. The value of these research and cultural theories will come from understanding the socio-cultural-anthropological origins of the game. Culture is reflected in the digital game because it represents, not only the game *per se*, but also the world in which we live. This means that media reality is reflected in the reality in which we live, and digital play is one of the forms of that reality. The media brings users into relationships with reality.

Why do we play digital games? This is an issue faced by gamers in their environment as much as scholars in society. If we answer that we play digital games because we like them, then the question arises, why do we like them. What is aesthetic about them that evokes pleasure, liking and satisfaction? Do games have an educational component? To play or not to play? It is also a paradox of postmodern society. Games for adults and games for children are essentially the same. Adults play games for children and children play games for adults. They look at each other, but do not see each other.

## Research Methodology

The paper applies a qualitative analytical-synthetic method,<sup>23</sup> aiming to break down the phenomena into their segments. The qualitative analytical-synthetic method breaks down social phenomena (digital game and game phenomenon) into segments (anthropological, philosophical, and pedagogical aspects). The understanding of such an analysis starts from the procedure according to which the analysis of the meaning of a certain phenomenon (game and playing) is used to deepen the understanding of a new meaning. In this way, we create a hermeneutic spiral<sup>24</sup> of causal relationships of meaning and sense of the observed phenomena (digital games) which we further interpret. In this study the authors apply two research approaches simultaneously: the critical realist method and the phenomenological method.<sup>25</sup> Such an interpretation of a phenomenological analysis<sup>26</sup> has its initial description related to a broader cultural, philosophical, and anthropological context.

The paper also applies the method of narratology, F. Schiller's aesthetic of education,<sup>27</sup> I. Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful (Analytik des Schönen)*,<sup>28</sup> and the theory of play according to J. Huizinga.<sup>29</sup> The paper also applies the method of E. Morin's aesthetics<sup>30</sup> and

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21 EAGLETON, T.: *The Idea of Culture*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 50-56.

22 NIEBORG, D. B., HERMES, J.: What Is Game Studies Anyway?. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2008, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 134.

23 WILLIG, C.: *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Maidenhead : Open University Press, 2013, p. 101-109.; HALMI, A.: *Strategije kvalitativnih istraživanja u primijenjenim društvenim znanostima*. Jastrebarsko : Naklada Slap, 2005, p. 27.; COHEN, L., MANION, L., MORRISON, K.: *Research Methods in Education*. London : Routledge, 2000, p. 17-23.

24 HALMI, A.: *Strategije kvalitativnih istraživanja u primijenjenim društvenim znanostima*. Jastrebarsko : Naklada Slap, 2005, p. 24.

25 WILLIG, C.: *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Maidenhead : Open University Press, 2013, p. 48-50.

26 LARKIN, M., WATTS, S., CLIFTON, E.: Giving Voice and Making Sense in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2006, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 105.

27 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 150-162.

28 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 85-118.

29 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 9-30.

30 MORIN, E.: *O estetici*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 15-24.

C. Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology theory.<sup>31</sup> The first ambition of structural anthropology is to achieve objectivity<sup>32</sup> because we will analyse mental categories, oppositions, and contradictions. The second ambition is the analysis of totality,<sup>33</sup> i.e., we will look at the social, cultural, pedagogical, and philosophical phenomenon of the game as a system, all aspects of which are connected. In other words, we will make a deconstructive analysis of the game phenomenon.

The study uses the deconstruction method as a structure of thought<sup>34</sup> that results from understanding the text. The deconstruction method starts from the hypothesis that the rules are found within the text whose elements are unique, and by parsing, interpreting, and analysing we create a method as a structure of thought<sup>35</sup> of a certain phenomenon. In this sense, the deconstruction method includes critical reading and writing to interweave unnoticed implications, to present and understand the subject of research more deeply, and to produce their relationship as a new structure of meaning. Specifically, the deconstruction analysis in this study refers to the phenomenon of game, playing and their interdisciplinary connection, which will answer the research question of why we play digital games. In this study, we looked at the concept of play through two categories: a) play as a subject and b) play as a predicate. Play as a subject refers to play as a carrier of culture<sup>36</sup>, play as the world we live in<sup>37</sup> and play as life.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, we can see play as education and play as a way of life. Play as a predicate represents playing, having fun, enjoying, escaping from reality and the act of existence. It defines a person's behaviour, and the game as a subject defines a person.

This paper aims to research, present, deconstruct and analyse why we play digital games from philosophical and anthropological contexts. In this paper, we start from the concept of gaming and game from the aspect of aesthetics and education. We then connect I. Kant's Analytic of the Beautiful to analyse the game from a philosophical aspect. With such an understanding of the game, we analyse two key issues. The first question stems from the need to play, and the second from understanding that need. The judgment of taste that expresses beauty consists of four moments: according to quality, quantity, relation, and modality. Simply put, I. Kant claims that a beautiful form is one that causes liking, a form without interest,<sup>39</sup> that is without content.

In this context, we will analyse the judgment of such beauty based on three digital games: *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*<sup>40</sup>, *Horizon Zero Dawn*<sup>41</sup>, and *Detroit: Become Human*<sup>42</sup>. Judgment of taste starts exclusively from the form, so we analyse three female characters that will be used as the subject of Analytic of the Beautiful. The characters were chosen

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31 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija*. Zagreb : Stvarnost, 1977, p. 41-63.; LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 72-75.; LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija 2*. Zagreb : Školska knjiga, 1988, p. 103-115.; LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Antropologija i moderni svijet*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2013, p. 13-27.

32 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Antropologija i moderni svijet*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2013, p. 23.

33 Ibidem, p. 24.

34 ROMČEVIĆ, B.: Metodološki profil dekonstrukcije. In *Filozofska istraživanja*, 2018, Vol. 15, No. 38, p. 627.; ANDRIĆ PETERNAI, K.: Znak, značenje i vlastito ime: kontroverzna mjesta u Derridaovom diskurzu. In *Filozofska istraživanja*, 2009, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 526.; CULLER, J.: *O dekonstrukciji: teorija i kritika poslije strukturalizma*. Zagreb : Globus, 1991, p. 163.; DERRIDA, J.: *O gramatologiji*. Sarajevo : Veselin Masleša, 1976, p. 137-184.

35 ROMČEVIĆ, B.: Metodološki profil dekonstrukcije. In *Filozofska istraživanja*, 2018, Vol. 15, No. 38, p. 630.

36 EAGLETON, T.: *The Idea of Culture*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 50-54.; EAGLETON, T.: *Culture*. London : Yale University Press, 2016, p. 15-18.

37 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 74-79.

38 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 9-17.

39 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 86.

40 EIDOS-MONTRÉAL: *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*. [digital game]. London : Square Enix Europe, 2018.

41 GUERRILLA GAMES: *Horizon Zero Dawn*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2017.

42 QUANTIC DREAM: *Detroit: Become Human*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.

according to hair colour<sup>43</sup>: black hair (Lara), redhead (Aloy) and blonde (Chloe). The characters were chosen only to confirm the philosophical judgment of beauty. According to I. Kant, a beautiful form is liked without interest,<sup>44</sup> it is a form of perfection, and it makes an object beautiful.

The context in which we question play starts from the understanding of play as an anthropological given in which we present play as a carrier of culture, play in the broadest sense of the word in which it is understood as the beginning of culture and civilization, but also play as a ritual, *credo*, and way of life. In the pedagogical sense, we understand play as a model of educational values and a form of media pedagogy that educates and promotes aesthetic and moral values. Finally, play is viewed from a philosophical aspect in the context of the notion of beauty and image. The context of the idea of beauty results from the observation of pure form,<sup>45</sup> and the context of the image<sup>46</sup> refers to the observation of the content.

The research questions are: What makes a digital game beautiful? What does an aesthetic feeling consist of? Why do we like digital games? Why do we love digital games? And the most important question: Why do we play digital games?

## Why so Serious?

The primary purpose of digital games was entertainment. In addition to providing a break from everyday life and representing the aesthetic pleasure of i.e., *flow*,<sup>47</sup> digital games are highly stimulating and attract attention. An additional attraction of digital games stems from their structure in which players control the situation and the speed of progress. From a psychological point of view, digital games have a clear structure, clear rules, and include tasks that players solve, thus enabling the experience of success and motivating them to continue playing. Success is always followed by a reward, such as moving to a higher level, unlocking a trophy or a new ability. At the same time, most digital games offer the option to play again, so players gradually practice harder levels. Some digital games take the replay option very seriously, so the complete style of the game is based on reaching a harder level with frequent replays, as is the case in the *Dark Souls*<sup>48</sup> series and *Bloodborne*<sup>49</sup> games.

The appeal of digital games is enhanced using realistic images and sounds, precise locations and geographical positions, historical events, real brands and celebrities from sports, society, music, or literature. As an example, let us mention realistic sounds from the digital game *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*<sup>50</sup>, *Far Cry 6*<sup>51</sup> or *Mafia III*<sup>52</sup>, or realistic images from *Red Dead Redemption 2*<sup>53</sup>, *Uncharted 4*<sup>54</sup>, *God of War*<sup>55</sup> and

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43 HINNEY, P. R.: The Role of Hair Color in the Perception of Attractiveness. In *Modern Psychological Studies*, 1992, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 35.; JANIF, Z. J., BROOKS, R. C., DIXSON, B. J.: Are Preferences for Women's Hair Color Frequency-Dependent?. In *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology*, 2015, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 60.

44 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći suđenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 92.

45 Ibidem, p. 91.

46 FLUSSER, V.: *Filozofija fotografije*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2007, p. 21.

47 MIŠKOV, J.: Motivation with Game Elements in Education Mediated by E-Learning Resources. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 30.

48 FROMSOFTWARE: *Dark Souls (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2011-2016.

49 FROMSOFTWARE: *Bloodborne*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2015.

50 INFINITY WARD: *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. [digital game]. Santa Monica, CA : Activision, 2007.

51 UBISOFT TORONTO: *Far Cry 6*. [digital game]. Saint-Mandé : Ubisoft, 2021.

52 HANGAR 13: *Mafia III (Playstation 4 version)*. [digital game]. Novato, CA : 2K Games, 2016.

53 ROCKSTAR STUDIOS: *Red Dead Redemption 2*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 2018.

54 NAUGHTY DOG: *Uncharted 4*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2016.

55 SANTA MONICA STUDIO: *God of War*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.

*Ghost of Tsushima*.<sup>56</sup> It is obvious that realistic sounds, as well as real music albums and the hyperrealism of the Wild West landscape, Nordic mythology or Tsushima Island further enhance the game's appeal. Also, the Assassin's Creed series very faithfully shows a combination of famous locations and historic buildings, such as Notre-Dame Cathedral in *Assassin's Creed Unity*,<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Tower (Big Ben) in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*<sup>58</sup> or Basilica di San Pietro in *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*.<sup>59</sup> The same goes for brands that appear in digital games, especially those associated with the automotive industry and athletes, such as *Need for Speed Payback*,<sup>60</sup> *EA Sports UFC 4*<sup>61</sup> and *FIFA 22*.<sup>62</sup>

Realism creates space for learning. Such informal learning, but also the model of tangential learning, opens the possibility of educating players. Pupils learn through digital games on various levels:<sup>63</sup> such as game mechanics, in-game narration, group play, and tangential learning. The game mechanics of the digital game itself are suitable for learning the laws of physics, geometric skills, and developing mathematical skills. Learning through game<sup>64</sup> narration is a key element in digital games because it creates an environment with which the learner identifies.<sup>65</sup> Learning in the context of a cooperative game implies a social aspect of playing that encourages the development of communication skills, culture, togetherness, and mutual respect. And finally, tangential learning implies self-learning of certain topics that have interested educatees and because of which they enrich their knowledge by exploring other sources.

From all the above we can conclude that digital games can be a valuable and useful tool for teaching and function as a motivator. Motives for playing digital games can be classified into three components:<sup>66</sup> achievement, social, and immersion components. Each component consists of three categories, i.e., achievement component includes advancement, mechanics, and competition. The social component includes socializing, relationship, and teamwork. Finally, the immersion component consists of discovery, role-playing, and customization. The listed components refer to RPG and MMORPG. However, from the analysis of the mentioned gaming motives we can abstract the fun, exploratory, competitive, and social components of digital games.

Frequent repetitions lead to the consolidation of adopted patterns and attitudes. Once learned, the pattern can determine ways to interpret similar situations in real life. Playing digital games encourages the development of various cognitive skills<sup>67</sup> and improves coordination and fine motor skills with greater precision of movement. In other words, gamers develop the skills of mental rotation, spatial visualization, and visual processing skills.

It is important to emphasize that such effects have not been observed in all types of digital games. Action-focused digital games, unlike adventure, RPG, or puzzles, show that

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- 56 SUCKER PUNCH PRODUCTIONS: *Ghost of Tsushima*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020.
- 57 UBISOFT MONTREAL: *Assassin's Creed Unity*. [digital game]. Saint-Mandé : Ubisoft, 2014.
- 58 UBISOFT QUEBEC: *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. [digital game]. Saint-Mandé : Ubisoft, 2015.
- 59 UBISOFT MONTREAL: *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*. [digital game]. Saint-Mandé : Ubisoft, 2010.
- 60 GHOST GAMES: *Need for Speed Payback*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : Electronic Arts, 2017.
- 61 EA VANCOUVER: *EA Sports UFC 4*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : EA Sports, 2020.
- 62 EA VANCOUVER: *FIFA 22*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : EA Sports, 2021.
- 63 TURKAY, S., ADINOLF, S.: What do Players (Think They) Learn in Games. In *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2012, Vol. 46, No. 2, p. 3347.; JAFTHA, N., MORONE PINTO, F. C., CHIRROP, T.: Knowing the Students' Game-Playing Characteristics as a Prerequisite for Successful Gamification in Education. In *Journal of Education and Development*, 2020, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 81.
- 64 ŠKRIPCOVÁ, L.: Media Literacy in Digital Games. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2022, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 136-138.
- 65 JUKIC, D.: Marketing Semiotics in Digital Games: Myth's Analysis in *The Walking Dead* and *Heavy Rain*. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 15.
- 66 YEE, N.: Motivations for Play in Online Games. In *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2006, Vol. 9, No. 6, p. 773.
- 67 GRANIC, I., LOBEL, A., ENGELS, R.: The Benefits of Playing Video Games. In *American Psychologist*, 2014, Vol. 69, No. 1, p. 76.

players have better spatial resolution in visual processing.<sup>68</sup> Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) shows that players who play action games filter irrelevant information from the environment more effectively.<sup>69</sup>

# The Philosophy of the Game

E. Fink<sup>70</sup> in his introductory chapter *Play as a Philosophical Problem* states that it may be unusual to choose play as the subject of a philosophical treatise, but play is indeed a subject of research in philosophy. The attempt to analyse the game stems from questioning the phenomenon of the game. If play is a subject of philosophy, as Fink confirms, the question arises: is play *worthy* of philosophy?<sup>71</sup> In this sense, the game is opposed to the seriousness of life and appears as *frivolous* and represents *leisure* and entertainment. This means that play, as a philosophical phenomenon<sup>72</sup> has limited value. However, play is a phenomenon that is not only inherent in contemporary society, but also a structuralist view of the culture of society before culture.<sup>73</sup>

If we analyse a game like chess, the game of colours that artists use in painting, the game of words that writers use in their works, we can conclude that this dichotomy is neither solid nor unambiguous. Play is a human need only if it springs from pleasure. The highest form of play in the anthropological sense is a ceremony and a cult.<sup>74</sup> Lived moments are transformed into artistic forms. The frivolity of the game is a pejorative form of understanding of the game, the philosophy of the game and the game world in which games are a less valuable area of research. Therefore, E. Fink claims that play is not frivolous,<sup>75</sup> but those who ignore play are frivolous. Even if we observe the phenomenon of play only in the context of entertainment, which it is not, we still cannot dispute its educational, cultural, social, economic, philosophical, and psychological value.

The concept of play is philosophically relevant within the question of human freedom and the question of aesthetics. I. Kant understands play as a pleasant activity accompanied by a sense of satisfaction. We view beauty as a concept of formal, pure subjective purpose. By understanding beauty and pleasure we can talk about the difference between F. Schiller's<sup>76</sup> and E. Fink's understanding of the game. However, the concept of play in F. Schiller's aesthetic education is like I. Kant's understanding, according to which play represents man's freedom. This is the so-called release *region*.<sup>77</sup> Such an understanding of the concept of play, within aesthetics, art, and philosophy, presents play as real, and the understanding of play as non-working and unreal opens the place to philosophical thinking.

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68 GREEN, C. S., BAVELIER, D.: Learning, Attentional Control, and Action Video Games. In *Current Biology*, 2012, Vol. 22, No. 6, p. R199-R200.; GREEN, C. S., GORMAN, T., BAVELIER, D.: Action Video-Game Training and Its Effects on Perception and Attentional Control. In STROBACH, T., KARBACH, J. (eds.): *Cognitive Training: An Overview of Features and Applications*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. New York, NY : Springer International Publishing, 2016, p. 111.

69 BAVELIER, D. et al.: Neural Bases of Selective Attention in Action Video Game Players. In *Vision Research*, 2012, Vol. 61, No. 5, p. 136-139.

70 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 1.

71 Ibidem, p. 3.

72 Ibidem, p. 71-76.

73 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 72.; HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 14.; FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 13.

74 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 74-75.

75 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 80-83.

76 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 150-162.

77 PLESSNER, H.: *Conditio humana: filozofijske rasprave o antropologiji*. Zagreb : Nakladni zavod Globus, Filozofski fakultet u Zagrebu, 1994, p. 163.

J. Huizinga emphasizes the aspect of the seriousness of the game as well as the creation of culture. His shaping culture without the game is not possible. The elements of culture in the game derive from the form of the game, and the culture itself *is played*.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, culture is an essential element of the game because it emerges in the form of a game as a double unity of the forced and the playful. J. Huizinga warns that the game should not be understood as a game *clothed* in culture, but that culture appears in the game with its shape and *mood*. Therefore, the question arises: why, in the anthropological-philosophical sense, does man play?

## The Structure of the Game

According to C. Lévi-Strauss, the relationship between play and ritual is the same type.<sup>79</sup> Each game is defined by a set of rules that allow an unlimited number of games, but the ritual, which is also played, is a privileged game. In other words, the game is at its core a separating factor because it ends up creating a differential gap between the players. This can best be explained by the example of multiplayer games where multiple players participate. In the beginning, everyone has an equal chance, and as the game nears the end, a separation factor is created that separates the winners from the losers. A typical example of such a digital game is *Fortnite Battle Royale*.<sup>80</sup> The reverse of the above is a ritual that represents a *merging* factor. In the context of multiplayer games, this is a co-op game that unites a group of players to achieve a goal together. An example is *Resident Evil 5*.<sup>81</sup>

The symmetry is predefined in the game. It is structural because it stems from the principle that rules are the same for everyone. From the aspect of ritual, the game is pre-designed, and it represents a *ritual*,<sup>82</sup> and the basic thought is that all players reach the given goal. An example of such a digital game is found in adventures like the *Life is Strange*<sup>83</sup> series. The game tends to keep each player on the winning side using structured events, that is, each episode conditions the default structure to move to the next level. In other words, the rituals are like the myths and symbols in the game. They *break down* groups of events to get to the structure.

According to structural anthropology<sup>84</sup> the misconception of sociology stems from the fact that it deals with terms, not the relationships between them. In this sense, C. Lévi-Strauss also observes the phenomenon of the game<sup>85</sup> from the aspect of relationships and opens a new perspective for analysing the game. With such an understanding, social phenomena can be viewed as phonemes in linguistics<sup>86</sup> because they acquire the meaning of words only on condition that they are integrated into kinship systems, that is, phonological systems. This leads us to the conclusion that to arrive at one rule of structure as a *differential element*<sup>87</sup> we organize it into pairs of opposition. C. Lévi-Strauss says that there is one system that is psychological and social in nature, and he calls it a *system of behaviour*.<sup>88</sup>

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78 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 47.

79 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 74.

80 EPIC GAMES: *Fortnite Battle Royale*. [digital game]. Cary, NC : Epic Games, 2017.

81 CAPCOM: *Resident Evil 5*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 2009.

82 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 74-75.

83 DON'T NOD ENTERTAINMENT, DECK NINE: *Life is Strange (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Square Enix, 2015-2022.

84 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija*. Zagreb : Stvarnost, 1977, p. 58.

85 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 74-75.

86 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija*. Zagreb : Stvarnost, 1977, p. 44.

87 Ibidem, p. 45.

88 Ibidem, p. 48.

What is meant by structure? According to C. Lévi-Strauss, the structure shows the characteristics of the system.<sup>89</sup> It consists of such elements that any modification of one of them results in the modification of all the others. Structure is a hidden order of human behaviour. It is this *fundamental, structural plan* that suggests that it is not always the content of the digital game or its myth that is important, but the way the symbols within the myth are interpreted.<sup>90</sup> Also, each model belongs to one transformation group, each of which corresponds to one model of the same type. Simply put, modifications in the structure are reflected in the games in the narratological, graphic and experiential plan of each digital game. Some changes become rules, and some push boundaries in the very structure of the game and upgrade it. On the other hand, each structure has specific *patterns* of behaviour so *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* contains some structural RPG elements that influence other digital games.

Models, such as games, are theoretical constructions that assume an exhaustive definition of *pro tempore*, such as J. Huizinga, who portrays play as an act of culture.<sup>91</sup> However, structuralist methodology warns of studying social phenomena that should have a *deeper structure*. We define form as opposed to matter.<sup>92</sup> However, structure has no particular content: it is the content itself that is taken in a logical structure.<sup>93</sup> Of course, a digital game can contain multiple parts of a structure, a *score*, but then, those parts of the structure represent different stories within the game. C. Lévi-Strauss here presents the structural anthropology of play according to the linguistic standpoint of analysing and defining the words that make a sentence. Such *scores* may follow one another: one may be included in the other by interrupting it occasionally, or it may be reflected at the end of the other. Parts of a structure can sometimes start at the same time, can have the same ending, or can complement each other. This is about intertextuality,<sup>94</sup> but also about analysing myths.<sup>95</sup>

## The World of the Game

According to E. Fink,<sup>96</sup> the game is opposed to the seriousness of life. We do not take the game seriously.<sup>97</sup> Although play is a cultural, anthropological phenomenon, it is primarily a philosophical subject. However, the concept of the game of the world is not a phenomenon. It is a speculative symbol of the overall movement of the world.

Game is a factor of culture.<sup>98</sup> The game is based on showing realities in images, shapes and meaning. Experienced moments are transformed into art forms. From this aspect, we understand the observation of digital games as culture because, not only are they a product of a cultural object,<sup>99</sup> but human action in the digital game itself is also a kind of game.<sup>100</sup> The game is a free act. The concept of place and duration starts from the

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89 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija*. Zagreb : Stvarnost, 1977, p. 290.

90 JUKIĆ, D.: Marketing Semiotics in Digital Games: Myth's Analysis in *The Walking Dead* and *Heavy Rain*. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2021, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 24-27.

91 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 10-13.

92 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija 2*. Zagreb : Školska knjiga, 1988, p. 103.

93 Ibidem.

94 MAGO, Z.: *Easter Eggs in Digital Games as a Form of Textual Transcendence (Case Study)*. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 51.

95 MALINOWSKI, B.: *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Long Grove, IL : Waveland Press, 2013, p. 100.

96 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 3-4.

97 Ibidem, p. 3.

98 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 10.

99 GRISWOLD, W.: *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. London : Sage Publications, 2013, p. 15-23.

100 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 14.

assumption that every digital game has certain boundaries of time and space. The game begins and ends at a certain point. Each game in its essence represents a spiritual creation.<sup>101</sup> According to J. Huizinga's theory, man plays for pleasure and relaxation, but he can also play above that level: for the sake of beauty and sublimity.<sup>102</sup> The game alludes to the biological instinct of imitation.<sup>103</sup> Digital games have educational value.<sup>104</sup> Starting from J. Huizinga's theory of play, play is not only essential to man, but is also crucial in developing emotions, creativity, imagination, and learning.

It is not necessary to present the game as a phenomenon, but we can analyse the game as a philosophical problem more closely. By playing, a person does not stay in themselves, they do not stay in a closed circle, but ecstatically comes out of themselves and meaningfully interpret the world.<sup>105</sup> In order to gain experience, we should possess knowledge of what we can experience. According to I. Kant, every experiential knowledge is preceded by knowledge *a priori* about the subject and knowledge about space and time.<sup>106</sup> I. Kant confirms such *conditions of experience* in the *enabled experience*. If it should be *a priori* of the human mind, then it is an *idea* that is not realized and is not perceived. With his dialectic, I. Kant speaks of the idea of cognition that is not realized but is not disputed in experience. In other words, thought about the world is no longer a theoretical concept, but a *mood* that turns into a *regulatory idea*.

But this means that I. Kant clearly realizes that the world is not a powerful object and that the relationship between man (subject) and the world cannot be arranged as a relationship between two beings.<sup>107</sup> I. Kant observes the world from the aspect of the subject and transforms it into a structure of the subject that he imagines in ideas. According to I. Kant's philosophy, we find two powers in the mind: the logical, which gives rules, and the transcendental, which gives principles. Logical power represents the power of reason, and transcendental power represents pure mind.<sup>108</sup> Logical power gives principles that provide unity to diverse rational concepts, much like the use of categories gives unity to diversity of experience.<sup>109</sup> The mind refers to reason, that is, to concepts and judgments, and reason refers to experience.

Thus, the philosophical concept of the *game of the world* is a speculative formula that does not express a phenomenon but indicates a path of thought. In that sense, anything that is real is possible, but not necessary. The reality thus understood is the modality of the being of things. However, then the question arises how and in what sense is the game defined as unreal? The behaviour and action of the game is just like other human activities. All activities are real. The problem is in the way we understand the digital game. Reality, as well as being, does not belong to the individual, but is realized in a real act, that is, by playing itself. Understood as an activity, as a spontaneous fulfilment of its meaning, play is one way of man's creation of reality. However, we say this with hesitation.<sup>110</sup>

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101 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 16.

102 Ibidem, p. 24.

103 ARISTOTEL: *O pjesničkom umijeću*. Zagreb : Školska knjiga, 2005, p. 7-10.

104 DE FREITAS, S., GRIFFITHS, M.: The Convergence of Gaming Practices with Other Media Forms: What Potential for Learning? A Review of the Literature. In *Learning, Media and Technology*, 2008, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 17.; TURKAY, S., ADINOLF, S.: What do Players (Think They) Learn in Games. In *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2012, Vol. 46, No. 2, p. 3347.; JAFTHA, N., MORONE PINTO, F. C., CHIRCOP, T.: Knowing the Students' Game-Playing Characteristics as a Prerequisite for Successful Gamification in Education. In *Journal of Education and Development*, 2020, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 81.; ŠKRIPCOVÁ, L.: Media Literacy in Digital Games. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2022, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 136.

105 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 18.

106 KANT, I.: *Kritika čistog uma*. Zagreb : Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1984, p. 366.

107 Ibidem, p. 364-371.

108 Ibidem, p. 156-157.

109 Ibidem, p. 157.

110 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 74-79.

The key is that what is done in the digital game is *not serious*, it is free of seriousness. The game suggests an *aesthetic* attitude towards life. In that sense, play is a category for the imaginary and the unreal. The game as such paraphrases various forms of serious life.<sup>111</sup> This is precisely its paradox because with such an understanding of the game it represents an imaginary action, adventure, story, and event. Although these actions are real, in a game that is imaginary and *frivolous*, they carry with them an element of the unreal. That is why Fink claims that play is an action that becomes apparent in its gesture of meaning. It fills the empty time and turns into the reality of the apparent paraphrase of serious life.<sup>112</sup>

We will compare a digital game and a gamer who highlights their moment of *frivolity* in adventure or action games, when the player disguises themselves as a game, and the action itself becomes two-dimensional: the action of the actor and the action of man in the world of game. Identifying the player with the main character in the game is then recognized as an option.<sup>113</sup> In this sense, we can connect the concept of the mask mentioned by Plessner,<sup>114</sup> because it is in the mask that the player hides and, conditionally speaking, they differ from themself. The gamer becomes their own means.<sup>115</sup> In such a medium, the gamer embodies themselves, they fake a role within the digital game. In this identification of the role of the main character, specifically Nathan Drake, we take on the fundamental categorical structure of the embodiment of the real person through the imaginary.

The question is what is the character of *frivolity* within such a game world? That imaginary frivolity is an illusion that exists. The object of fantasy is psychic reality, not objective and intersubjective reality. In such an understanding of the game, we are all actors and spectators. Man plays only where, in the full sense of the word, he is a man, and he is entirely human only where he plays.<sup>116</sup>

## Aesthetics of the Game

F. Schiller understands the game as the core of education. Man seeks abundance and excess of matter to conceal its limits to lust and secure for himself a pleasure.<sup>117</sup> However, F. Schiller<sup>118</sup> argues that man also seeks an *aesthetic addition*, an abundance that transcends matter to satisfy the instinct for form. It is precisely this *aesthetic addition*, this instinct for form, which is the pleasure that comes from playing a digital game. Aesthetic feeling comes from shape, colour, sound, images, but also from the story.<sup>119</sup> Such a feeling is determined by pleasure and admiration.<sup>120</sup>

The real character of the game stems from the imagination that makes self-enjoyment in the player's relieved interests. Imagination is the essence of the game.<sup>121</sup> The imagination that A. Gehlen is talking about is a process of communication identical to the structuralist understanding of the game. Play is a communication between imaginary life experienced in the real world. In this experience, the game arouses the interest

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111 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 81-82.

112 Ibidem, p. 83.

113 ŠKORIĆ, G.: Aspekti pojma igre u estetici i antropologiji. In *Metodički ogledi*, 2012, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 26.

114 PLESSNER, H.: *Conditio humana: filozofijske rasprave o antropologiji*. Zagreb : Nakladni zavod Globus, Filozofski fakultet u Zagrebu, 1994, p. 165.

115 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 83.

116 ŠKORIĆ, G.: Aspekti pojma igre u estetici i antropologiji. In *Metodički ogledi*, 2012, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 27.

117 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 152.

118 Ibidem, p. 152-153.

119 MORIN, E.: *O estetici*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 9.

120 Ibidem, p. 11.

121 GEHLEN, A.: *Čovjek: njegova narav i položaj u svijetu*. Zagreb : Naklada Breza, 2005, p. 189.

of the imagination, and the very structure of the game is the structure of the *roles* that are mirrored in each other. I. Kant speaks about this in the aesthetic court, claiming that it is based on a sense of satisfaction.

E. Morin metaphorically calls the state in which one emotion changes us *poetic*,<sup>122</sup> and it represents another, different state that is on the border of the mystical, the ecstatic and the transformed. The French philosopher goes a step further and argues that when we are on the top of the aesthetic experience, the works we love provide a sublime feeling and lead to ecstasy.<sup>123</sup> A very similar feeling of ecstasy is found in the term *flow*,<sup>124</sup> which M. Csíkszentmihályi defines as an enchanting obsession. Such a way of experiencing the world and relationships with other people, that is, the pleasure in the feeling of satisfaction that arises when information in consciousness says that expectations are fulfilled, leads to comfort.<sup>125</sup>

Digital games can create a state of desired experience, enthusiasm and happiness that is like *flow* and motivates users to stay in that state for as long as possible.<sup>126</sup> In this sense, aesthetic feeling is a modality of the *poetic state*. According to E. Morin,<sup>127</sup> beauty is no longer what it used to be, so the aestheticization of almost everything is on the rise. After aestheticizing digital reality, we try to aestheticize our own life, that is, we give it a *poetic* meaning. One way is to turn a digital game into a *beautiful* adventure. The dialectic of the artistic in digital games creates a dualistic unity. Through form, such a dual process of sudden take-off in the wake of the highest levels of consciousness leads to *mimesis* in digital games. The aesthetic emotion we feel as a spectator or gamer is always a state of mild *obsession*,<sup>128</sup> a mild *mimesis* that we do not perceive. In other words, the fascination of gamers brings us to a poetic state.

When V. Flusser talks about image decoding,<sup>129</sup> he claims that the role of the apparatus-operator is crucial in the formation of linear texts in the technical image. V. Flusser is right because decoding requires knowledge,<sup>130</sup> pedagogical competence,<sup>131</sup> and media literacy.<sup>132</sup> In fact, it is like the concept of pedagogical media criticism, which in its essence starts from media knowledge and media analysis.<sup>133</sup> Media competence includes individual characteristics of the recipient of the message, decoding of media symbols and critical reflection. The role of media pedagogy is in decoding media messages. Symbols and signs that appear in the media have a specific meaning. The concept of the symbolic world, the idea that media pedagogy takes over that man lives in a symbolic world, is also reflected in the works of the French sociologist J. Baudrillard,<sup>134</sup> who talks about consumer codes. V. Flusser says that communication itself is artificial and rests on symbols arranged in codes<sup>135</sup> and we are not aware of this artificial communication. The way the codes work is shown through three types: images, text, and techno images.

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122 MORIN, E.: *O estetici*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 16.

123 Ibidem, p. 15-16.

124 CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, M.: *Flow: očaravajuća obuzetost*. Jastrebarsko : Naklada Slap, 2006, p. 139-170.

125 Ibidem, p. 100.

126 DICHEV, C., DICHEVA, D.: Gamifying Education: What Is Known, What Is Believed and What Remains Uncertain: A Critical Review. In *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 2017, Vol. 14, No. 9, p. 5.

127 MORIN, E.: *O estetici*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 22.

128 Ibidem, p. 42.

129 FLUSSER, V.: *Filozofija fotografije*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2007, p. 21.

130 McLUHAN, M.: *Razumijevanje medija*. Zagreb : Golden marketing-Tehnička knjiga, 2008, p. 137.

131 BAACKE, D.: *Medienpädagogik*. Berlin : De Gruyter, 1997, p. 99.

132 ŠKRIPCOVÁ, L.: Media Literacy in Digital Games. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2022, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 135-137.

133 KÜBLER, H.-D.: Zurück zum kritischen Rezipienten? Aufgaben und Grenzen pädagogischer Medienkritik. In NIESYTO, H., RATH, M., SOWA, H. (eds.): *Medienkritik heute. Grundlagen, Beispiele, Praxisfelder*. München : Kopaed, 2006, p. 44-46.

134 BAUDRILLARD, J.: *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structure*. London : Sage Publications, 1998, p. 76.

135 FLUSSER, V.: *Komunikologija*. Beograd : Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2015, p. 9.

The reality that V. Flusser talks about is built according to the code of images. Imagination rests on a convention that concerns the meaning of symbols that create new codes. According to V. Flusser, for people who are not aware of image codes, the world is a stage.<sup>136</sup> In this sense, the image that we have learned to make from concepts is not the meaning to which that concept refers, but the image itself gives the meaning. J. Baudrillard claims the same, only in the context of symbols of meaning.<sup>137</sup> With his understanding of the techno image and its deciphering, V. Flusser approaches the understanding of media pedagogy which claims that we need to decode meanings. Even though, according to R. Barthes, such codes can be decoded through the system of semiotics,<sup>138</sup> V. Flusser believes that mass techno images are false.<sup>139</sup> The attempt to decode is imposed as crucial in understanding the world.

Therefore, everything that is aesthetic in a digital game is part of the *poetic* relationship of the *game world*. The aesthetic, as such, always determines the poetic. The aesthetic feel of the gamer is contemplative. There is an *osmosis* relationship between the aesthetic and the ludicrous. The play is therefore a pleasure, E. Morin argues, and its ultimate goal is checked only in it, and the scene of the aesthetic experience is manifested in the very essence of the play.<sup>140</sup> This means that *Homo Ludens* is both, *poetic*, and *aesthetic*. In this sense, aesthetic states can be represented as: poetic, aesthetic, state of enchantment, state of trance, mystical and ecstatic state (Table 1).

Table 1: Aesthetic States of Digital Games

Condition	Characteristics
Poetic	Separation of the Self from the Non-Self
Aesthetic	Work of art
Enchantment	Admire the beauty of the game
Trans	Creativity Game
Mystical	Harmony of Beauty and Ecstasy
Ecstatic	The fulfilment of the poetic

Source: own processing; MORIN, E.: *O estetici*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 86-88.

However, pictures or photography in the game unites the property of presence and absence. This means that a digital game contains elements that are inherent to duplicate. C. Lévi-Strauss<sup>141</sup> spoke about the duality of the game in the context of rituals and scores. Such a structure is understood here as affective and sentimental. It is a term that E. Morin calls the *magic of an image*<sup>142</sup> that reflects a mirror. This metaphor of the mirror represents a real path in which digital play resembles real life and reflects reality through fictional characters and a fantastic path that invents a world beyond reality.

By imitating real and imaginary life, the aesthetic quality that gamers experience while playing digital games is achieved. It is the *magic of a picture*.<sup>143</sup> Since, according to

136 FLUSSER, V.: *Komunikologija*. Beograd : Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2015, p. 107.

137 BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London : Sage Publications, 2017, p. 28-31.; BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Simulacija i zbilja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2001, p. 12-16.

138 BARTHES, R.: *Mitologije*. Zagreb : Pelago, 2009, p. 147.

139 FLUSSER, V.: *Komunikologija*. Beograd : Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2015, p. 134.

140 MORIN, E.: *O estetici*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 84-88.

141 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija*. Zagreb : Stvarnost, 1977, p. 44-48.; LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 74-75.

142 MORIN, E.: *O estetici*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 46.

143 Ibidem, 47.

E. Fink<sup>144</sup> play represents the seriousness of life, it is a category of the unreal and the unreal. The game as such, paraphrases various forms of serious life, and the characters in the game represent the *creative enthusiasm*<sup>145</sup> of the creator and the aesthetic participation of the gamers.

## About the Beauty of the Game

The concept of beauty has changed through years, centuries, periods, and cultures. Beauty is a fundamental determinant of the philosophy of art, which starts from Plato's famous thesis *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. According to E. Morin,<sup>146</sup> make-up, necklaces and ornaments have an aesthetic component intended to please both others and themselves. In other words, this *game of seduction*<sup>147</sup> exposes the recourse to beauty, but not beauty itself. Aesthetic feeling, which E. Morin calls poetic, is a state in which there is an inherent absence of pleasure and admiration, but at the same time, separating the *Self from the non-Self*.<sup>148</sup> However, at the same time, the ecstatic state, as the highest goal of the aesthetics of the digital game and the poetic state, is actually a paradox because the gamer is in ecstasy in which they are lost and in which they are fulfilled.

For I. Kant, one of the basic questions in aesthetics is related to the concept of the beautiful,<sup>149</sup> that is, why an individual likes something and whether it is valid for everyone or only for them. In his dialectic *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kritik der Urteilkraft), I. Kant dedicates the first part to the critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, more precisely, Analytic of the Beautiful. Goodness and beauty are the role models imagined by the human mind, and it requires that the true reality coincide with it.<sup>150</sup> According to I. Kant, the human mind wants what is and what becomes to be both good and beautiful. The importance of I. Kant's Analytic of the Beautiful is based on the establishment of the autonomy of the sphere of beauty, the concept of the indifference of aesthetic pleasure,<sup>151</sup> the elaboration of the concept of aesthetic experience and the search for the universality of aesthetic judgment.

To explain I. Kant's dialectic of beauty more easily, let us compare Shadow of the Tomb Raider, Horizon Zero Dawn, and Detroit: Become Human. We will do this by looking at three female characters as the subject of Analytic of the Beautiful (Picture 1-3). The characters were chosen according to hair colour: black hair (Lara), redhead (Aloy) and blonde (Chloe). The object connection, stated by I. Kant, cannot be a feeling of satisfaction (comfort) because it does not signify anything about the observed. It is the subject who feels themselves looking at the examples given. Knowing the concept of a digital game, a character from a digital game or a landscape allows us to make judgments that have arisen in *pure reason*.

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144 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 84.

145 MORIN, E.: *O esteticima*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 48.

146 Ibidem, p. 13.

147 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 44-45.

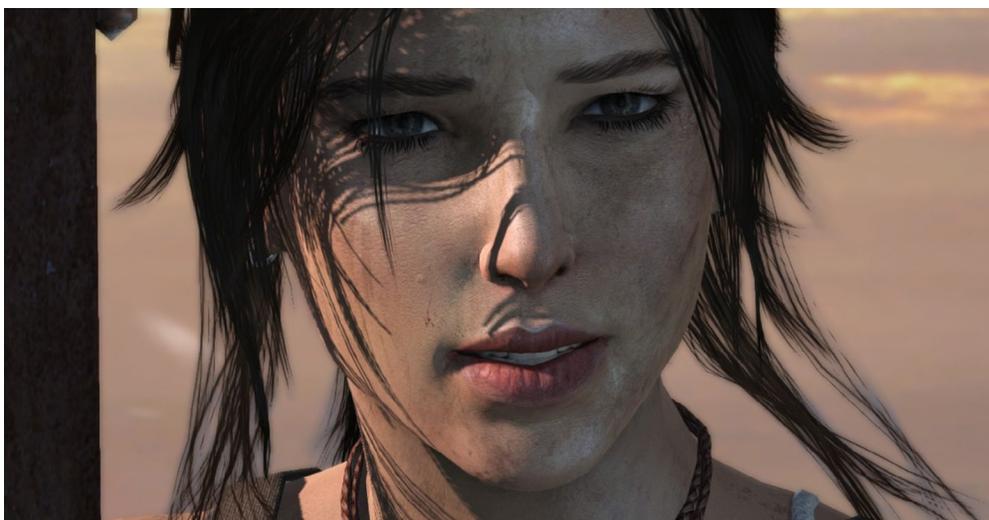
148 MORIN, E.: *O esteticima*. Zagreb : TIM press, 2017, p. 15.

149 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći suđenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 108.

150 STEINER, M.: Kantova estetika. In *Obnovljeni Život*, 1997, Vol. 52, No. 6, p. 533.

151 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći suđenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 86.

In the aesthetic cognition of objects, we do not use objective but subjective judgment. M. Steiner<sup>152</sup> argues that beauty is not a conceptual judgment and therefore it is not possible to give a positive definition of beauty but only a negative one. If we understand the game as being among other ways of being, then we can understand the digital game as a different kind of game. Such an understanding of the game presupposes a clear demarcation from other areas of life, primarily the sphere of work.<sup>153</sup> I. Kant considers aesthetic judgment (judgment of taste) as a judgment of beauty that arouses pleasure. In an individual aesthetic experience, the imagination is spontaneously activated according to some sense, an indefinite idea of the mind to which it is not guided but flows naturally, spontaneously. That sense acts as a necessity<sup>154</sup> so that we can see the whole.<sup>155</sup> I. Kant denotes this meaning by formal purposefulness, purposefulness without a concept of purpose,<sup>156</sup> and the undefined play of imagination and reason is accompanied by a sense of aesthetic comfort.



Picture 1: Lara from *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*

Source: *The Actress Who Plays Lara Croft in Shadow of The Tomb Raider Is Gorgeous in Real Life*. Released on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2022. [online]. [2022-06-25]. Available at: <<https://www.looper.com/787048/the-actress-who-plays-lara-croft-in-shadow-of-the-tomb-raider-is-gorgeous-in-real-life/>>.

I. Kant's claim to aesthetic judgment stems from the fact that it is not based on a concept but on a sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This means that gamers can only expect others to share a judgment about beauty that is equal to ours. However, beauty is a form, without the image of the end, which is also a paradox. This means that something does not have to have a purpose to be beautiful, but it seems to have a purpose.<sup>157</sup> Therefore, we take as an example the three listed characters from digital games to confirm that the judgment of beauty exists regardless of whether we have played the game, know the content and to recognize facial contours in the hyperrealism of digital play as a work of art.<sup>158</sup>

152 STEINER, M.: Kantova estetika. In *Obnovljeni Život*, 1997, Vol. 52, No. 6, p. 535.

153 ŠKORIĆ, G.: Aspekti pojma igre u estetici i antropologiji. In *Metodički ogleđi*, 2012, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 30.

154 KANT, I.: *Antropologija u pragmatičnom pogledu*. Zagreb : Naklada Breza, 2003, p. 122.

155 FERY, L.: *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*. Chicago, IL : The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 91-93.

156 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 86.

157 GUMBRECHT, H. U.: *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*. Cambridge, MA : The Belknap Press, 2006, p. 42-44.

158 JUKIĆ, D.: Digital Game as an Artistic Mimesis and a Cult Brand. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J., PROSTINÁKOVÁ HOSSOVÁ, M., SOLÍK, M. (eds.): *Megatrends and Media: Home Officetainment*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2021, p. 530-533.

Art shows the beautiful that serves as an alternative to reality. In this sense, we view aesthetics as F. Schiller, that is, we perceive the dualism of reason and the senses.<sup>159</sup> Although F. Schiller considers the problem of human life, he speaks of an individual who is fragmented in his wholeness.<sup>160</sup> In other words, F. Schiller argues that only the beautiful can give a man his social character. It is obvious that the aesthetics of pedagogy, of which F. Schiller speaks, derives from I. Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful*.

Beauty is only that which belongs to taste, that which belongs sublimely to aesthetic judgment. However, I. Kant argues that the image of the sublime can and should be beautiful, otherwise it is cruel and barbaric. The image itself can be beautiful, even when it is a symbol of evil and ugliness<sup>161</sup> like The Wendigo from *Until Dawn*<sup>162</sup>, and even if some aesthetic object that causes repulsion needs to be presented.



Picture 2: Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn*

Source: WADE, D.: *Guerrilla Games Horizon Zero Dawn Art Blast*. Released on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2017. [online]. [2022-11-03]. Available at: <<https://magazine.artstation.com/2017/05/guerrilla-games-horizon-dawn-art-blast/>>.

The key questions I. Kant asks are: why do we like an object and why do we like a digital game, i.e., its holder? To be able to distinguish whether something is beautiful or not, we associate it with imagination and illusion. However, I. Kant goes on to argue that any connection can be objective, but then it means the reality of some empirical cognition. Also, an objective connection cannot exist if it does not signify anything in the subject (gamer), but only if the subject feels themselves as they are affected by the performance (in this case a character from a digital game).

According to I. Kant, things in themselves affect the Self in itself, that is, things stimulate our senses and thus the senses arise as representations and opinions. I. Kant defines four fundamental moments of judgment: quantity, quality, relation, and modality<sup>163</sup> by which we make aesthetic judgments (Table 2). It rearranges its categories to fit the judgment table. I. Kant argues that reason cognizes through concepts and takes the

159 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 81.

160 Ibidem, p. 37-42.

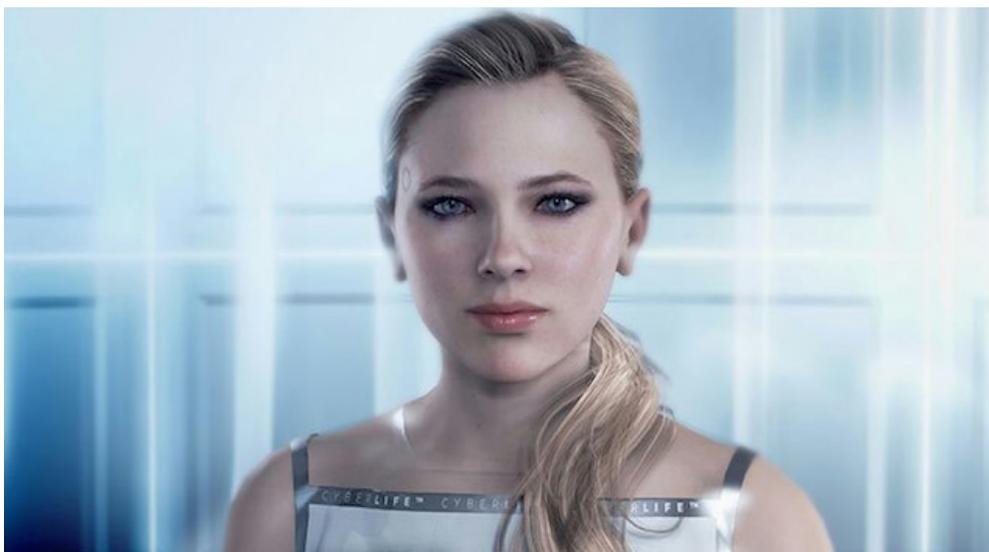
161 KANT, I.: *Antropologija u pragmatičnom pogledu*. Zagreb : Naklada Breza, 2003, p. 123-124.

162 SUPERMASSIVE GAMES: *Until Dawn*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2015.

163 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 85-118.

expression of the category from Aristotle. By exploring the judgments concerning cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kritik der reinen Vernunft) and the morals in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kritik der praktischen Vernunft), Kant demonstrates the power of judgment. And it is in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that he argues that trial is the universal power by which everyone is bound. This judgment is not the power of distinctions, it transcends these processes through the possibility of harmony, i.e., beauty.

According to I. Kant, judgments about beauty do not concern the *comfort* of experience. They are not reduced to the question of experience. Enjoyment is always a matter of subjective and individual taste and cannot be equated with *universal feeling*.<sup>164</sup> In other words, the court of taste is not a court of knowledge, it is an aesthetic court that is subjective in its interior. When an individual makes an aesthetic judgment, then the *existence* of that digital game is not important to them, nor the *content* of that object (narratives, ideas, constructions). The liking that evokes what is pleasant or good is liking out of interest.<sup>165</sup>



Picture 3: Chloe from *Detroit: Become Human*

Source: *Detroit: Become Human – Chloe (no menu)*. Released on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2020. [online]. [2022-06-25]. Available at: <<https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2140151851>>.

I. Kant states that interest is the satisfaction associated with the image of the existence of an object. What does that mean? Pleasant satisfaction is not related to the object, it does not stand in the role of cognition. From the moment a gamer finds a game enjoyable, they thus express an interest in the existence of that game because their desires arouse the senses and make us play that game. Therefore, I. Kant argues that satisfaction that is pleasant satisfies. So, what is good evokes satisfaction using pure reason.<sup>166</sup> A digital game does not have to have any meaning to find beauty in it.

The gamer judges the digital game beautiful according to the reflection that leads them to any concept and such liking is different from the pleasant one that comes from feeling. And that is the key difference between good and pleasant.<sup>167</sup> The pleasant, the beautiful, and the good designate then three different relations of representations to the

164 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći suđenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 87-88.

165 Ibidem, p. 87.

166 Ibidem, p. 87-90.

167 Ibidem, p. 90-91.

feeling of pleasure. Pleasant signifies the pleasure of the gamer, and it is devoid of mind. Beautiful means that they like the digital game, and good means that the gamer appreciates and approves of such a game, i.e., gives it objective value. Let us compare Table 2 to distinguish the moments of judgments more clearly.

Table 2: Analytic of the Aesthetical Judgment of the Digital Games

Categories	Explanation
Quantity	The subject on which the concept depends
Quality	It only applies to some subjects
Relation	It can be applied to some subjects
Modality	The content of the subject's concept

Source: own processing; KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 85-116.

According to I. Kant, the beautiful is that which pleases universally without a concept. This is *general* satisfaction.<sup>168</sup> Since satisfaction is not based on the subject's interest or preference for the subject, the subject must assume that there is a reason someone would like the same subject. In other words, I. Kant argues that if something is liked only by someone, then we cannot call that object beautiful. Any objective relationship can only be imagined, but if it is subjective, it is felt. When it comes to being beautiful in a digital game, then it is different. That is why there are different genres. The individual determines the judgment of taste, and they are independent of beauty. Subjective unity can only be understood through emotions. In conclusion, the beautiful is that which pleases universally without a concept.<sup>169</sup>

The third category talks about the purposefulness of the form of an object (digital games). Beauty is a form of purposefulness of an object if it is perceived in it without purpose. Purpose is the object of a concept as the cause of that object and the causality of a concept in terms of its purpose (*forma finalis*).<sup>170</sup> More simply, we are talking here about the purposefulness of a form of digital game whose purpose is to evoke emotions. However, such an accentuated form of the beautiful in art raises the question of favouring drawing and character as opposed to content and material.<sup>171</sup> In other words, the gamer adds beauty through the purity of colour, graphics, drawings, and the overall visual impression, i.e., the composition of the work.

Qualitative perfection is the completeness of every thing of its kind and it as such represents the pure concept of everything that a particular digital game or character from a game should contain. Such an idea of beauty, specifically Lara Croft denoting one concept, represents the most sublime example of the taste of a pure idea of beauty, or, ironically, the ideal displayed in the android RT600 which is a simulacrum<sup>172</sup> of a young woman. An ideal that can be expected only in a human figure differs from the normal idea of the beautiful.

I. Kant distinguishes two types of beauty: free (*pulchritudo vaga*) and dependent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*).<sup>173</sup> In judging free beauty, no concept of purpose is assumed. The beauty of a digital character like Aloy, Lara or Cloe, presupposes a concept of purpose that determines what the thing should be. Thus, the dependent beauty of the

168 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022., p. 92.

169 Ibidem, p. 96-98.

170 Ibidem, p. 99.

171 GUNTER, Z.: *Kritički duh*. Zagreb : Matica hrvatska, 2012, p. 272.

172 BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI : The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 1.

173 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 106.

above characters from the digital game stems from the resemblance to the real beauty of a woman. The ideal consists in the expression of what is moral and that is exactly what causes admiration, as is the case with Aloy.

The fourth moment of taste starts from satisfaction as a necessary consequence. I. Kant argues that beautiful has a necessary relationship to satisfaction.<sup>174</sup> He means that the individual requires the other to agree with them because they have a principle that is common. This principle represents the idea of general feeling. However, such a principle starts from common sense, that is, the subjective necessity we attach to the judgment of taste is conditioned.<sup>175</sup> I. Kant concludes that the condition of necessity imposed by the judgment of taste is the idea of a common sense.

Can we relate F. Schiller's aesthetics to I. Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful*? According to F. Schiller, man seeks abundance and excess to hide its limits from lust and ensure his own pleasure. However, man also seeks abundance above that matter to expand that pleasure. So, an individual enjoys more, but does not enjoy otherwise.<sup>176</sup> The same analogy applies to the gamer and their need to play digital games of the same genre in the series *Call of Duty*<sup>177</sup>, *Assassin's Creed*<sup>178</sup> or *Uncharted*<sup>179</sup>. Games differ in gameplay mechanics, graphics, action, or new features, but the essence of enjoyment remains the same. The individual did not increase their pleasure by scope, they ennobled it according to the manner and kind of pleasure.<sup>180</sup> This is precisely the key in F. Schiller's consideration of the beauty of enjoyment, because the individual already enjoys the very act of expectation.

## Discussion

The topic of the study *why we play digital games* was analysed from an anthropological-philosophical-pedagogical aspect. Even from the subtitle, it is evident that there seems to be a discrepancy between the three disciplines within the consideration of the game phenomenon. This interdisciplinarity tells us that the phenomenon of play and playing is significant in human life, from the very beginnings of culture, the development of tribes and rituals all the way to the philosophical understanding of the world and man in the context of play and his upbringing. This also reveals to us the richness of the game phenomenon, which is reflected depending on the aspect of game research.

First, the answer arises that we play games for enjoyment, rest, and liking. We could argue that we play games because we love them and have a need to play them. A closer reflection on the *existence* of the game raises two questions: do we play games for the sake of beauty, or is the beauty in playing a game? If we play games for the sake of beauty, then we are allowed to view the game in the context of I. Kant's understanding of the distinction of beauty. With this, we accept the hypothesis that beautiful is what does not arouse interest, that is, we observe the form and not the content of the game. In this sense, we look at three images from three different digital games that represent a pure, disinterested idea of the game. According to I. Kant, beauty is in the free play of imagination that causes pleasure in the subject.

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174 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći suđenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 112.

175 Ibidem, p. 113.

176 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 152.

177 INFINITY WARD et al.: *Call of Duty (series)*. [digital game]. Santa Monica, CA : Activision, 2003-2022.

178 UBISOFT MONTREAL et al.: *Assassin's Creed (series)*. [digital game]. Saint-Mandé : Ubisoft, 2007-2020.

179 NAUGHTY DOG et al.: *Uncharted (series)*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2007-2022.

180 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 153.

I. Kant shows beauty in the context of *imagination*. This means that in this study we analysed the concept of beauty, which does not speak about the *existence* of the game itself, therefore it does not speak about the content and the main characters or their moral values, but we observed the game exclusively in the context of disinterested liking, therefore as a form. Even more simply, a game image represents a concept-free idea of a game. The problem that arises in such an abstract understanding of the beauty of the game is related to the mistake of *looking for meaning* and content. This error is caused by adding meaning to the term F. de Saussure spoke about in the analysis of the linguistic sign.<sup>181</sup> Here, the emphasis is on the expression of the linguistic sign, that is, on the signifier level, which we observe in the context of I. Kant's form. The mistake is that we automatically observe the image and add meaning to it, but then it is no longer a disinterested liking because we know the meaning of that term and combine it into a sign, or form into content. I. Kant states exactly this as crucial in the understanding of beauty. We then *understand* and judge the game rationally, not aesthetically.

Therefore, the deconstruction of the idea of the beauty of the game, that is, its segment that we have shown in the three pictures, serves as evidence of the analysis of beauty according to which beauty evokes general liking, and that beauty is a form without a purpose. I. Kant gives an example of the idea of beauty in the context of a green meadow, which we understand as objective, but its pleasure belongs to the subjective sense. In other words, I. Kant claims that pleasure (sensation) and the idea of beauty (judgment of taste) make it impossible to produce an idea. In the context of a digital game, let us take for example the image of Lara, which we judge according to the idea of the beauty of the form, exclusively as an image, ignoring the *search for the meaning* of her heroic and moral values (without an existential component).

Understanding certain digital games as a form of art,<sup>182</sup> we can conclude that beautiful art is one that follows the imagination as a way of knowing. This is I. Kant's premise of an aesthetic idea that encourages reflection. In this study, we tried to answer whether the idea of the game, its mental creation that we presented in the form of three pictures, is sufficient for understanding the beauty of the game in an abstract sense.

From the aspect of the meaning of play, new questions have been raised that are still looking for answers. However, structure is also important in game analysis. C. Levi-Strauss understands structure as a solid system that represents the hidden order of human behaviour.<sup>183</sup> Such a structure allows us to correlate with J. Baudrillard's works, which talk about hidden symbols and signs within the world in which we live.<sup>184</sup> V. Flusser says that we are surrounded by images that create a collective amnesia for us caused by the hyperproduction of images that also demand decoding.<sup>185</sup> In his analogy of the photographer, he says that the position of photography as a gesture of play opens the possibility of new thinking about imagination.<sup>186</sup> In this sense, man exists with the help of images that represent the world to him. This also raises new questions for us, especially if we look at them in the context of media pedagogy and digital games. Man, lives in the digital space and is surrounded by techno images without thinking about the function of these images.

181 SAUSSURE, F.: *Tečaj opće lingvistike*. Zagreb : ArTresor, 2000, p. 98.

182 DUTTON, D.: *The Art Instinct Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. London : Bloomsbury Press, 2009, p. 58.; JUKIĆ, D.: Digital Game as an Artistic Mimesis and a Cult Brand. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J., PROSTINÁKOVÁ HOSSOVÁ, M., SOLÍK, M. (eds.): *Megatrends and Media: Home Officetainment*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2021, p. 533-534.

183 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Strukturalna antropologija*. Zagreb : Stvarnost, 1977, p. 58.; LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 74-75.

184 BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London : Sage Publications, 2017, p. 28-31.; BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Simulacija i zbilja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2001, p. 12-16.

185 FLUSSER, V.: *Filozofija fotografije*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2007, p. 21.; FLUSSER, V.: *Komunikologija*. Beograd : Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2015, p. 179-184.

186 FLUSSER, V.: *Komunikologija*. Beograd : Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, 2015, p. 183.

Because of the above, play is also observed from the aspect of E. Fink, who understands play in a symbolic sense,<sup>187</sup> where the transfer of play from an individual to society takes place. This means that digital games in their imagination reflect reality, so the themes, motives and meanings discussed are also a reflection of reality. According to the aspect of media pedagogy,<sup>188</sup> digital games influence users, they shape the user by immersing them in the world of imagination, beauty, and hidden meaning. The user in such a digital world is freed from serious life. Two opposites appear here: R. Barthes' analysis of the digital game myth and V. Flusser's techno image of digital reality.

If we analyse the meanings of digital games according to R. Barthes, then new ways of decoding media semiotics open for us according to which we show new meanings of digital games. However, if we analyse digital games and the digital world according to V. Flusser, then the images are presented as scenes in which the users are consumed and, they themselves become the object of the game.

Therefore, the questions that remain open for discussion and further research refer to the position of researching the phenomenon of digital games itself. From the aspect of aesthetics, questions of the beauty of digital games can be explored in the context of a sublime character who has moral and heroic qualities. In this sense, the possibility of analysing artistic creation and cognitive sciences opens. Also, it is possible to compare I. Kant's understanding of the idea of an artist who stimulates the talent of another artist when creating digital games if we consider the digital game as a form of contemporary artwork.

In further research, the techno-imaginary characters mentioned by V. Flusser can be investigated, but in the context of the digital world and from the aspect of media pedagogy. Since digital images are information that has been processed, the question of constructing an artificial reality arises. Decoding digital games requires a symbolic code that allows for different interpretations. This also raises the question of the active role of the creators of such codes, but also of the construction of the real from the unreal. The question arises whether man is really *Homo ludens imago Dei* in the theological sense.<sup>189</sup> Can we see the world as a play and as a toy? In this sense, the question remains open: is the man in relation to the play or is the play in the man?

## Conclusion

The analysis of beauty that we have shown according to I. Kant through the four moments of judgment derives from the premise that beautiful form is satisfaction without interest, perfection without purpose. Such beauty does not require the content of a digital game, because content signifies the existence of an object.<sup>190</sup> If an individual were to know the content of an object (digital games) then their aesthetic judgment would be subjective without a realistic expectation that other individuals would agree on a common claim. What you like does not depend entirely on reason. It is beautiful when we do not benefit from it and when we do not include notion in it.

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187 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 80-83.

188 BAUER, T. A.: Die Kompetenz ethischen und ästhetischen Handelns. Medienethik aus medienpädagogischer Perspektive. In KARMASIN, M. (ed.): *Medien und Ethik*. Stuttgart : Reclam, 2002, p. 199.; BAUER, T. A.: *Mediji za otvoreno društvo*. Zagreb : Sveučilišna knjižara, 2007, p. 157.

189 GOLUB, I.: Homo ludens imago Dei. In *Bogoslovska smotra*, 1991, Vol. 61, No. 1-2, p. 48.

190 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći suđenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 88.

Also, taste should not depend on the concept. The same goes for the aforementioned digital games, i.e., three female characters. According to I. Kant's Analytic of the Beautiful, we make judgments based on form, not content. Only with such an understanding can we observe the digital game, its characters, landscape, or fragments in an aesthetic and artistic sense. What is beautiful is determined by looking at the form, and we do not draw conclusions about the content of the digital game. If we accept that the three female characters reflect digital art, the form of the artwork depends on the composition, surface, contrast, and order of colours.

Finally, we can ask a concluding question: *why do we play digital games?* To answer this question, we will refer to the analysed theories in this study. We live through play because play is the beginning and a free act.<sup>191</sup> It is a spiritual creation of man. We play for pleasure and rest, but also for exaltation. Play is beautiful in its form, and beautiful is what causes liking without a clue. The beautiful is that which pleases universally without requiring a concept.<sup>192</sup> Games teach us<sup>193</sup> and represent the imagination of life.<sup>194</sup> Through the game we become people and create our own stories,<sup>195</sup> and, at the same time, we forget who we are because they overwhelm us.

In this sense, we can paraphrase the Latin proverb *Dum spiro spero* and reshape its meaning according to which we live as long as we play. It is a game where everyone has their time, place, and role. Digital games are one big techno picture in which every scene is live and there are no restarts.

For F. Schiller, man is free only when he plays, because play complements man.<sup>196</sup> With this statement, F. Schiller expresses his own definition of how a man should play with Beauty. In such a game, the individual learns, feels, thinks, and belongs to himself. Man plays for pleasure and rest, but also above that level, for the sake of beauty and sublimity.<sup>197</sup> The state in which one emotion changes us E. Morin calls metaphorically *poetic*, and this is exactly what the gamer experiences. What is crucial in observing such images stems from an understanding of form, not content.

When we look beautiful, the feeling of satisfaction stems from a limitation of form because we do not know the content. That is the most beautiful. The digital game, which we do not know the end of, draws us like our own life in that we do not know how it will end, but we want to live it in beauty.

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191 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 14.

192 KANT, I.: *Kritika moći sudjenja*. Zagreb : Jesenski i Turk, 2022, p. 98.

193 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 192.

194 FINK, E.: *Igra kao simbol svijeta*. Zagreb : Demetra, 2000, p. 83.

195 LÉVI-STRAUSS, C.: *Divlja misao*. Beograd : Nolit, 1978, p. 74-75.

196 SCHILLER, F.: *O estetskom odgoju čovjeka u nizu pisama*. Zagreb : Scarabeus, 2006, p. 89.

197 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo ludens: o podrijetlu kulture u igri*. Zagreb : Naprijed, 1992, p. 24.

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# Nulltopia: Of Disjunct Space

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## ABSTRACT:

Nulltopia is disjunction in space, the non-space between one space and another. Such disjunction becomes important in the ontology of imaginary worlds, whose thresholds are not fully traversable. Some knowledge and some exigencies transfer across the boundaries of an image, but some do not, remaining asymmetrically bound, extant only on one side – potentiating scenarios like starving while eating *Minecraft* cookies. This theoretical study presents an exercise in the metaphysics of digital games, defining nulltopia in reference to dreams, the theatrical proscenium, vehicle windows, video screens, loudspeakers, and interactive consoles; and contextualizing nulltopia relative to immersion. Developing from a syncretic combination of movement and depiction, the video screen extends a technology of imagination that already existed in component forms. Partially separating slow reality from fast imaginary, nulltopia affords both discourse and addiction to the 'etiolated actual', in contrast to an imagined, perfectly immersive, 'society without screens', the bounds of whose world become imperceptible.

## KEY WORDS:

digital game, imagination, immersion, nulltopia, ontology, perception of motion, space, virtual reality.

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# Introduction

"I hate portals."

- Geralt of Rivia, *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*<sup>1</sup>

Where "space is a practiced place",<sup>2</sup> *nulltopia* is disjunction in space. Such disjunction becomes important in the ontology of imaginary worlds, whose thresholds are not fully traversable. Some knowledge and some exigencies transfer across the boundaries of an image, but some do not, remaining asymmetrically bound, extant only on one side – potentiating scenarios like starving while eating *Minecraft*<sup>3</sup> cookies. Nulltopia is the non-space between one space and another. This theoretical study defines nulltopia, celebrates nulltopia's affordances, and relates nulltopia's hazards to the flow of addiction. The argument unfolds through eight sections: (1) a description of nulltopia in terms of space and discontinuity, followed by a genealogy tracing nulltopia through (2) dreams; (3) the theatrical proscenium; (4) windows; (5) video screens; (6) loudspeakers; and (7) interactive consoles, before (8) contextualizing nulltopia relative to immersion.

At its core, this argument is an exercise in the metaphysics of imaginary worlds, with metaphysics understood not as the abstraction of ideal forms, but as deliberation about the metaphors we choose to guide our ontologies – still abstract, but less normative, and perhaps less teleological.<sup>4</sup> The research method is philosophy, following G. Deleuze and F. Guattari's definition of philosophy as "the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating

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1 CD PROJEKT RED: *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. [digital game]. Warsaw : CD Projekt, 2015.

2 DE CERTEAU, M.: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 1988, p. 117.

3 MOJANG: *Minecraft*. [digital game]. Stockholm : Mojang, 2011.

4 For more information, see: LAKOFF, G., JOHNSON, M.: *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL : University of Chicago Press, 2008.

concepts”.<sup>5</sup> Nulltopia and its lexical derivatives are neologisms intended to provoke novel intuitions for future empirical exploration. The goals of the study are to describe indices of nulltopia, and to advocate nulltopia’s importance for investigation as an object connected with wellbeing.

# Nulltopia is Unoccupiable Space

Nulltopia functions as, but does not feel like, liminal space. This affect-function split results from a division between applications of the term liminality: in architecture, liminal spaces like streets function as transitions between other spaces;<sup>6</sup> whereas in psychotherapy, especially depth psychology after C. Jung,<sup>7</sup> a liminal space is a space that plays host to transformation – in this sense, the therapist’s office may become a liminal space, because a liminal event occurs inside it. Nulltopia functions as, but does not feel like, liminal space, because nulltopia occurs at a limen between other spaces; however, being uninhabitable, nulltopia has no affect associated with its habitation. Nulltopia is less phenomenal than noumenal. Its interiority neither seems nor feels like anything.

Likewise, nulltopia may or may not be considered a type of virtual space, and nulltopia has such an ambiguous status because of differences between definitions for the ‘virtual’. P. Milgram and F. Kishino place the virtual and the real on a continuum, where virtual objects cause effects but cannot be observed as directly or interacted with in as many ways.<sup>8</sup> B. Massumi agrees that a virtual object is observable only in its effects: “The virtual, as such, is inaccessible to the senses. This does not, however, preclude figuring it, in the sense of constructing images of it. [...] When expressions of its effects are multiplied, the virtual fleetingly appears. Its fleeting is in the cracks between and the surfaces around the images”.<sup>9</sup>

In B. Massumi’s ontology, the virtual is a reservoir of potential from which a body draws one course of action by inhibiting – dampening – the rest.<sup>10</sup> The Massumian virtual is pre-qualia, unqualified, energy that has not yet been imbued with meaning – which, meaning-making, differentiation, happens later, with ‘actualization’. Perhaps ironically, B. Massumi uses the term ‘virtual’ somewhat like – in an ontology avoiding distinction between the real and unreal – what Kantian philosophy positions as the noumenal thing-in-itself inaccessible to the senses,<sup>11</sup> with one difference being that Kantian things-in-themselves are substantively different from each other, whereas Massumian virtuality is not predicated on differentiation whatsoever. In B. Massumi’s Spinozist and Deleuzian train of thought, the most important distinction is the virtual versus the actual, rather

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5 DELEUZE, G., GUATTARI, F.: *What Is Philosophy?*. New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 2.

6 See also: MATTHEWS, H.: *The Street as a Liminal Space: The Barbed Spaces of Childhood*. In CHRISTENSEN, P., O'BRIEN, M. (eds.): *Children in the City: Home Neighbourhood and Community*. London : Routledge, 2003, p. 119-135.

7 ANDREWS, H.: *Liminality*. In WRIGHT, J. D. (ed.): *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. London : Elsevier, 2015, p. 131.

8 See: MILGRAM, P., KISHINO, F.: *A Taxonomy of Mixed Reality Visual Displays*. In *IEICE Transactions on Information and Systems*, 1994, Vol. E77-D, No. 12, p. 1321-1329.

9 MASSUMI, B.: *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2002, p. 145.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 33.

11 STANG, N. F.: *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*. In ZALTA, E. N. (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA : Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022. [online]. [2022-07-31]. Available at: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism/>>.

than the phenomenal versus the noumenal or the virtual versus the real. Nevertheless, B. Massumi's ontology still admits meaning for the popular term 'virtual world', provided we distinguish the virtuality of the virtual world from the image of the virtual world. For example, the world of *Doctor Who*<sup>12</sup> is not the ensemble of images associated with the show's title, but rather something implied by the images the show presents, and those images' interrelations.

In contrast, much vernacular use of the term 'virtual' identifies virtual worlds by their difference from the real, with 'real' differentiated from 'fictive', and 'virtual' signifying some type of heightening, concretization, interactive distribution or material and energetic overdetermination of fiction. Such vernacular seems nonsensical in B. Massumi's description of virtuality, but finds some accord with G. Deleuze's, which includes *memory* – "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract".<sup>13</sup>

To avoid becoming an argument about lexicon, this study avoids answering whether imaginary worlds count as virtual; here, a digital game world is at least an imaginary world; dreams, digital games, and the imagination all involve imaginary worlds, with digital games intersubjectively distributing the practice of imagination by means of audiovisual signifiers and interaction patterns. However, some disagreeable distinctions are inevitable – here, the imaginary world of a digital game is not 'real'. The player whose avatar eats a Minecraft cookie does not 'really' eat the cookie. We could say 'physical' instead of real; but that would preclude the physical unreal – the parsing of an imaginary world via physical intuitions; in which sense the choppy Minecraft trees and climbable Minecraft mountains around our picnicking player reward physical intuitions. Reality is failure. It is a limit on what of the virtual becomes actual. The real admits of, hosts, different transferences than the fictional. We encounter the realness of the real as insurmountable disability of the imagination – limits on the capacity of the Minecraft cookie to provide nourishment; situations where imagining something does not make it so. As in the discoveries of clinical trials or laboratory experiments, the real presents as defeat – the defeat of a frame of reference, model or schema for expectation or anticipatory behaviour. The real is failed transduction.

Strangely, T. Hobbes aligns closely with B. Massumi's thinking about signal processing, of waves and resonance and dampening. Hobbes imagined imagination as transduced sensation, and sensation as transduced physical energy – imagination "is nothing but decaying sense".<sup>14</sup> Poststructuralist theory adds additional complexity to the metaphor of decay: where T. Hobbes thought about physics linearly, B. Massumi has more giants upon whose shoulders to stand – paradigms of computer programming and cybernetics, with metaphors of recursion and feedback, intervene between the Enlightenment and the poststructuralist. Massumian trains of thought constantly loop around and collide with each other. T. Hobbes's conceptualization may seem mechanistic – if imagination is decaying sense, creativity is combinatorial, not transformative;<sup>15</sup> and indeed 'transformation' comes to seem like transubstantiation, mythic – but, in positing not so much a materialism as an energetics, Hobbes serves well to connect affect theory and today's ideas about distributed cognition, which consider thinking to take place among, not only immanent to individual, physical bodies.<sup>16</sup>

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12 NEWMAN, S., WEBBER, C. E., WILSON, D. (Creators): *Doctor Who (series)*. [TV]. London : BBC, 1963-2022.

13 DELEUZE, G.: *Difference and Repetition*. New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 208.

14 HOBBS, T., SMITH, W. G. P.: *Hobbes's Leviathan: Reprinted from the Edition of 1651*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1909, p. 13.

15 BODEN, M. A.: *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*. London : Psychology Press, 2004, p. 9.

16 For more information, see: NEWEN, A., BRUIN, L. D., GALLAGHER, S.: 4E Cognition: Historical Roots, Key Concepts, and Central Issues. In NEWEN, A., BRUIN, L. D., GALLAGHER, S. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 3-16.

A lacuna remains, however, in the way that transduction, from energy to sense to imagination, encounters barriers. The distribution of cognition, like the distribution of any signal and any energy, is not trivial: only some energy becomes distributed in each situation, while some becomes obstructed, contained, or even – though not destroyed – lost, to the noumenon outside the system at hand. In the experience of playing in a digital game world, images must transfer from a world represented and inhabited in some ways, to a world represented and inhabited in others. Such transference must cross the barrier that is nulltopia. While the concept of a nulltopia, non-space, may seem grossly fictive, the non-transference of certain forms of energy or material – such as the depicted physical nourishment of a cookie in Minecraft – is a profound and strange occurrence; so strange, this study thinks, that of nulltopia, we deserve not only a practical account or praxis, as has emerged in industry through the operationalized metaphor of 'immersion', but the additional, extended abstraction of a metaphysics.

## Nulltopia of Dream

In dreams, object permanence is not consistent. A dreamworld changes wildly around its dreamer. Such transience is especially true for the parts of the dream not presently imagined. In dream, it may be possible to, for example, look to the left and see a door, then look ahead into a dark, interstellar void, then look to the left and neither see the door nor have any sensation that the door should have continued to be there. The permanence, substance, persistence from moment to moment, that a real door would have is not a feature of the now-gone door as dream object – the object that no longer is, that has been masked, dampened, inhibited.

The reduced, etiolated, or absent permanence of oneiric objects likewise applies to the ground a dreamer might assume to support their body. 'Standing' in a dreamworld, a dreamer has no knowledge of the ground underfoot; the ground is a consummate mystery. Not only is the dreamer's ability to investigate their environment limited – where some senses become attenuated in the dreamworld, perhaps including the dreamer's tactile capacity to feel qualities of the ground – further, the ground will not necessarily persist. The oneiric ground has as little substance as any place of human subjectivity. The following question becomes paradoxical: looking out across the world of the dream, where is your dream body? Where are you – where is your mind?

The dream is both a prototypical case of immersive imaginary, and the closest a subject can become to inhabiting nulltopia, where nulltopia is uninhabitable space. As J. Gough contemplates in Minecraft's evocative *End Poem*: "what did this player dream? [...] It dreamed it created. And it dreamed it destroyed. It dreamed it hunted, and was hunted. It dreamed of shelter. / Hah, the original interface. A million years old, and it still works".<sup>17</sup>

## Nulltopia of Proscenium

The first nulltopic moment occurred somewhere in time immemorial. Perhaps it was the night sky – looking up and seeing shapes in the stars. Somebody postulated an astrological theory – that constellations are figures interacting, looking at each other, chasing

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17 For example, see: GOUGH, J.: *End Poem*. In MOJANG: *Minecraft*. [digital game]. Stockholm : Mojang, 2011.

each other. Sometimes the meaning of these signifiers became politically important, where interpretations hewed courses of action; yet despite feelings of determination, *cosmos exegesis* depends on *cosmos agnosis*; the disjunction, that, to some extent, what happens in the *cosmos* stays in the *cosmos*. That long hazy time ago, not being able to perturb or otherwise investigate constellations, interpreters of the stars gained the option to use them as discursive catalysts, as canvases of theoretical and dramatic projection.

The theatrical proscenium is a fictionalizing technology, forming a distinction between space onstage rendering imaginary happenings, and the seats, the theatron, space hosting bodies of audience. The proscenium's delineation of imaginary space emerges from the general phenomenon of mimesis: though mimicry is a common feature of learning, a learner imitating, to embody and internalize, a practice, the proscenium facilitates a less immersive, less transformative mimicry, a form of partial mimicry; because, onstage, actor and character consubstantiate in human body. An actor does not fully turn into their character, but rather puts it on, not becoming but playing as, like the stage plays as rather than becomes the character's world. The unreality of drama gives it fluidity, actors playing multiple roles, the stage playing multiple places, liminal events of death and maiming proving miraculously reversible, trauma transformed into an object of contemplation and sometimes aesthetic pleasure.

Where maiming normally does not transcend the bounds of the imaginary, morality proves more like pleasure – copiously transmissible – motivating generations of moral concern about fiction, from Plato to M. Consalvo, who criticizes the notion that the boundaries of a game separate in-game activity from outside ethics.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, to interact with a represented world is to enact one-to-one effects in the real, as when a military drone pilot gazes into a console and aims a weapon, simultaneously causing real missiles to launch from real drones causing real suffering. While *nulltopia* prevents the drone pilot from reaching through the screen and making manual adjustments to the flying drone, the pilot nevertheless distributes their cognition, and violent intent, across *nulltopia*. Theatres have less aptitude for such trans-subjective, trans-spatial signal transduction. Nevertheless, where audiences gazed across the proscenium's threshold into a virtual world, they could still walk onto the stage and pester the actors. The proscenium is *nulltopia* by fiat, audience agreeing to cast the limit of the stage in the role of inter-world portal, an architecture maintained in the absence of walking through.

## Nulltopia of Window

Enjoying the privileges of passengership, a child plays a game with the following procedure: on a train, or in the backseat of a car, look out the window and imagine someone alongside. While the car attains a speed at which no animal could run, the imagined figure yet lopes along, keeping pace with the car, overleaping obstacles, moving with the visual flow imposed by the frame of the window upon the landscape outside. Perhaps there are other phantasms: a spaceship; a low-flying airplane. The moving window becomes an imaginative aide.

In contrast to the limen of the proscenium – which presents a scene to an audience with both body sets in approximate stasis – and, perhaps, the object impermanence of the dream, to the extent that the dreamer's imagination supplies itself with its own

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18 For more information, see: CONSALVO, M.: There Is No Magic Circle. In *Games and Culture*, 2009, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 408-417.

sense of movement – the vehicle window presents a technology of imagination through *dromology*,<sup>19</sup> through speed. The motive power of the vehicle does the cognitive work of flow-generation. Gazing through, across, the vehicle window, the passenger's imagination traverses a dromological gap inaccessible to a human body moving alone. Lubricating visions of spaceships and super-fast runners, dromological disjunction differs from other gazing. Here is a precursor to cinema: before there were video screens, there was, for a wealthy class, the world across vehicle glass. Thus we meet a polysemic term: *flow*. As B. Soderman notes, a phenomenal flow seems, like play, to be 'autotelic',<sup>20</sup> providing its own telos, as a type of experience functioning as an aesthetic good-in-itself. Dissecting M. Csikszentmihalyi's flow psychology,<sup>21</sup> B. Soderman notes M. Csikszentmihalyi's connection with A. Maslow.<sup>22</sup> A. Maslow posited a hierarchy of needs at whose base one finds survival exigencies like the pursuit of air, water and food, and in whose superstructure one finds 'peak experiences' of self-actualization. M. Csikszentmihalyi presented flow like Maslowian peak experience,<sup>23</sup> and advocated the pursuit of flow; leading, among other discourses, to processes of gamification, methods to better flow various productive activities, making work like play, making labour seem autotelic.

Although flow is normally associated with a sense of virtuosic activity,<sup>24</sup> passive shortcuts exist toward flow-like experiences. Consider, for example, the YouTube sub-genre of 'Minecraft parkour', featuring the flowing first-person perspective of a Minecraft avatar leaping from *voxel* to *voxel*.<sup>25</sup> The video echoes the trance of the child gazing out the car window, maintaining flowing subjectivity via vicarious movement, during real, seated passivity. The passenger trance is adaptive to patience, to the world going by on the way to a destination. In an intervening development, between a windowed vehicle and an addicted audience, the video screen would make nulltopia more than a side effect.

## Nulltopia of Screen

Cinematic motion picture emerges in large part from experimentation with the psychophysics of motion. High-frequency flashes of light trigger neurons that sense movement, turning sequences of pictures into images both of space and movement.<sup>26</sup> Here, this study speculates, is the mechanism by which looking out a car window facilitates imagination of moving creatures: the motion is not imaginary – motion is really there, in the flashes of things going by. While the creature may be imaginary, its movement is a high-fidelity representation, fictional only through its imaginative context; fictional in the sense that a real actor mimics an imagined role. When we already had the barrier of glass, the speed of a carriage, the fidelity of a photograph, cinema brought them together.

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19 See also: VIRILIO, P.: *Speed and Politics*. Los Angeles, CA : Semiotext(e), 2006.

20 SODERMAN, B.: *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject*. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2021, p. 32.

21 CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, M.: *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games*. San Francisco, CA : Jossey-Bass, 1975, p. 74.

22 See: MASLOW, A.: A Theory of Human Motivation. In *Psychological Review*, 1943, Vol. 50, No. 4, p. 370-396.

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24 CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, M.: *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games*. San Francisco, CA : Jossey-Bass, 1975, p. 74.

25 For example, see: *1 Hour 20 Minutes of Relaxing Minecraft Parkour (Nostalgia, Scenery, No Ads)*. Released on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2018. [online]. [2022-07-31]. Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\\_Dv4JMiWk8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_Dv4JMiWk8)>; Remark by the author: Voxel is a term used in 3D computer graphics, by analogy with the pixel in 2-dimensional space.

26 For more information, see: ZACKS, J.: *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies*. New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 154-161.

The visual fidelity of photographic technology prompted a normative response in art criticism, exemplified in C. Greenberg's famous medium-specificity argument for abstract painting.<sup>27</sup> Per C. Greenberg, photography had completed the modernist project of rendering visual perspective, becoming so hi-fi that the art of painting seems comparatively inadequate; so, rather than compete for a different field's niche, painters ought to embrace abstract expressionism, a style in which paintings avoid representing recognizable objects, and evoke instead a sense of what C. Greenberg positioned as painting's greatest good: flatness. Yet flatness, pristine flatness, is a difficult effect to render; by comparison, painters easily slip into depicting some vestige of perspective, through a curious window-like power of the canvas.

Subsequent fictions – *Dark Souls*<sup>28</sup>, for example, in the Painted World of Ariamis – have played with the idea of entering a painting with one's whole body. Greenbergian art criticism implies such an imaginative entrance enacted to some extent whenever a viewer gazes into paintings that do not achieve the ideal of abstract expressionism. C. Greenberg suggests, in effect, that most paintings produce low-fi images of virtual space. The video screen is a canvas, accelerated. The screen paints fast because it has a generic, dormant form – unexcited screens are just walls; but, excited, a screen hosts ephemera varying with an ease whose closest precedents lie in theatre and dream. The screen is message-unspecific, an unfixed medium for fixed 'media', a window that can move with infinite pace, its expenses of energy, its sacrifices, hidden.

## The Acousmatic – Nulltopia of Loudspeaker

In the discourse around electroacoustic composition, 'source-bonding' refers to "the natural tendency to relate sounds to supposed sources and causes, and to relate sounds to each other because they appear to have shared or associated origins".<sup>29</sup> In 'acousmatic' composition, music plays back through loudspeakers, which break the bond between recorded object and playback environment, a situation that musician R. M. Schafer called *schizophonia*. Schizophonia imbues audio with a sense of expansive potential provenance, making the source of each sound in an acousmatic composition mysterious; making the source bond into an object of creative, receptive reconstruction.<sup>30</sup>

Just as the video screen, as generic object and physical barrier, serves as window into an imagined world, so the loudspeaker, by destabilizing the source bond, facilitates the aesthetic attribution of sounds to imagined scenarios. Composers instrumentalize the capacity of the generic loudspeaker to afford fantastical continuity between spaces, as can be heard in extradiegetic film music, music of ambiguous imaginary attribution; or among varied reverberation effects applied simultaneously to different instruments in a pop recording. The loudspeaker is schizophonic and thus schizo-spatial. It presents, here, the sound of space there. The loudspeaker's rendering of alternate space extends the window role-play of the screen, as both an implication to a world on the other side – not

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27 See: GREENBERG, C.: Towards a Newer Laocoon. In *Partisan Review*, 1940, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 296-310.

28 FROMSOFTWARE: *Dark Souls*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Namco Bandai Games, 2011.

29 SMALLEY, D.: Spectromorphology: Explaining Sound-Shapes. In *Organised Sound*, 1997, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 110.

30 SCHAFER, R. M.: *The New Soundscape: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher*. Scarborough : Berandol Music, 1969, p. 43.

just the forests and fields passing outside the train, but the sound of the rails too – and a barrier to the transduction of some parts of that world, that world yet removed from the tests of touch.

# Nulltopia of Console

The earliest nulltopic moments involved situations of physical defeat – the stars we cannot influence; the trains we cannot keep up with; the stage we ought not to tread upon. Nulltopia appeared in the absence of experimental intervention. In contrast, the game console is a technology of robust nulltopia, affording experimentation while suspending disbelief, through a form of ‘ranged touch’<sup>31</sup> whose prosthetic sensors are discontinuous – fingers, hitboxes, brushing the scenery while lacking need or capacity to protrude across the window’s threshold.

Of interactivity robust and limited, the console<sup>32</sup> of perspective, sound, movement renders not only images but ecologically inspired models. Objects onscreen present, help make present, an imaginary world by interacting with some fidelity to remembered ecologies. Through, among other frameworks, physical interrelationships assigned via physics engine, luminary interrelationships assigned via graphics processor, and reverberations processed by audio modules, the virtual world worlds, appearing not just in images and sounds, but a schema for the behaviour of images and sounds; images and sounds promising plural potentials surplus to what the console presently or ever actualizes.

Understood as technology, the console facilitates impressive high-fidelity transference of relational systems, training player reflexes, decisions. Toward ethics mitigating traumatic or violent-making play, much has been said about ‘bleed’ between worlds.<sup>33</sup> Less has been said about the losses associated with non-transference. As player sits in home theatron, orchestrating the acts of an onscreen avatar, they pursue actualization without satisfaction. The dissociation, where, for example, an avatar becomes well-adapted to its surrounds, while its player’s health deteriorates, emerges from the difference in affordances between the real and imaginary. Where images change as fast as needed to entertain, real progress unfolds slow, halting, and painful. Nulltopia admits some emotional, sensory, affective transference, but food, water, shelter, and many other underpinnings of health do not make the crossing, turning actualizations across nulltopia into private goods, difficult to share outside the imaginary (an avatar cannot bake cookies for its player’s friends, only for other avatars) and riven from many needs of the human body. Mind saps matter. Non-transferable, consequence-impermanent triumphs form a recipe for addiction – in their triumphs, and in their privations. No subjectivity-immersing technology can remedy the incompleteness nulltopia imposes through time gazing across the screen, that hides what it demands from audience and spectator.

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31 COOK, M., TWEET, J., WILLIAMS, S.: *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook: Core Rulebook 1 v.3.5*. Renton, WA : Wizards of the Coast, 2003, p. 141.

32 Remark by the author: We used the term ‘console’ in order not to generalize beyond games, which involve a screen and loudspeakers. An alternative term ‘platform’ might include unexpected counterexamples from virtual or extended reality that do not involve nulltopia.

33 MASSUMI, B.: *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2002, p. 46.; For more information, see: SHAW, I., WARF, B.: *Worlds of Affect: Virtual Geographies of Video Games*. In *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 2009, Vol. 41, No. 6, p. 1332-1343.

# Immersion at the End of Nulltopia

Where nulltopia defeats some forms of transfer, the pursuit of immersive design can be understood as the attempt to eliminate nulltopia. Designers of training simulators hope that, in visually and auditorily enveloping participants in simulation worlds, they can better convey the experiences of imagined scenarios, and thus better teach transferable lessons. Simulators have met with especial success in aviation, where the mechanics of a vehicle prove easier to simulate than the experience of a free-range human body – and where the rigorous training rituals of pilots construct and protect the value of the simulator as a representation of aviation. The spectre of a *Matrix*<sup>34</sup>-like totally immersive world, however, appears in forbidding contrast, as a simulation that less corresponds to the real than overwrites.

The etymology of *immersion* invokes the metaphor of a fluid. Total non-immersion in one substance is immersion in something else, such as a swimmer experiences when diving from a state of immersion in air to a state of immersion in water. Nulltopia, as surface, can be conceptualized as an obstruction of flow. Fortuitously, such flow aversity, like that of the miraculous proscenium, keeps aesthetic responses aesthetic, by defeating the transference of some noxious stimuli from fiction to reality. Further, nulltopia makes criticism of images more comfortable than criticism of real, in-your-face characters, who, walking out of Hollywood's silver screen, would often come angry and well-armed. In contrast, R. Ebert asks: what role would critics have for VR movies, *vrovies*?<sup>35</sup> Where movies already have much power to move spectators, *vrovies* would acquire additional tools to defeat critical stances, critical reservations. Where marginalized movie spectators have developed survival strategies, like what b. hooks<sup>36</sup> calls the *oppositional gaze*,<sup>37</sup> the *vrovie* promises to intensify the battles of marginalized audiences for representation and survival.

Total immersion, no vestige of nulltopia, is identity with the experience of a body in a world, complete with memories, pains, and the object permanence of physical consequences – total birth, death, limits of memory, and everything between. It would be tempting to say that we already have total immersion; but anyone who has encountered nulltopia, of dream or screen, has enjoyed its glimmer of alterity. In a difference theory of meaning, where “differences carry signification”<sup>38</sup> and “a map is not the territory it represents”,<sup>39</sup> non-identity is a condition of representation; total immersion means incomparability, impossibility of discourse, beyond magical interventions like *The Matrix*'s ‘red pill’. All discussed experiences of immersion rely on some surface, contact with which potentiates reference. By obstructing flow, by differentiating, nulltopia facilitates discourse, metaphors instead of what we might call *holophors*, the whole transport, impossible, figured in *Star Trek*'s transporter<sup>40</sup> and holodeck,<sup>41</sup> of objects from world to world.

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34 WACHOWSKI, L., WACHOWSKI, A. (Directors): *The Matrix*. [DVD]. Burbank, CA : Warner Bros., 1999.

35 EBERT, R.: *The Chilling Film Concept of Virtual Reality*. Released on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1992. [online]. [2022-07-31]. Available at: <<https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/the-chilling-film-concept-of-virtual-reality>>.

36 Remark by the author: An American author, bell hooks, is known for stylizing her name in all lowercase to emphasize her message instead of her name.

37 HOOKS, B.: *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York, NY : Routledge, 2014, p. 115-132.

38 SAUSSURE, F. D.: *Course in General Linguistics*. New York, NY : Philosophical Library, 1959, p. 118.

39 KORZYBSKI, A.: *Science and Sanity; An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. New York, NY : The Science Press Printing Company, 1933, p. 58.

40 BUTLER, R. (Director): *Star Trek. Episode 1: The Cage*. [TV]. New York, NY : NBC, 1966.

41 SCANLAN, J. (Director): *Star Trek: The Next Generation. Episode 12: The Big Goodbye*. [TV]. Los Angeles, CA : Paramount Domestic Television, 1988.

Yet while much does not flow across nulltopia, what does flow, flows fast. In videogamified gambling, nulltopia lubricates money loss.<sup>42</sup> In video vehicle control, nulltopia facilitates feats of agile piloting (or crashing).<sup>43</sup> In video role-playing games, nulltopia facilitates the exploitive pattern of extensive grinding,<sup>44</sup> in which boredom takes over where physical fatigue once motivated change of chore. Perhaps the most fearsome thing about nulltopia is the comfort of gazing into it, of the flowing subjectivity of an unmoving subject, the sense of being taken away, made patient, by a locomotive whose exhaustion lacks nervous fibres.

## Conclusion

Where interactive fiction is often considered using a metaphysical structure composed of four parts – player, avatar, real world, and imaginary world – this essay posits five: player in real world; avatar in imaginary world; and, between two worlds, nulltopia. Where utopia is nowhere, a fiction, nulltopia has place but not content, not even fictive content. Where space is practiced place, nulltopia is practiced through partial traversal, but not occupation. Where actualization is the enactment of what is imagined, desired, sought, or impelled toward, nulltopia is a partial barrier to actualization, potentiating an *etiolated actual*, a satisfaction in cultivating fictional resources.

Nulltopia bounds the extent and qualities of transference from an imaginary world, which, like a thought experiment or rehearsal, benefit from limited consequence. While moments of superheated immersivity characterize engagement with many great digital games, such moments eventually give way to the power shutting off, the console cooling down, and a revitalized player attendance to a real world in which the best lessons of the fictive hope to find application. Digital games are, among other things, a form of distributed hypothetical reasoning, amid scenarios whose audiovisual fidelity becomes socially constructed as impressive only in their subsequent absence; when, as a limit of consequence, nulltopia facilitates leaving the thrall of the fantastic. To echo M. Foucault's encomium for heterotopia:<sup>45</sup> in a society without screens, multiverses, and their plural adventures, will be lost, leaving a metaverse, and its governmentality, in their place.

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# Spatiality, Focalization and Temporality in Horror Games

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Klaudia Jancsovics is a doctoral student at the University of Szeged in the Department of Comparative Literature. Her research belongs to game studies, and she examines digital games with the methods of literary and film studies. She aims to prove that digital games can tell stories in unique, interactive ways while using the techniques of literary writings and movies, whilst they are more than mere storytellers. So far, she has published many studies focusing on different digital games (e.g., in *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies*, she analyzed the artistic value of several digital games). She also explores the different approaches (like the characteristics of detective stories, movie language, or horror stories in digital games). She also held a course at her university where she introduced game studies to the students. It was the first game studies-related class at the University of Szeged. She has also been interested in narratology, game studies, digital humanities, intermediality, and film studies.

## ABSTRACT:

The horror genre can be found both in books and movies to shock and scare the audience. In digital games, players have to survive, they try to progress while they have to overcome frightening obstacles, otherwise they cannot be successful. The paper analyses three main topics: spatiality (where closed, open and looping spaces are in the centre), focalization (based on G. Genette's term., We shows how the different angles could contribute to the narrative and what unique methods exist), and temporality (where traumatic experience and looping time is at the focal point, and E. Husserl's protentions and retention terms will be important as well). We also argue that these games are unusual if we take a look at M. Csíkszentmihályi's skills-challenges diagram and see if they fit in the flow zone. The paper aims to extend our understanding of horror games.

## KEY WORDS:

flow, focalization, horror, protention, retention, spatiality, temporality.

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# Introduction

Defining an entire genre – regardless of the medium – can be a challenging task, and the topic attracts the interest of academics from time to time. R. Altman states, “from Aristotle to Todorov and from Horace to Wellek and Warren, the topic of genre has remained one of the staples of theoretical discourse”.<sup>1</sup> It can be “one of staples of theoretical discourse,” because genres are born, transform or even vanish; they are not permanent and stable. Due to their nature, “‘temporary structures’ is also a good definition for – genres: morphological arrangements that *last* in time, but always only for *some* time”.<sup>2</sup> No medium is an exception.<sup>3</sup>

But how can we grasp one particular genre, the subject of this paper: *horror*? As D. Mieritz and S. C. Boonen state, “even with common conventions and formulas, horror games can differ widely from each other in terms of gameplay, game-structure, and settings of the game-world”.<sup>4</sup> According to R. Dansky, horror games are an unusual fit in the gaming industry because most genres are defined by their play styles or content, but horror indicates a unique atmosphere, in other words, the mood of the game.<sup>5</sup> The author lists a few common elements from this game genre: tight or locked camera, long bits of exposition, and characters wandering off by themselves (which will have consequences). Furthermore, “to supporting gameplay, creating an engaging story, and writing good dialogue, the horror game writer must help create and sustain a feeling of fear”.<sup>6</sup> Fear is one

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1 ALTMAN, R.: *Film/Genres*. London : British Film Institute, 1999, p. 1.

2 MORETTI, F.: *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for a Literary History*. London, New York, NY : Verso, 2005, p. 14.

3 Remark by the author: One example is crime fiction. From the highly intellectual 'armchair' detectives, the trend is shifted toward the tough, streetwise hard-boiled figures both in movies and books.; For more information, see: PORTER, D.: *The Private Eye*. In PRIESTMAN, M. (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 95-113.

4 MIERITZ, D., BOONEN, S. C.: *Paralysing Fear: Player Agency Parameters in Horror Games*. In JØRGENSEN, K., ŠVELCH, J. (eds.): *DiGRA Nordic '18: Proceedings of 2018 International DiGRA Nordic Conference*. Bergen : DiGRA, 2018, p. 10. [online]. [2022-11-15]. Available at: <[http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA\\_Nordic\\_2018\\_paper\\_19.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_Nordic_2018_paper_19.pdf)>

5 See: DANSKY, R.: *Writing for Horror Games*. In DESPAIN, W. (ed.): *Writing for Video Game Genres. From FPS to RPG*. Wellesley, MA : A K Peters, Ltd., 2009, p. 113-126.

6 Ibidem, p. 115.

of the key elements of this genre, and this emotion can arise from knowing that something terrifying will happen, but we are not sure what the threat exactly is and when it will reveal itself (it usually slowly comes forward). “Much of the horror of these games is constructed using feelings of tension and terror – the trepidation and anticipation that the player feels as they move through the game. These feelings are created, for example, through the use of music, as other media does to heighten dramatic tension”.<sup>7</sup> In my opinion, unpredictability, the fact that we have to go through the given route and our responsibility to the character increases the sense of fear.<sup>8</sup> The sounds and the dark visual effects provide more dimensions to these types of stories and deepen the player’s immersion.<sup>9</sup>

When someone is watching a horror movie or reading it in a book, they want to shiver and experience the threat from a safe distance. Fiction and the different medium’s characteristic are the distance: we can put away the book or pause the movie (or, as we can read in B. Perron’s book, close our eyes).<sup>10</sup> What makes digital games so unique is that the player becomes the protagonist or, as we mentioned, they will be responsible for their fate: if the player fails, the story cannot continue and/or the character will suffer (in many cases, the player will be punished with jumpscare scenes). B. Perron summarizes this issue as follows: “closing one’s eyes in front of a scary scene is actually a way to take flight from the feared object. However, looking away as a monster approaches toward the player-character in a horror game will undoubtedly not allow a gamer to wait out the threat or avoid seeing the character’s demise and just keep going afterwards”.<sup>11</sup>

Being aware that we cannot defend against the threat with traditional defence mechanisms makes horror games more frightening. We are exposed to the algorithm, and in several cases fighting back is not even an option. As we see it, digital games in the horror genre are the perfect representation of the whole medium’s logic: we are “trapped” between frameworks where we have to cooperate with the algorithm, and although our instinct would dictate otherwise (e.g. we would close our eyes, hide or fight, but the game does not give us the opportunity to do so) we are forced to follow the rules. Of course, the genre is evolving in relation to the market needs, but it is worth looking at horror games in general.

In the following few chapters, we will focus on one particular game – *Love, Sam*<sup>12</sup> – and will mention several others to show how horror games use spatiality, focalization, temporality and audio-visual elements in order to create a frightening atmosphere. One step further, the paper will use E. Husserl’s protentions and retentions terms<sup>13</sup> in order to shed light on the genre’s attributes. *Love, Sam* was released in 2019, and it grasped my attention with its story and unique solutions. Moreover, the game has an uncommon storytelling method, mainly relying on written information, just like many walking

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7 STOBART, D.: *Videogames and Horror. From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!*. Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2019, p. 28.

8 Remark by the author: It is worth to mention the different terms which connect to the topic. As D. Stobart highlights, terror is an „internal, psychological, feeling that there is something to fear around the next corner, in the darkness, or behind the closed door. Horror, by contrast, is the realization of that fear“.; See also in: STOBART, D.: *Videogames and Horror. From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!*. Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2019, p. 3.

9 Remark by the author: We follow J. Murray’s term here, which is based on the experience of being submerged in water: “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus“.; For more information, see: MURRAY, J. H.: *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York, NY : The Free Press, 2016, p. 99.

10 PERRON, B.: *The World of Scary Video Games. Study in Videoludic Horror*. New York, NY : Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 88-89.

11 Ibidem, p. 89.

12 KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam (PC version)*. [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

13 For more information, see: HUSSERL, E.: *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*. Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press, 1973.

simulators do. The paper also focuses on M. Csíkszentmihályi's flow theory. As far as we see, while most games can evoke flow, the horror genre is an exception, or at least, it can fall in another zone in M. Csíkszentmihályi's diagram. An important remark before one reads further: the paper contains major spoilers.

## Flow or Anxiety: The Horror Games' Mechanism

Immersion has already been mentioned in the Introduction, and in this chapter, we suggest approaching this question from a different angle. M. Csíkszentmihályi's flow theory resonates with J. Murray's findings: in order to achieve an ideal state of mind, we have to focus on one particular activity. "Attention is the medium that makes information appear in consciousness".<sup>14</sup> A game can immerse its players if it has the ability to 'lock' gamers in the fictional world so they will use their 'physic energy'<sup>15</sup> on the game.

According to M. Csíkszentmihályi, the perfect zone – the flow, when one is streaming with the events – appears when we have to face a highly challenging task but we have the necessary skills to solve it.<sup>16</sup> Horror games do not always let the players use their skills; there are several scenarios where the opportunities are tightly restricted. We would like to argue that these games – as they are more focused on fear – more likely fall in the territory of anxiety or arousal in M. Csíkszentmihályi's diagram.<sup>17</sup> But then, why would anyone play these games?

Players want to experience vulnerability, while the game gives them challenges. As we will see, survival and a happy ending is not always an option. The nature of horror games – its core mechanism – indicates that we will immerse ourselves in a frightening world while we experience dread. I'm not stating that horror games cannot trigger us reaching flow, but if we look at these games' methods, we can find that they are more focused on causing anxiety or at least arousal. Sudden changes – in every aspect of these games – cannot let the player be confident about what will happen next. Unpredictability takes away confidence, and the player cannot stream with the events. Now, let's take a closer look at how horror digital games can strengthen the mentioned mental states.

## Spatial Storytelling

Spatiality is one of the most important aspects of a digital game: the sculpted world helps the players to immerse themselves in the fictional space, and even the most minor details can build the whole atmosphere further (sometimes, they function as clues about the fictional world). As H. Jenkins and K. Squire highlight, spatial elements set the terms

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14 CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, M.: The Flow Experience and Its Significance for Human Psychology. In CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, M., CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, I. S. (eds.): *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 18.

15 Ibidem, p. 20.

16 Ibidem, p. 29.

17 Remark by the author: M. Csíkszentmihályi also presented the challenges/skill ratio diagram at a TED talk.; See: CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, M.: *Flow, the Secret to Happiness*. Released on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2014. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <[https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihalyi\\_flow\\_the\\_secret\\_to\\_happiness](https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_flow_the_secret_to_happiness)>.

for the player's experiences, "[i]nformation essential to the story is embedded in objects such as books, carved runes, or weapons. Artifacts, such as jewels, may embody friendship or rivalries or may become magical sources of the player's power. The game space is organized so that paths through the world guide or constrain action, making sure we encounter characters or situations critical to the narrative".<sup>18</sup> Besides the rules, the given space is the other boundary that can help to keep the player on the route. Invisible walls, closed doors, barricaded corridors, and the list continues: they are responsible for marking the path and restricting the character's movement, ensuring that the player encounters every important narrative element.

It is crucial to look at the fictional environment where the gameplay happens. Love, Sam takes place in a small apartment with a bathroom and an open space where a kitchen, a writing desk, a bookshelf and a bed can be found. The whole place gives a claustrophobic feeling; the main character cannot leave the apartment, and the only window is a tiny one (that is positioned up high). The light is poor, it is raining outside, the sky is dark, and only lightning filters in through the small window. The player is mostly 'anchored' to the writing-table, little or no movement is needed to unfold the story and progress in the gameplay.<sup>19</sup> The act of reading – the major activity in the game – is from time to time disturbed by strange events which need to be investigated (the phone starts to ring, the window shuts open, somebody knocking on the door, etc.). The player can look behind them almost anytime while sitting on the chair. This ability evokes the 'behind you' horror cliché when the threat can sneak up behind the protagonist. The fact that the character faces a wall most of the time – due to the writing desk's placement – and an open space behind them arouses vulnerability. At one point in the game, the player learns that a ghost is haunting them, and when the character enters the bathroom, the light will turn off, and there will be no escape for a while. This kind of confinement goes beyond the previously experienced situation, especially when we realize that a furious soul is behind the strange events that happened.

Most frequently, horror games operate with narrow and small rooms, corridors to increase the sense of enclosure, and/or the other common spatial methods are the huge open spaces with several objects, elements where the threat can hide (e.g. trees, abandoned buildings, etc.). For example, *The Quarry*<sup>20</sup> or *Resident Evil Village*<sup>21</sup> enables one to move freely on the given map, but there are restrictions, and inside the buildings, the space is small. The Quarry takes place in a wood that functions as a hunting area (werewolves can move there quickly), whereas inside the accommodations, other threats are waiting for the player. In the case of Resident Evil Village, even though players cannot leave the territory, they have the freedom to explore it according to their will – of course, there are some restrictions, and a few places will be available when the player makes progress in the game. It is not necessary to go into every house or explore all the rooms, but one can find valuable items and clues there. In this case, 'clues' refer to different pieces of information which tell the story of the village and its inhabitants (e.g., players can learn more about the background of the four Lords, who they were before the mutation, etc.).

The same applies to many horror games: the story unfolds while the player explores the space. In other words, the environment helps to tell the narrative. Being chased or getting scared and exploring the environment creates an interesting rhythm in horror games.

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18 SQUIRE, K., JENKINS, H.: *The Art of Contested Spaces*. [online]. [2022-10-24]. Available at: <<http://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/contestedspaces.html>>.

19 Remark by the author: There are a few puzzle elements in the game. These parts give more dimension to the whole, they build the story further. In addition, the riddles provide the player a frustrating feeling: in some cases, they have to solve them within a short amount of time.

20 SUPERMASSIVE GAMES: *The Quarry*. [digital game]. Novato, CA : 2K Games, 2022.

21 CAPCOM: *Resident Evil Village (PlayStation 4 version)*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 2021.

They invite the player to learn more and try to understand their fictional world, but at the same time, there is a danger that blocks the players from doing so. It is not uncommon that players are forced to go back to a given space after escaping from a pursuer because they missed a clue. The player's need to investigate everything and their predictability offers many possibilities to the game developers and designers. In some cases, the game 'plays' with the users' attention: in *Resident Evil Village*, the player has to search for a code at a point. It's not a challenging task because the numbers are written in bright colours; however, they are only visible from a window. When the character steps closer, a monster jumps in front of the window. This jumpscare builds on the player's predictability. *Paranormal HK*<sup>22</sup> has a similar scene. The player encounters a locked door that has a unique padlock. In order to find out the code, the player has to look through a small keyhole. Even though they put everything in the correct order, the door remains closed. The following attempt to check the code – through the keyhole – will cause a jumpscare: a monster will appear in front of the player. In these cases, the fictional world plays with the gamers' attention.

Another spatial method in horror games – besides open spaces and small interior ones – is the recurring/'looping space', where the character stays in the same environment, but it slightly changes as the game progresses. Horror games that try to explore traumas and mental illnesses use this approach frequently. It is worth mentioning here *Layers of Fear*<sup>23</sup> and *Ouija Rumors*<sup>24</sup> as examples. In both cases, the character goes from room to room in the same building, but the space will be more disturbed until it finally turns upside down. As the environment changes, the story unfolds, and the player gets closer to the source of the issue. Sometimes a hidden trauma, some kind of buried atrocity lies in the background or the protagonist does not know their own, twisted past. The character and the player are in the same position with regard to the possession of information. In this case, the same space reveals the truth that changes in relation to the protagonist's mental state. In other words, the player is both closed in a place and someone's mind.

## Audio-visual Elements and Focalization

"Please don't look away."  
- Love, Sam<sup>25</sup>

The above-mentioned quote can be found in Love, Sam, at one of the most intense and frightening parts. As was already stated, reading is an essential part of this game; the whole story unfolds through diary pages. Some of them are in a diary, while others look like they have been ripped out, they can be found on individual papers (with dates). This will be an important clue as to the identity of the diaries' owners.

As C. Solarski highlights in his book, players can experience a one-sided approach to communication through written materials. According to him, this is usually not a welcomed solution because players want interactivity. He adds that "written narrative information may be a necessity for development budget reasons or a welcome story

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22 GHOSTPIE STUDIO: *Paranormal HK*. [digital game]. Hong Kong : Ghostpie Studio, 2020.

23 BLOOBER TEAM: *Layers of Fear*. [digital game]. Austen, TX : Aspyr Media, 2016.

24 LSGAMEDEV: *Ouija Rumors*. [digital game]. Miri : Lsgamedev, 2022.

25 Remark by the author: A quote in one of the diary pages from the game Love, Sam.; See also: KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam (PC version)*. [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

layer for players who enjoy delving into every aspect of a plot.”<sup>26</sup> Walking simulators usually use written materials in order to unfold the narrative. According to M. Kagen, “in Walking Simulators, the game world and game narrative tend to revolve heavily around death. Often the world is postapocalyptic, haunted, or both. This tension – between an undying PC and a dead, empty world – creates a focus on death by intentional omission.”<sup>27</sup> In *Love, Sam*’s case, reading is perfectly tied to the oppressive atmosphere and the dread, while interactivity is not fully suspended. The protagonist can die, but a restart is always an option – in this sense, the protagonist’s actual death only comes when the player does not want to start over –, while the world is haunted and almost empty. The game resonates well with the walking simulators’ methods.

In *Love, Sam*, the player does not even know who they are controlling (it will be revealed in the end), while a high-school drama – about unrequited, obsessive love and cruel classmates – slowly turns into a tragedy. We will learn that a girl, Sam Holt – who just moved to Rosen Peek recently – falls for the popular football star, Brian Colmer. She writes her experiences down in her diary, this is how we learn that she has to deal with Brian’s best friend, Kyle and Kyle’s mean girlfriend, Stacy, who seems to hate her. We can read their story without knowing who ‘we’ are in this drama or if we are even related to anything that happened in Rosen Peek. As the story unfolds, the romantic fairy tale becomes a toxic obsession, somebody is stalking Brian. We can assume that Sam is the one who wrote every diary entry, and she has grown unhealthy feelings towards Brian, but we could not be more wrong. The diary – that is not torn apart – slowly reveals more disturbing drawings and short sentences about someone’s devotion to Brian. In addition, a torn-out newspaper piece will inform us that Sam died at age 17. Stacy and Kyle humiliated her, and according to the news, she had thrown herself off a cliff. Now, the player can assume that the threat in the apartment is none other than Sam.

Audio-visual elements have an essential impact on digital games; they build the whole atmosphere further. “Audio alone can transform the aesthetic experience of gameplay by providing an ambient atmosphere for the player’s actions. Audio is a term that covers two principle categories in the context of games: music and sound effects”.<sup>28</sup> Many horror games operate with several sound effects. In *Love, Sam*, a rattling voice returns frequently. This gives a spine-shivering experience, but when Sam’s tragic fate is revealed, it will be much worse. She did not die instantly when she fell: she tried to grasp for air from her broken neck. This fact – which we can learn from the newspaper – explains the strange sound: the rattling voice belongs to Sam’s ghost. At this point, we can see how the narrative elements and the sound effect create a more frightening atmosphere. Furthermore, the player must put the pieces together because we cannot read a full summary of the story at the end.<sup>29</sup>

“Keeping the tone of the exposition in line with the visuals and the player expectations helps the message get across better”.<sup>30</sup> In the sense of visuals, *Love, Sam* – as horror games usually do – has poor lighting, and the lights frequently turn off. In the bathroom scene – where the character is trapped with Sam – the only light source is a camera’s flashes, but we are not the one who controls it. As we have already learnt from the diary, Sam was fond of photography, so we can be sure that Sam is with us. In this scene, the

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26 SOLARSKI, C.: *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art. A Storytelling Framework for Game Design*. Boca Raton, FL, London, New York, NY : Taylor & Francis Group, CRC Press, 2017, p. 55.

27 KAGEN, M.: *Wandering Games*. Cambridge, MA, London : MIT Press, 2022, p. 10.

28 SOLARSKI, C.: *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art. A Storytelling Framework for Game Design*. Boca Raton, FL, London, New York, NY : Taylor & Francis Group, CRC Press, 2017, p. 77.

29 Remark by the author: At this point, we would like to mention that the analysis is our interpretation of the game based on the available clues, but others may interpret the pieces differently.

30 DANSKY, R.: Writing for Horror Games. In DESPAIN, W. (ed.): *Writing for Video Game Genres. From FPS to RPG*. Wellesley, MA : A K Peters, Ltd., 2009, p. 121.

game connects a narrative fragment (Sam's hobby: taking photos) and a horror element (only a few light sources are available). In *Ouija Rumors*, the player uses candles to have some light, but at one point, someone always blows off the flame, whereas we should be alone in the room. Playing with light and darkness makes horror games more frightening. The player cannot hide; they have to face these alarming events if they want to go further.

At one point in the game, Sam's ghost leaves a message in the bathroom: "You don't deserve a face" which, on the meta-level, resonates with the nature of Love, Sam's first-person view approach. The playable character's whole body remains invisible, we can only see what the protagonist experiences, and this angle strengthens vulnerability. The hidden messages lead to the realization that maybe we are controlling someone who is responsible for the girl's death.

Focalization – G. Genette's term – suggests that there are perspectives through which a narrative is presented.<sup>31</sup> In the case of digital games, we cannot talk about classical narration, but we can discover its elements. For example, a first-person game (like *Resident Evil Village* or *Love, Sam*) is seen through the protagonist's eyes. According to A. Nae, the first of their kind, "*Condemned: Criminal Origins* attempted to use the formal traits of the first-person shooter in order to provide a survival horror gameplay experience".<sup>32</sup> This method – now widely used – mimics the subjective shot from cinema. In contrast, "by taking control over the camera away from the player, classical survival horror games such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) manage to enfeeble the playable character and encumber gameplay. The game designer is to a limited extent similar to a film editor who uses discursive blind space in order to control the amount of ludic and diegetic information that is readily available to the player, script jump scares, and complicate the use of movement controls so that the colonial mastery of space simulated by action games can no longer be achieved, at least not with the same ease".<sup>33</sup> When we are placed behind the protagonist's eyes, we have a given point of view, but the player can decide what they want to see. "In what Genette calls *internal focalization* the narrative is focused *through* the consciousness of a character",<sup>34</sup> and we can experience the same method in most horror games as we are restricted to the character's eyes and movements, making the events more frightening.

In *Love, Sam*, we see the events through the nameless character's eyes. When we read in the journal: "Please don't look away" the game sets a new rule, and we are not allowed to look away even though the sound suggests that someone or something is behind us. If we turn back, we have to face the consequences in the form of jumpscare/game over. But if we are staring at the page, a hand will reach out to our face and try to force us to turn back. This forced view resonates with focalization; we experience the events through the playable character. At this point, the game challenges us and tries to 'steal' our control over the focalization. If the player can resist, the story will continue.

Another interesting example is when the player can see Sam and Brian together from the obsessed person's point of view, but their movement is strange and robotic. In my opinion, in addition to the "first person" term, G. Genette's terminology (*internal focalization*) also stands since we are experiencing the story through the playable character's eyes and mental state. The character – who sees these events – has their own interpretation and background that influences how players see the whole. This small detail also confirms that Sam is not the one who is stalking Brian and that there is a third person who made the events twisted.

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31 GENETTE, G.: *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 212.  
32 NAE, A.: *Immersion, Narrative and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Video Games*. London, New York, NY : Routledge, 2022, p. 168.  
33 Ibidem.  
34 GENETTE, G.: *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 10.

There is a unique focalization method – that can be found in horror games, too – also worth mentioning: the second-person view. In this case, there is a ‘you’ just like in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books.<sup>35</sup> On the meta-level, this method sheds light on the digital game’s logic as it brings into focus that there is an outside observer, the ‘you’, who is in control. The player sees their character through the perspective of another one, which is equivalent to G. Genette’s external focalization, where “the narrative is focused on a character, not through him”.<sup>36</sup> *Out of Sight*<sup>37</sup> and *Silent Mementos*<sup>38</sup> are two outstanding examples of this. In the first one, a kidnapped, blind girl who can only see with the help of her teddy bear tries to escape. Just like watching a movie, the player can see everything from a bigger distance, the fact that both the threat and the controlled character are visible gives a new meaning to fear and anxiety. In *Silent Mementos*, a worried woman tries to find her boyfriend in an abandoned house. We see the events through her eyes, but when we watch film recordings of her missing loved one, we will control him. In these cases, there is something that mediates the events. This method can raise vulnerability: in the case of *Silent Mementos*, while we are controlling the man – as we are ‘watching’ the recordings – the woman stands alone in a dark room (see Picture 1), vulnerable to the algorithm because we cannot control her if something happens.



Picture 1: We are alone in a dark, abandoned house. Our only connection with another human being is experienced through a projector

Source: OLINKALEX: *Silent Mementos*. [digital game]. San Francisco, CA : itch.io, 2021.

35 Remark by the author: This method creates a unique bond between the character and the player.; For more information, see: MANSKY, J.: *The Surprisingly Long History of ‘Choose-Your-Own-Adventure’ Stories*. Released on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2022. [online]. [2022-11-15]. Available at: <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/surprisingly-long-history-of-choose-your-own-adventure-stories-180980014/>>.; For more details on role-playing games, see: TRESKA, M. J.: *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC, London : McFarland & Company, 2011.

36 GENETTE, G.: *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 11.

37 FG21ST: *Out of Sight*. [digital game]. Stockholm : FG21ST, 2022.

38 OLINKALEX: *Silent Mementos*. [digital game]. San Francisco, CA : itch.io, 2021.

# Temporality, Trauma and Madness

“Trauma destroys time.”

- R. D. Stolorow<sup>39</sup>

In one of Sam's journal entries, players can read about her book report task. The book is the story of a jealous girl who sabotages everyone who tries to get closer to her crush. Sam finds this 'cute', even though she adds that the girl in the book is 'dorky' and 'psycho'. Her comment can give the impression that she was the one who was obsessed with Brian; at this point the game still wants us to believe that Sam was the one who slowly became obsessed.

So who are we in the game? Who is the nameless character that 'don't deserve a face'? As it turns out, the two different journals belong to different persons. Every entry with longer sentences, dates and is placed on single papers is a fragment of Sam's diary, but these are only a few pages. However, the more disturbing diary, which is a whole, operates with shorter sentences and has several drawings, supposedly belonging to Kyle, who had a toxic obsession with Brian. As we learn, he is the one who is responsible for Sam's death because jealousy led him to a horrible decision: he pushed Sam off the cliff (or at least he was the one whose action led her to fall off).

In the game, we learn about the past through journal entries, however, time is uncertain and looks like it is not passing. In some cases, Kyle returns to several significant moments: we can see Sam through his eyes as she is standing near the cliff or the school library, where Kyle eavesdrops on Sam and Brian's friendly conversation. The whole game gives the impression that we are in a timeless prison created by guilt. “Experiences of trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned through the portkeys supplied by life's slings and arrows”.<sup>40</sup> We can even find needles in the apartment, which suggests that Kyle has a drug addiction. His mental condition – which is influenced by drugs – and the feeling of guilt, traps him in a time loop, where he has to experience his feelings and repeatedly suffer for his sins. “Everyday, every night, I'm surrounded by whispers. Whispers that lie. Whispers that eat away my brain piece by piece”,<sup>41</sup> states Kyle in his diary, and later, he also adds: “My life is nothing but a repetition of waking up with nothing to live for”.<sup>42</sup> In the so-called 'time loop' narrative repetition is an essential element. As L. Lahdenperä highlights, time loop belongs to the future narrative (the other type is the forking paths): “A player of a video game, just like a character in a time loop narrative, often replays scenes or levels. If the player's avatar dies, time rewinds back and the avatar respawns; ready to try (and die) again until a goal has been reached. Time loop narratives, then, can be seen to imitate the replay quality of video games”.<sup>43</sup>

If Kyle dies, he has to start the 'level' again, however, he does not narrate this experience, and only the above-mentioned journal entries show how he sees his repetitive life. It is

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39 STOLOROW, R. D.: *Trauma and Human Existence, Autobiographical, Psychoanalytic, and Philosophical Reflections*. New York, NY, London : The Analytic Press, 2007, p. 17.

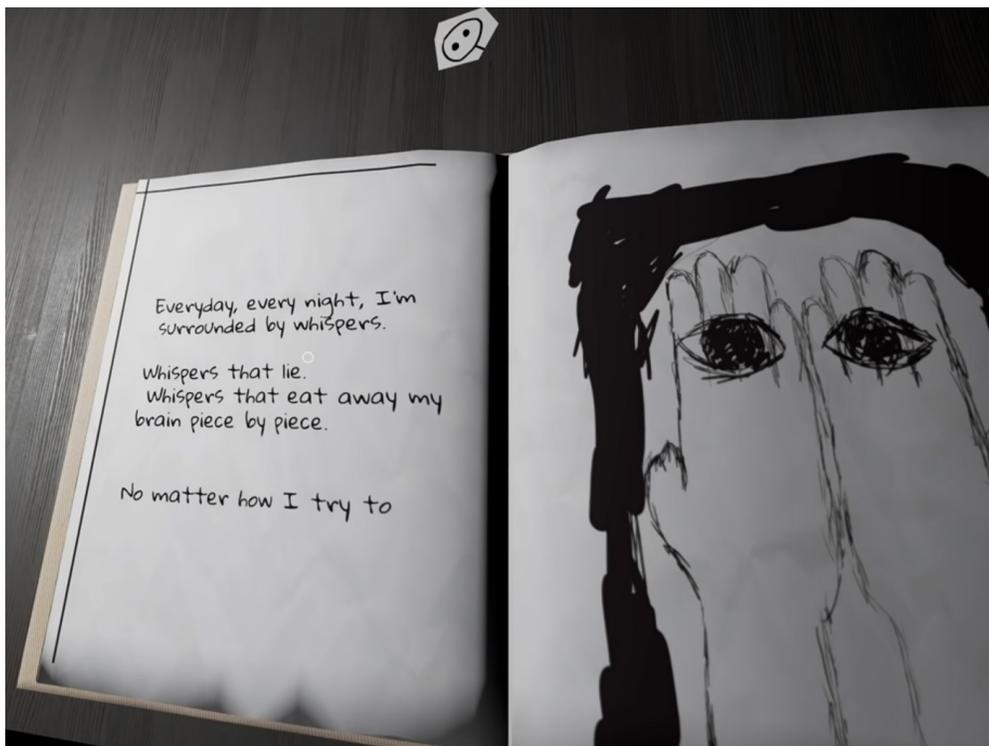
40 Ibidem, p. 20.

41 Remark by the author: A short quote from one of Kyle's journal entry. See: KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam (PC version)*. [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

42 Ibidem.

43 LAHDENPERÄ, L.: “Live-Die-Repeat”. The Time Loop as a Narrative and a Game Mechanic. In *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy*, 2018, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 144.

important to add, that Brian and Kyle are no longer friends when the game starts, because as we learn, Stacy told Brian how they tried to frame Sam. After that, Kyle lost all of his connections with Brian. Now players learn that besides guilt, he is left alone. These two strong traumas trap him in this eternal suffering. In the context of the game, Kyle becomes mad: his writing method, journal (see Picture 2), and visions all show his twisted personality.



Picture 2: One of Kyle's journal entries and drawings<sup>44</sup>

Source: author's screenshot; KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam* (PC version). [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

Our understanding of what madness is – like genres – can change and mean different things as time changes. C. Rodéhn highlights: “A platform game from the 1980s produces a very different kind of madness compared to a massive multiplayer online role playing games produced during the 2020s. This also implies that madness can mean different things in different games and in different game genres. Therefore, madness must be considered a temporary and unstable category that only appears as stable in certain game contexts”.<sup>45</sup> She adds that “goals, plots, themes, aesthetics, narratives, language, game design, game mechanics, dialogues, and/or sounds can also be representations of madness”.<sup>46</sup> In the game, every design and narrative element leaks madness. Kyle has several hallucinations, his written tone becomes more and more aggressive, and his drawings are also worrying.

44 Remark by the author: The watching eyes are recurring symbols in the game that suggest how the main character has tried to look away for three years (since Sam died), but he cannot do it anymore. It can also refer to the threat that watches Kyle and can also represent Kyle's stalking nature (he took pictures of Brian secretly, followed him and Sam, etc.).

45 See also: RODÉHN, C.: Introducing Mad Studies and Mad Reading to Game Studies. In *Game Studies*, 2022, Vol. 22, No. 1. [online]. [2022-07-15]. Available at: <<http://gamestudies.org/2201/articles/rodehn>>.

46 Ibidem.

Layers of Fear and Ouija Rumors also tell the story from someone's point of view who committed some kind of sin. That is why they will be trapped in time and space: they experienced a traumatic moment they cannot let go of. In possession of all information (clues) the player can feel that justice has been served, and the antagonists suffer. It is worth highlighting a psychological conflict: players feel responsible for the playable character, and they try to save them, but as they learn their background, they will realize that the threat (e.g. a haunting ghost) is on the right side of the story and our character did something horrible to them. While we usually want to experience justice, we can lose our sympathy toward the playable character as we reach the game's end.

## Conclusion

At the end of my paper, we would like to analyse one more aspect of temporality that connects well to the previous chapters. As M. Merleau-Ponty states, "Husserl uses the terms protentions and retentions for the intentionalities which anchor me to an environment. They do not run from a central I, but from my perceptual field itself, so to speak, which draws along in its wake its own horizon of retentions, and bites into the future with its protentions [...] With the arrival of every moment, its predecessor undergoes a change: I still have it in hand and it is still there, but already it is sinking away below the level of presents; in order to retain it, I need to reach through a thin layer of time".<sup>47</sup> Retention is a presentation of a temporally extended present, and protention implies how we anticipate the next moment. This also ties in with the previous part, where we analysed how horror games build on the player's predictability. We process the given information and have an idea of what comes next, but this genre can turn it upside down.

In Love, Sam, we have the wrong assumption of the stalker's identity because we are reading Sam's journal entries, and it seems evident that every written text belongs to her. At one point in the game, when we read her text, all lights turn off, but only one word remains visible: 'psycho'. This is something that the player does not expect; they are ready to read through one more journal entry as they did before. Horror games can change anytime, making our protention useless. This can cause fear and raise vulnerability, the algorithm decides everything. According to T. Grodal, "as opposed to film, video games simulate emotions in a form that is closer to typical real-life experiences since "emotions are motivators for actions and are labeled according to the player's active coping potentials". It's the perception and appraisal of the threat as well as the ways a gamer can respond that determine the intensity of our gameplay fear".<sup>48</sup>

Horror games are great examples of how a game can build on one's predictability and how they can play with the attention. As we saw, these digital games use several methods – from spatiality to temporality – in order to strengthen the player's fear. Looping time, sudden changes – in the sound or the visual elements –, and unpredictable events offer a high challenge factor, but skills sometimes cannot help to solve the issues. This realization makes me believe that these games evoke anxiety and/or arousal more often than flow, and these attributes make the horror genre so unique. With the perfect combination of dark visual effects, worrying sounds and adequate focalization, they can offer a frightening experience.

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47 MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Phenomenology of Perception*. London : Routledge, 1981, p. 416.

48 PERRON, B.: *The World of Scary Video Games. Study in Videoludic Horror*. New York, NY : Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 91.; GRODAL, T.: Video Games and the Pleasure of Control. In ZILLMANN, D., VORDERER, P. (eds.): *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal*. Mahwah, NJ : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, p. 201.

In the paper *Love, Sam* was my central point for the consideration that the game has outstanding solutions and uses the main horror elements while misleading the player. On the meta-level, the game also reveals its nature. As we can read on one of Sam's diary pages, "My first Rosen Peek weekend! As the name itself gives away, the small town fits perfectly as a setting for a mystery/horror genre." Ironically, the players cannot see Rosen Peak, they will only witness fragments of this town through Kyle's eyes, but they will be a part of a horror story.

In order to give a broader view, we also mentioned several other examples and details. The main sections were: spatiality – where we highlighted three categories (closed, open and looping spaces) – focalization – where based on G. Genette's term, we showed how the different angles could contribute to the narrative –, and temporality – where the traumatic experience and the looping time was at the focal point. Even though horror games are an unusual fit in the gaming industry (according to R. Dansky), as far as we see it, they represent the whole medium's logic: we have to cooperate with the algorithm even though our instinct would dictate other solutions.

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# Convergence in Digital Games: A Case Study of League of Legends

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## ABSTRACT:

The study deals with content media convergence, i.e. the fragmentation of media into different forms and formats in order to reach new audiences. The main thesis is that this form of convergence, which has been observable in the media segment over the last decades, has in recent years started to be deliberately and purposefully implemented in the digital games segment as well, and game studios are trying to reach audiences that are not players of the original game from which the media content converged through the creation of media content. However, not in order to attract them to play the game, which could be considered a classic marketing strategy, but in order to create a narrative and intermedia universe from which each converged part can have a separate audience, for which it is not necessary to know the whole universe. The study proves this through a case study of the game League of Legends by the game studio Riot Games and on the contents that converged from the game, through a discursive content analysis in the categories of gaming segment, audio-visual contents, music, social networks and other contents. The study concludes that the analysis supports the thesis that League of Legends converges and is able to fully reach non-gamer audiences.

## KEY WORDS:

audience, convergence of digital games, cross-media, digital games, League of Legends, media convergence.

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# Introduction

Convergence is not a new concept for media studies. It has been talked about for 20 years and is associated with the convergence of media – their tendency to converge and then branch out/fragment into multiple media domains.<sup>1</sup> In production, it tends to professionalise as widely as possible – i.e. companies try to buy as many stages of their media's production chain as possible in order to reduce the cost of production, while expanding into different related industries that will allow them to increase their audience reach and keep it with one publisher, whether they choose print, audio-visual, auditory, social media, etc. Effectively, this creates a wide network of one medium that is branched out into everything that brings in potential recipients and profit. M. Latzer categorizes convergence into technological, economic, sub-sectoral and socio-cultural,<sup>2</sup> H. Jenkins into technological, industrial, cultural and social,<sup>3</sup> B. Ip categorizes it in the games industry into technological, content and market convergence.<sup>4</sup> In this study we will focus on cultural or content convergence, which can border on transmedia storytelling – content is created for different media formats, offering different types of content, different processing or storytelling.

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- 1 See: JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY, London : New York University Press, 2006.; DEUZE, M.: *Liquid Life, Convergence Culture, and Media Work*. Bloomington, IN : Indiana University, 2006. [online]. [2022-10-15]. Available at: <<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/3343/Liquid%20Life%20Deuze%202006.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>.
  - 2 LATZER, M.: Media Convergence. In TOWSE, R., HANDKE, Ch. (eds.): *Handbook on the Digital Creative Economy*. Cheltenham, Northampton, MA : Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013, p. 128.
  - 3 JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY, London : New York University Press, 2006, p. 282.
  - 4 IP, B.: Technological, Content and Market Convergence in the Games Industry. In *Games and Culture*, 2008, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 199.

The point is that it is precisely the horizontal convergence of media – the tendency of one medium to be present in all media spheres – that has begun to manifest itself in recent years in digital games and related spheres into which the gaming segment is expanding. In the words of H. Jenkins: “The flow of content across multiple media platforms”.<sup>5</sup> This study is a case study of a specific example that is a prime example of convergence in the digital games sphere and will surely serve as a prime example of a well-managed expansion in the gaming industry for many other digital game developers. This is the convergence of the digital game *League of Legends*<sup>6</sup> by Riot Games.

Before we get into specific analysis, it must be said that *League of Legends* is not the only digital game or game franchise to attempt such a convergence, and it is not even the first to start something like this. The origins or precursors can be found in many titles, be it *Mortal Kombat*<sup>7</sup>, *Street Fighter*<sup>8</sup>, *Tomb Raider*<sup>9</sup>, *Assassin's Creed*<sup>10</sup>, *Warcraft*<sup>11</sup>, *Dungeons and Dragons*, or many others. *Warcraft*, as one of the forerunners of the current convergent trend, has many years back, in addition to releasing the *Warcraft* trilogy itself (*Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*<sup>12</sup>, *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness*<sup>13</sup>, *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*<sup>14</sup>, and *Frozen Throne*<sup>15</sup>), followed up with the release of *World of Warcraft*<sup>16</sup> and all of its expansions or subsequent remasters.<sup>17</sup> However, the convergence can be traced mainly in the expansion into the book industry through the release of numerous book publications that branched out the original storyline, narrative, or otherwise supported the original digital game, through the release of the *Warcraft*<sup>18</sup> movie, and through numerous minor activities such as the *Azeroth Choppers*<sup>19</sup> show, etc. Compared to our research material they had a huge disadvantage – many of the activities that could have been successful in convergence and its development ended up as a marketing strategy that only reached a certain segment of the audience. They may have helped the development of the narrative, but they did not always do so successfully, and some of these activities therefore ended up rather on the periphery of history (or mediocre at best).

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- 5 JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY, London : New York University Press, 2006, p. 282.
  - 6 RIOT GAMES: *League of Legends*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2009.
  - 7 MIDWAY GAMES: *Mortal Kombat*. [digital game]. Chicago, IL : Midway Games, 1992.
  - 8 CAPCOM: *Street Fighter*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 1987.
  - 9 CORE DESIGN: *Tomb Raider*. [digital game]. London : Eidos Interactive, 1996.
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  - 16 BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *World of Warcraft*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.
  - 17 See also: BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *Warcraft III: Reforged*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2020.
  - 18 JONES, D. (Director): *Warcraft*. [DVD]. Universal City, CA : Universal Pictures, 2016.
  - 19 BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT (Created by): *Azeroth Choppers (series)*. [TV]. Los Angeles, CA : Endemol USA, 2014. [online]. [2022-10-28]. Available at: <[www.azerothchoppers.com](http://www.azerothchoppers.com)>.

# Convergence

Perhaps the question is now lingering in your mind – are not these convergent contents just a well-chosen marketing ploy to force the audience to find their way to the main – the original medium, in this case the game? Is not it all just part of a strategy to increase player numbers? And it is in the answer to this question that the ‘miraculous’ difference lies. Most game titles and studios use different channels just to raise awareness of the original game or to increase the number of players or any other marketing strategies to reach the audience. However, the convergent content we are talking about can take on a life of its own, without the need to play the original game or without the player even caring about the original game, and still be a full-fledged medium. Poetically speaking, they can ‘live without their parent’. A recipient who encounters such converged content may or may not also be exposed to the original game’s universe, may or may not have any knowledge of it, and yet become a fan of only a particular converged segment. For avid gamers, such converged content will be ideal – they know the setting or characters, can ‘decode’ would-be hidden secrets or Easter eggs, and enjoy their imagined success of understanding the content a bit more than a disinterested audience encountering the universe for the first time. Some authors argue that games are not convergence.<sup>20</sup> If we look at it through the lens of media content, for which games are an expansion, we agree. However, this model is the opposite – in the beginning it was not a movie or a series, but a game. We look through the lens of a digital game, and that changes the point drastically.<sup>21</sup>

The main dividing line between conventional marketing outreach to a potential player and game convergence can be seen as whether such content can survive without the player knowing about the original game from which the content converged, and whether such content will be successful and its tendency replicable to other domains. This is also the main thesis of this study. The research material on which we will attempt to demonstrate this is the game *League of Legends* by the studio Riot Games.

*League of Legends* is no newcomer to the digital gaming market. It was created in 2009 by the game studio Riot as a reaction to the game *Defense of the Ancients*<sup>22</sup> (*DotA*), which originally originated in the game *Warcraft III*, or in its custom maps that players could create. It has a lot in common with *DotA* and *Dota 2*<sup>23</sup> respectively, after all even the strongest neutral objective just carries a reversed name (Roshan in *Dota 2*, Nashor in *League of Legends*), as well as many playable characters carrying similar gameplay mechanics, etc.<sup>24</sup> This type of ‘lagging’ carries over in many other aspects as well, e.g., *Teamfight Tactics*<sup>25</sup> came out only shortly after *Dota Auto Chess*<sup>26</sup> / *Dota Underlords*<sup>27</sup> with almost identical mechanics. We see a similar trend in convergence, which we’ll talk about

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20 For more information, see: O'DONNELL, C.: Games Are Not Convergence: The Lost Promise of Digital Production and Convergence. In *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 2011, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 271-286.

21 Remark by the author: Along with the development of this field only in recent years.

22 VALVE CORPORATION: *Defense of the Ancients (Game Mod for Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos)*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Valve Corporation, 2003.

23 VALVE CORPORATION: *Dota 2*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Valve Corporation, 2013.

24 See also: HILTSCHER, J.: *Dota 2 and League of Legends: Two of the World's Most Popular Video Games, Their Cultural Aspects, Their Genre and Its Definition*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Bonn : Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2022. [online]. [2022-10-29]. Available at: <<https://bonndoc.ulb.uni-bonn.de/xmlui/handle/20.500.11811/9774>>.

25 RIOT GAMES: *Teamfight Tactics*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2019.

26 DRODO STUDIO: *Dota Auto Chess (Game Mod for Dota2)*. [digital game]. Chengdu : Drod Studio, 2019.

27 VALVE CORPORATION: *Dota Underlords*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Valve Corporation, 2020.

later. League of Legends released the *Arcane*<sup>28</sup> series on Netflix in 2021, and a *DotA* series called *Dota: Dragon's Blood*<sup>29</sup> was released on the same platform in the same year, which currently has 3 seasons and is animated in an anime/cartoon style. Where Riot Games has really set itself apart from its competitors with League of Legends and begun to pave a sure path in the history of digital game convergence that has brought about change for the industry is by branching out into all areas of media and linking them together into a single universe through the aforementioned convergence.

In the context of the marketing strategies we have already mentioned, League of Legends is not far behind. Merchandising, collaborations with technology companies (which deal with game gear,<sup>30</sup> for example), audiovisual trailers for new champions,<sup>31</sup> cinematics,<sup>32</sup> event marketing,<sup>33</sup> short stories<sup>34</sup> and many others represent a well-chosen mix of tools that the studio is working with. This is nothing surprising or groundbreaking nowadays, and almost all major studios that have been on the market for a few years now work with them. Convergence, as we mentioned, is a unique approach that allows content to create its own audience, which is not necessarily the same as the original audience of the parent game. Effectively, these could be two separate audiences, though in reality they often overlap. Convergence can yield audiences that do not necessarily become players of the original game, but remain only in the fanbase of that converged content, which itself becomes a self-earning activity (if possible).

The main research subject for this case study becomes the game League of Legends and all its converged media content that has a clear and demonstrable link to the original game. The main goal of the study is to identify convergence in League of Legends in gaming and non-gaming sectors and to prove that convergence, as we know it from the media industry, has also been applied in the digital-gaming segment in recent years. The research method is discursive content analysis, and we establish the following convergence research categories to make the results more transparent: other digital games, audiovisual works, music, and social networks among others. Within each category, we will not seek a basic description of features, but rather to grasp the issue of convergence and converged content that is not necessarily intended for the primary target audience of the game, but can live a full media life of its own, and the audience can fully consume the content even without knowing the original game from which the content converged. We deliberately omit in our research categories that are directly linked to the original game and the consumption of which is contingent on knowledge of the game, or those that can be considered explicitly as marketing strategies to reach an audience. It is arguable that some of the content analysed was originally intended as a marketing strategy. However, their final development caused them to break out of this category and converge among other audiences.

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28 YEE, A., LINKE, Ch. (Created by): *Arcane (series)*. [VOD]. Los Gatos, CA : Netflix, 2021.

29 YOUNG, P. S. et al. (Directors): *Dota: Dragon's Blood (series)*. [VOD]. Los Gatos, CA : Netflix, 2021.

30 For example, see: *Play All Out*. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.logitech.com/en-eu/league-of-legends-kda-gear.html>>.

31 For more information, see: *The Hunter's Pride | K'Sante Champion Teaser – League of Legends*. Released on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2022. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i90x5zUMI6w>>.

32 See also: *Defeat Your Monster | K'Sante Cinematic – League of Legends*. Released on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2022. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ruq89ouObQc>>.

33 See: *Legends Never Die – Opening Ceremony | Finals | 2017 World Championship*. Released on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2018. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mP3fGkpmVM0>>.

34 For example, see: LUO, M.: *Everything We Should Have Said*. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <[https://universe.leagueoflegends.com/en\\_US/story/ksante-color-story/](https://universe.leagueoflegends.com/en_US/story/ksante-color-story/)>.

# Analysis: Gaming Segment

The convergence of Riot Games studio and the League of Legends universe can be seen very clearly and distinctly in the digital gaming category. In addition to the original League of Legends itself, Riot Games is releasing / has previously released / plans to release in the near future (Picture 1): *Valorant*<sup>35</sup>, *Teamfight Tactics*<sup>36</sup>, *League of Legends Wild Rift*<sup>37</sup>, *Legends of Runeterra*<sup>38</sup>, *Ruined King*<sup>39</sup>, *Hextech Mayhem*<sup>40</sup>, *Conv/rgence*<sup>41</sup>, *Song of Nunu*<sup>42</sup>, *Tellstones: King's Gambit* (tabletop game), *Mechs vs. Minions* (tabletop game), as well as several other announced games that are still in development or testing, such as *Project L*<sup>43</sup> (fighting game), *Project F*<sup>44</sup> (RPG), and *LoL Esports Manager*<sup>45</sup> (sport/simulation game). There are two interesting aspects to this boom. The first is the variety of genres they cover – from the card game *Legends of Runeterra* (whose principle is the same as classic tabletop card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!*), to the FPS *Valorant* (principle similar to *CS:GO*<sup>46</sup>, *Overwatch*<sup>47</sup>), the platform hopping game *Hextech Mayhem* (principle of *Super Mario Bros.*<sup>48</sup> but with elements of a music rhythm game such as *Taiko no Tatsujin*<sup>49</sup>), to of course MOBA games. The distribution platforms have expanded as well, and since the original League of Legends was designed exclusively for PC via its own client, some of the aforementioned have been developed exclusively for smartphones, or some of them are also designed for console play – PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch. Another interesting distribution decision is to leave Riot's own client and provide, for example, *Ruined King* via Steam, Epic Games or GOG.com.<sup>50</sup> However, given the convergence and promotion to audiences other than the primary and the specificity of the genre, this makes sense and was a logical decision.

The other interesting aspect in this category is the development of the universe and narrative through convergence. Some of the aforementioned games still develop the same universe of characters, worlds and interconnections, as in the original *League of Legends*, while others serve as expansions, introduce new characters and personas, or serve to transmedia the narrative – developing a part of the story that has not yet appeared elsewhere.

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35 RIOT GAMES: *Valorant*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2020.

36 RIOT GAMES: *Teamfight Tactics*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2019.

37 RIOT GAMES: *League of Legends: Wild Rift*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2020.

38 RIOT GAMES: *Legends of Runeterra*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2020.

39 RIOT GAMES: *Ruined King: A League of Legends Story*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, Riot Forge, 2021.

40 RIOT GAMES: *Hextech Mayhem: A League of Legends Story*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, Riot Forge, 2021.

41 DOUBLE STALLION GAMES: *CONV/RGENCE: A League of Legends Story*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, Riot Forge, TBA.

42 TEQUILA WORKS: *Song of Nunu: A League of Legends Story*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, Riot Forge, TBA.

43 See: CANNON, T.: *Project L /dev: Finding Our Game*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2021. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.riotgames.com/en/news/project-l-dev-finding-our-game>>.

44 See also: *10-Year Anniversary Celebration | Riot Pls: 10th Anniversary Edition – League of Legends*. Released on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2019. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4FGqymg4k4>>.

45 RIOT GAMES: *LoL Esports Manager (open beta in China)*. [digital game]. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2022.

46 VALVE CORPORATION, HIDDEN PATH ENTERTAINMENT: *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Valve, 2012.

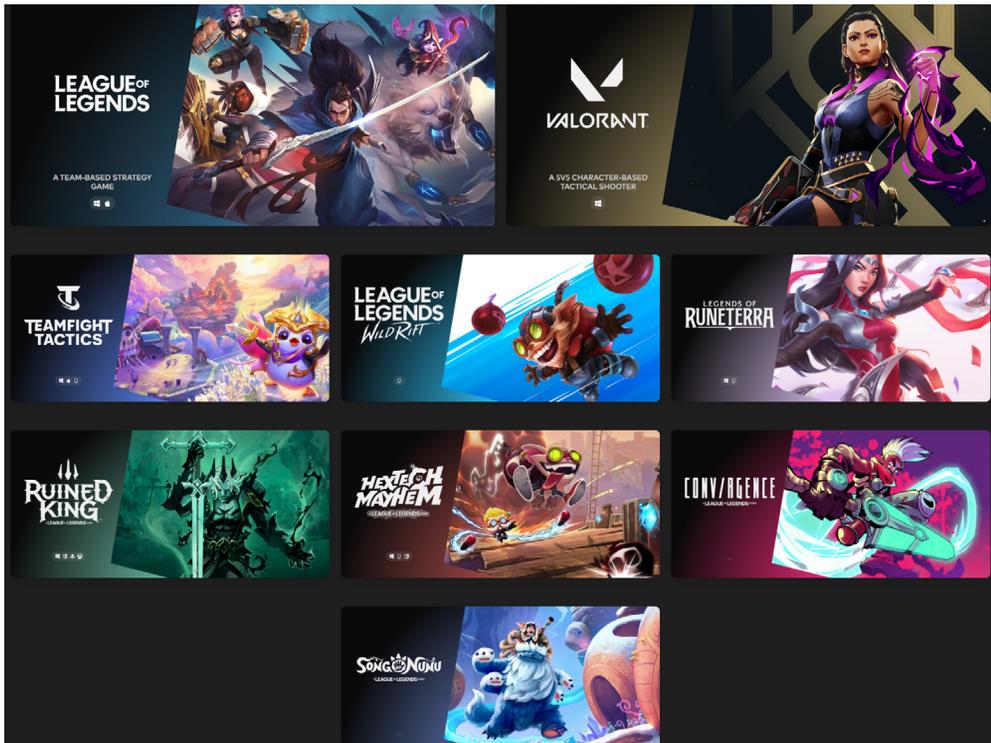
47 BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, IRON GALAXY: *Overwatch*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2016.

48 NINTENDO R&D4: *Super Mario Bros.* [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1985.

49 NAMCO: *Taiko no Tatsujin*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2001.

50 *Ruined King: Availability*. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://ruinedking.com/en-us/>>.

For example, *Song of Nunu* (an adventure game) should describe the main character's search for his lost mother, a narrative that has not yet appeared anywhere (it is only mentioned in the character's lore as a motif from the past), while *Conv/rgence* maps out a story that is sufficiently developed through other converged content, but should provide insight into the missing parts of the main character's history. All games that develop a character's narrative carry the subtitle *A League of Legends Story*, a direct reference to the original game and universe, but knowledge of these is not necessary to play the game or to understand the game's narrative, although its absence may affect a comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind the characters' actions.<sup>51</sup>



Picture 1: Games from the studio Riot Games

Source: Our games. [online]. [2022-09-29]. Available at: <<https://www.riotgames.com/en>>.

## Analysis: Audio-visual Production

It is one of the strongest drivers of the game's convergence, and arguably has the biggest future. We are not talking about cinematics, which are now a common part of games, whether through direct implementation into gameplay or as a marketing tool

51 Remark by the author: It could be argued, that even in the film or series industry there are countless works that function as coherent storylines within individual films, but it is only the interconnectedness and complexity of all of them with each other that offers an authentic insight into the motivations of individual characters (e.g., the *Marvel* universe, the *DC* universe, etc.), which is not to say that a viewer cannot view only some and still have an audiovisual experience.

before a big event or when introducing expansions and DLC. Their goal is obvious – to attract attention, raise awareness or bring back players who have since stopped playing. This form is also used by League of Legends, who release cinematics / music videos for big events such as Worlds,<sup>52</sup> for the release of new champions (Champion Teasers), but also for skin lines (e.g. K/DA,<sup>53</sup> Spirit Blossom,<sup>54</sup> Empyrean,<sup>55</sup> etc.), while the quality and the way they are handled can vary, from in-game footage to separate animated videos).

The higher level is the creation of a stand-alone audiovisual work, such as the *Arcane* series in this case (Picture 2). This develops the narrative of several characters, their childhood and adulthood, their conflict with each other, and also describes the birth of some characters, against the background of others who are not part of the original League of Legends game from which *Arcane* was created. In other words, it contains a mix of characters that are familiar to the player, ones that they only recognize at later stages in their lives (in the game they occur after some sort of transformation, after a departure to evil, but in the series they occur still in the early stages of development or the series describes their birth), but it also introduces completely new characters that the player has not previously known (although some of them may later appear in games converged from the original game, such as Silco from *Arcane* in one set in *Teamfight Tactics*). The League of Legends player is given a certain advantage when watching *Arcane* – they visually recognize the characters and know their names, but it has no significant impact on the narrative development. The story is as new to them as it is to someone who is not a player of the game. The animated series *Arcane* was released in late 2021 through the streaming platform Netflix, has won Best Rated Original Series based on ratings on IMDB,<sup>56</sup> numerous other awards, and at the time of this writing, a second series of the series was in production. Fairly recently, a documentary series *Arcane: Bridging the Rift*<sup>57</sup> was also released via YouTube, offering a behind the scenes making of the first season of *Arcane*. At this point, one could speculate that it is highly likely (especially in the context of the success of the first series) that the series will continue and further develop the story, that perhaps there will be series from other parts of the League of Legends universe, or that they will at some point result in a feature film. Their secondary uses are also interesting – for example, the *Arcane* series motif was also used for the Opening Ceremony at the Worlds 2021 eSports championship<sup>58</sup> (a combination of animation, live-action, music, visuals, etc.), motifs from K/DA music videos were used in the Opening Ceremony at Worlds 2020<sup>59</sup>

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52 For example, see: *RISE (ft. The Glitch Mob, Mako, and The Word Alive) | Worlds 2018 – League of Legends*. Released on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2018. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB8TyLTD7EE>>.

53 *K/DA – POP/STARS (ft. Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, Jaira Burns) | Music Video – League of Legends*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2018. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOxkGD8qRB4>>.

54 *Wandering Spirits | Spirit Blossom 2022 Skin Trailer – League of Legends*. Released on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2022. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaEH96kB-RY>>.

55 *Fire to the Fuse (Ft. Jackson Wang) | Official Empyrean Cinematic – League of Legends x 88rising*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2022. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNkT\\_aZWysA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNkT_aZWysA)>.

56 TASSI, P.: *'Arcane' Is Netflix's Best Rated Original Series Ever, According to IMDB*. Released on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2021. [online]. [2022-09-25]. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2021/11/09/arcane-is-netflix-top-rated-original-series-ever-according-to-imdb/?sh=63a78f28979c>>.

57 *Arcane: Bridging the Rift | Part 1 – I Only Dream in Risky*. Released on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2022. [online]. [2022-09-25]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mz4-38d3-AE>>.

58 *Worlds 2021 Show Open Presented by Mastercard: Imagine Dragons, JID, Denzel Curry, Bea Miller, PVRIS*. Released on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2021. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OzoFq4Q3\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OzoFq4Q3_c)>.

59 *Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | Worlds 2020 Finals*. Released on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2020. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_hugvOCBh-E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hugvOCBh-E)>.

and 2018,<sup>60</sup> True Damage at the same event in 2019,<sup>61</sup> and a short 'documentary' series *Lil Nas X Takeover*<sup>62</sup> (with a degree of irony and hyperbole) about the studio's new 'director' – singer Lil Nas X, who took over the role of studio head in the staged documentary, and whose theme tied to the release of the new character was later translated into the Opening Ceremony at Worlds 2022.<sup>63</sup> The convergence between audiovisual contents is obvious – on the one hand, the universe is fragmented through different narratives and their elaborations among audiences; on the other hand, it is reunited through eSports events designed predominantly for players of the original game. In this area, the biggest boom is probably yet to come.



Picture 2: Arcane poster

Source: Arcane: League of Legends. [online]. [2022-09-29]. Available at: <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11126994/>>.

60 Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | Finals | 2018 World Championship. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2018. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYSJloehGq0>>.

61 Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard | 2019 World Championship Finals. Released on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2019. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QDWbKnrRcc>>.

62 Lil Nas X Takes Over as President of League of Legends | Worlds 2022. Released on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2022. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Xunjy1no4>>.

63 Worlds 2022 Finals Opening Ceremony Presented by Mastercard ft. Lil Nas X, Jackson Wang & Edda Hayes. Released on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2022. [online]. [2022-11-10]. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/PzRi2JyRlvw?t=543>>.

# Analysis: Music

Music is one of the first dominant components of convergence in League of Legends. The baseline, which in this case does not play any specific role in convergence, could be considered music for the fans and players of the game. These are the various songs or albums released upon the release of a new champion in the game (mostly instrumental, in the past they were also found on the loading screen of the client when logging into the game), upon the release of a series of skins (mostly collectively called *The Music of League of Legends: Season X-Y*<sup>64</sup> or released as standalone singles<sup>65</sup>), when generating interest in the Worlds in a given season (each World has its own anthem, which is also played during the Opening Ceremony, implemented in the game client and also in the opening seconds of the game itself). All of these are commonly available on audio streaming platforms such as Spotify, under the League of Legends banner.

However, the convergence comes at the point of fragmenting specific music projects under their own headers, which even within audio-streaming platforms function as separate artists and can find their specific audience, who may have no knowledge of the original game and only like a given music, band or singer, all of whom are just virtual avatars/artists, persons who do not really exist, but appear as characters in the original game (which is irrelevant for the specific music). Specific examples are the musical groups Pentakill, K/DA, True Damage, and the singer Seraphine, who joins K/DA in her virtual 'career'. Each of these musical projects represents a different genre and in essence composes a tribute, an homage to it and tries to develop it. True Damage is clearly the weakest of these projects in terms of production, with only one song released in 2019<sup>66</sup> in the hip-hop genre, tied to Worlds in that year and to a collaboration with the Louis Vuitton brand (clothing line<sup>67</sup>, Worlds cup case design<sup>68</sup>, prestige LV skin of the in-game character<sup>69</sup>).

Pentakill is a heavy metal genre-focused project that has released three albums – *Smite and Ignite*<sup>70</sup>, *Il: Grasp of the Undying*<sup>71</sup> and *III: Lost Chapter*<sup>72</sup>, with each song on the albums referencing items (and later runes) in the original game, e.g., *Last Whisper*, *Deathfire Grasp*, *Mortal Reminder*, *Frozen Heart*, *Edge of Night*, *Redemption*, etc. To a fan unfamiliar with the original game, the individual song titles, album titles, visuals, and even the band name itself say nothing, even though they carry a direct reference to the game. However, this is ultimately unnecessary.

The K/DA project is a tribute to the k-pop genre (partially linked to the hip-hop and EDM genres) and has been the most successful of all of the aforementioned (based on the current listenership numbers of each artist on audio-streaming platforms and the number of plays of each artist's songs). The initial success of the *POP/STARS*<sup>73</sup> single in 2018 (nearly

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64 For more information, see: LEAGUE OF LEGENDS: *The Music of League of Legends: Season 9 (Original Game Soundtrack)*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2019.

65 See also: LEAGUE OF LEGENDS: *K'Sante, the Pride of Nazumah*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2022.

66 TRUE DAMAGE: *Giants*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2019.

67 DUVAL, A.: *Louis Vuitton x League of Legends: What if You Dressed as Your Favorite Video Game Character?*. Released on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2019. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.vogue.fr/fashion/article/league-of-legends-characters-are-now-dressed-by-louis-vuitton-outfits-skins-trophy-case>>.

68 *Louis Vuitton and Riot Games Partner Starting with the 2019 League of Legends World Championship*. 2019. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://nexus.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/2019/09/louis-vuitton-joins-worlds-2019/>>.

69 *True Damage Qiyana Prestige Edition: League of Legends Skin*. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://lolshop.com/product/true-damage-qiyana-prestige-edition/>>.

70 PENTAKILL: *Smite and Ignite*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2014.

71 PENTAKILL: *Il: Grasp of the Undying*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2017.

72 PENTAKILL: *III: Lost Chapter*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2021.

73 K/DA: *POP/STARS*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2018.

280 million plays on Spotify, 533 million views of the song's video on YouTube<sup>74</sup>) was followed by the release of album *ALL OUT*<sup>75</sup> in 2020, which was accompanied by secondary marketing activities such as a limited collaboration with gaming chairs manufacturer Secret Lab<sup>76</sup> (also a longtime Worlds sponsor), with gaming gear manufacturer Logitech<sup>77</sup>, as well as the creation of personal playlists with music from other artists on audio-streaming platforms for individual K/DA characters,<sup>78</sup> as each of them represents a different persona (party/creative/chill/socialist). All the songs from *ALL OUT* album were also given music videos, ranging from concept video,<sup>79</sup> dance video,<sup>80</sup> full animation treatment<sup>81</sup> to lyric video.<sup>82</sup> The band name K/DA is also a reference to the game itself, reflecting the ratio of 'kills-deaths-assists'.

The last musical project mentioned is 2020's *Seraphine*, a tribute to aspiring songwriters and self-producers, a soft pop genre. It is the first musical project that has a narrative created at the same time – the character has a dream since childhood to be part of her favourite band K/DA, she 'produces' music from her childhood room until she later manages to get into the band and debuts with them on the aforementioned album *ALL OUT*. All of her music produced up until then is only available as singles and most of it was covers of other artists' songs.<sup>83</sup>

In all of the above examples, we see a clearly recurring theme – to converge into different musical genres through individual virtual artists who have nothing in common to connect them to the original game. Listeners don't need to be familiar with the game for the full experience, the converged content is clearly separate from marketing strategies and regular in-game music, and League of Legends has been working with this type of content since 2014 and is continually developing it. It also provides a different perspective for players on music projects due to their familiarity with the characters, all of the aforementioned characters also received in-game cosmetic skins corresponding to the music project in question (in the case of Pentakill, even in two lines), and were also the musical and visual themes for the Opening Ceremony on the respective Worlds. They can also stand on their own as converged content, as well as the great recent musical collaborations that have found their way to radio even though they were originally linked directly to the game – namely the song *Enemy*<sup>84</sup> by Imagine Dragons (the theme music in the *Arcane* series and in the Opening Ceremony at Worlds 2021) and the song *Star Walkin'*<sup>85</sup> by Lil Nas X (the pseudo-documentary *President of League of Legends Takeover*, Worlds 2022 Anthem).

74 Remark by the author: Numbers valid as of November 8, 2022.; *K/DA – POP/STARS (ft. Madison Beer, (G) I-DLE, Jaira Burns) | Music Video – League of Legends*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2018. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOxkGD8qRB4>>.

75 *K/DA: ALL OUT*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2020.

76 TUTING, K.: *Secretlab Has Gone All Out on Its New K/DA Gaming Chair*. Released on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2020. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.onesports.gg/league-of-legends/secretlab-has-gone-all-out-on-its-new-k-da-gaming-chair/>>.

77 *Play All Out*. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.logitechg.com/en-eu/league-of-legends-kda-gear.html>>.

78 For example, see: *K/DA: All Access: Akali (Artist Playlist)*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2020.

79 *K/DA – VILLAIN ft. Madison Beer and Kim Petras (Official Concept Video – Starring Evelynnn)*. Released on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2020. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoWxv2yZXLQ>>.

80 *K/DA – DRUM GO DUM ft. Aluna, Wolfityla, Bekuh BOOM (Official Concept Video – Starring Bailey Sok)*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E\\_PbH5y70Tc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_PbH5y70Tc)>.

81 *K/DA – MORE ft. Madison Beer, (G)I-DLE, Lexie Liu, Jaira Burns, Seraphine (Official Music Video)*. Released on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VTKBuxU4yk>>.

82 *K/DA – THE BADDEST ft. (G)I-DLE, Bea Miller, Wolfityla (Official Lyric Video) | League of Legends*. Released on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020. [online]. [2022-10-18]. Available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkID8\\_gnTxw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkID8_gnTxw)>.

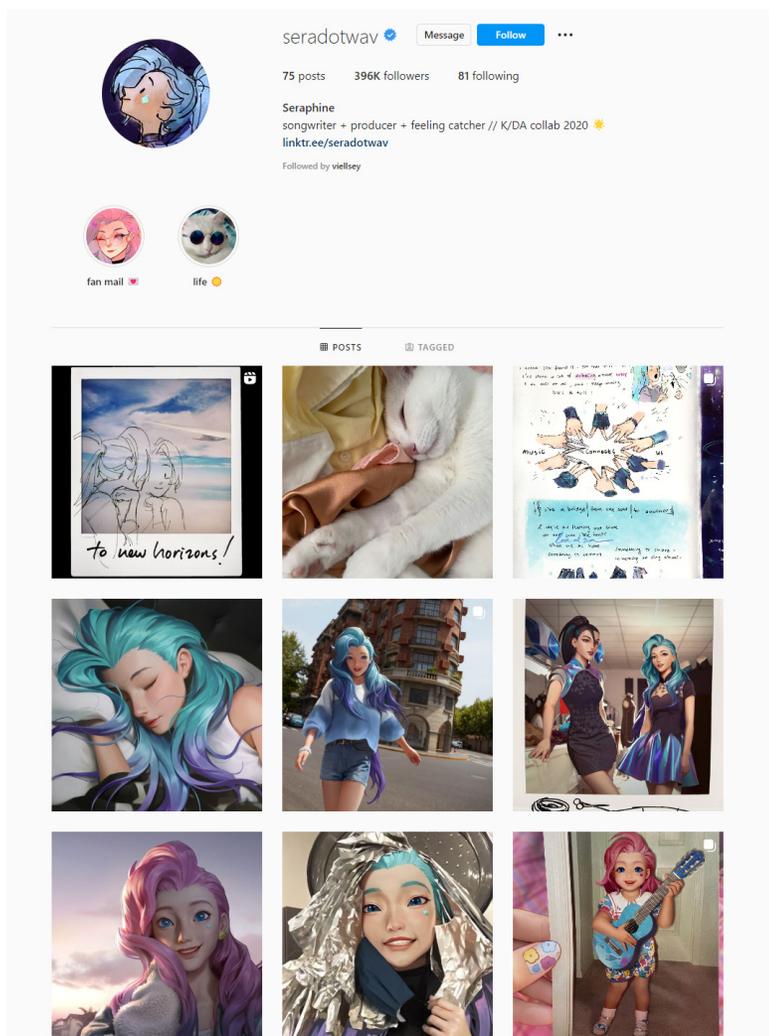
83 See: *SERAPHINE: All the Things She Said*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Los Angeles, CA : Spotify, Riot Games, 2020.

84 *IMAGINE DRAGONS, ARCANÉ, LEAGUE OF LEGENDS: Enemy (from the series Arcane League of Legends)*. [AOD]. Stockholm, Santa Monica CA : Spotify, Interscope Records, 2021.

85 *LIL NAS X: STAR WALKIN' (League of Legends Worlds Anthem)*. [AOD]. Stockholm, New York, NY : Spotify, Columbia Records a Division of Sony Music Entertainment, 2022.

# Analysis: Social Networking and Other Contents

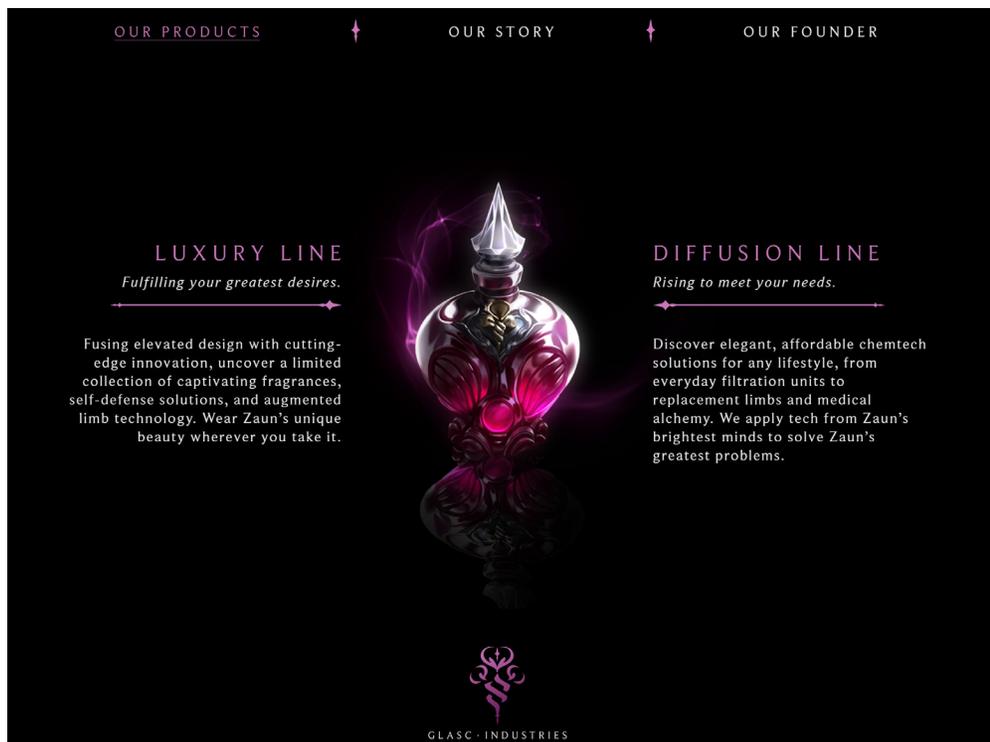
While all previous converged content has been standalone projects with high production value, League of Legends has also converged into areas that are not as dominant and are somewhere on the cusp of convergence and fanservice. A first example would be social media accounts, such as those of the band K/DA, but also the account of the aforementioned Seraphine called @seradotwav on Instagram and Twitter (Picture 3), which was active from June 26, 2020 to November 8, 2020 and imitated the accounts of regular aspiring artists, i.e. it presented a mix of private life, making new music, etc. In the era of V-tubers and other virtual celebrities or influencers, it could easily happen that the accounts gained popularity with the audience without knowing about the characters' affiliation to the game.



Picture 3: Seraphine Instagram profile

Source: Seradotwav (Instagram account). [online]. [2022-10-20]. Available at: <<https://www.instagram.com/seradotwav/>>.

The same could have been the case in early 2022 with the Glasc Industries website (Picture 4), which at first glance resembles any budding cosmetics project, presenting a bottle resembling a perfume. The non-specific characteristics, categorized as Our Products, Our Story and Our Founder, do contain references to Zaun, Piltover and City of Progress in some of the text, but may not suggest anything to an unknowing audience (while fans of the game know that these are place names from the game's universe). The website was released without any official information from the studio, and was a promotional form for the release of a new character in the game.



Picture 4: Glasc Industries web page

Source: Glasc Industries. [online]. [2022-10-21]. Available at: <<https://www.glascindustries.com/en-gb/>>.

Also noteworthy is the convergence into the book segment through the fantasy book *Ruinat*,<sup>86</sup> subtitled *A League of Legends Novel*, released in September 2022, which develops the narrative of the character, who is also featured in the converged game *Ruined King* and in the original *League of Legends* game as well, as part of the character's lore, as well as older publications such as *Garen: First Shield*<sup>87</sup> and the artwork publication *League of Legends: Realms of Runeterra*,<sup>88</sup> which did not receive as much popularity and attention. Of course, game content also converges with each other. In addition to the aforementioned narrative and other connections between the games and each other, we can also find many small references, such as *Valorant*, *K/DA*, *Ruined King*, *Wild Rift*, and *Legends of Runeterra* arcade game machines in the *Arcade World* locale within the *Star Guardians 2022* visual novel story, the *Cafe Cuties* locale (a series of skins) in the same story, which

86 See: REYNOLDS, A.: *Ruinat: A League of Legends Novel*. London : Orbit, 2022.

87 See also: REYNOLDS, A.: *Garen: First Shield*. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2020.

88 RIOT GAMES: *League of Legends: Realms of Runeterra (Official Companion)*. Los Angeles, CA : Riot Games, 2019.

is an ever-evolving mini-narrative in League of Legends within the seasonal events (which is an overall tribute to the anime and manga), and many more. However, given that they are found directly in the games and refer to each other, we do not consider them to be as significant an element of convergence between other audiences as in all of the previous examples.

## Conclusion

In the previous sections, we described and analysed how League of Legends content converges into individual media segments, becomes independent from the original game, and manages to be full-fledged media content for an audience without that audience being a player of the original game. We have defined a boundary that separates marketing strategies to reach players and potential players from the convergence we can observe. In some cases, we can talk about a mix of these characteristics – content is both convergent and serves marketing purposes. This dividing line also presents us with the limitations of our research – we are unable to analyze audiences in an exact way and determine how large each group of audiences are on a scale of: a player of the game who consumes all of the content in question – a disinterested audience member who has never encountered the original game, but is a fan of the converged content. However, we are afraid that it is simply not possible to conduct research that can adequately answer this question. In terms of a systematic approach to the issue under study, we can clearly define that League of Legends converges into different media areas, does so purposefully and intentionally, and is not a random phenomenon. Ultimately, N. Laurent, CEO of Riot Games, describes it in just different words when he says that the fundamental pillars of the new operating model are games, eSport and entertainment and that they do not want to be defined just as a games company, but to provide a complete experience.<sup>89</sup> There is also a noticeable globalisation – from convergence into different game genres through individual games, to convergence into different popular music genres through separate projects, to converged audiovisual creation, whose biggest boom is probably yet to come. Like League of Legends, other digital games are also converging, expanding into the media industry and trying to reach the largest and widest possible audience. It is highly likely that we will see the convergence of many more games whose size and financial budgets allow it, and that this will be the way to stay popular in the future with so many games constantly being created. Ultimately, convergence has been and is the most significant driver of 21<sup>st</sup> century media development.

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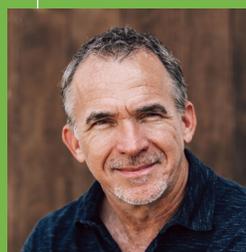
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# The Perception of Culture in the Virtual World

Interview with Tom BOELLSTORFF

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Tom Boellstorff is an anthropologist based at the University of California, Irvine, known and respected for his research on the anthropology of sexuality, globalisation, linguistics and more. Tom Boellstorff chairs the Association for Queer Anthropology and is a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies. His research on LGBT includes a study that took place in the online virtual world Second Life. His work has won the Ruth Benedict Award, presented by the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists. He is a former editor-in-chief of the *American Anthropologist* and co-editor of a Princeton book series entitled *Princeton Studies in Culture and Technology*.

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**Alexandra Rysulová (A. R.): Professor Boellstorff, how would you define culture in the virtual world? How is it shaped and who influences it?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** Virtual-world cultures are as vibrant as physical-world cultures. It is about human social interaction, and the core definition is no different. Even in the physical world there are many different cultures across place and time, and digital cultures extend that. Virtual cultures are influenced by cultures from all over the physical world, and are also influenced by different online cultures. And all of these, physical and online cultures, can be real or unreal in different ways. Nowadays it is very complicated, because you can have virtual-world cultures that are shaped by multiple physical-world cultures, just like you and I are in Europe and the United States right now. And there can be multiple online cultures shaping things. In most online virtual worlds nowadays, like *Second Life* or *Fortnite*, people might have set up a Discord channel, or they use Instagram or other communication channels, so there can be other online cultures that shape virtual cultures.

**A. R.: What differences can you identify between the cultures of different virtual worlds such as *Second Life* or *Animal Crossing*?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** In every virtual world there are a variety of subcultures and cultures, and there can also be differences and similarities between them that are shaped by the possibilities of the platform. In *Second Life*, for example, you can easily have 30 or 40 people on your piece of land, and if you make it a space where four different servers come together, up to 200 people can attend an event. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH), only 8 people can be on an island at a time, so you cannot run events for large groups in the same way. In ACNH there is no voice output, and you must use an iPhone or an external program to talk, which has an impact on interaction. Compared to *Second Life*, ACNH uses non-player character (NPC) villagers, who are not humans but automated bots with whom people can sometimes have very close relationships. *Second Life* does have some automated bots, but they do not have the functionality comparable to the NPC villagers in ACNH. The automated items in *Second Life*, such as scripted babies or pets, are not universal, whereas ACNH requires engagement with villagers as part of the game engine. Those kinds of technical affordances have an impact, just like the fact that one is accessed via a laptop or desktop computer, and the other on the Nintendo Switch, has an impact on the way you interact. It changes the way text chat works when you do not have a keyboard and must type more slowly. There are also cultural differences. For example, ACNH is part of a series; there have been *Animal Crossing* digital games for more than 10 years. Some people who come to ACNH have played those earlier games and are familiar with the story; others have not. In an open-ended virtual world like *Second Life*, that does not exist at all. And then there are virtual worlds like *Minecraft*, which are open ended but where a “story mode” has been added to create a kind of narrative that influences people’s behaviour. So there can be three different kinds of influences: internal diversity within the virtual world, a diversity between virtual worlds and the way those virtual worlds interact with each other, and then diversity based on the possibilities of the platform and the ownership of the platform.

**A. R.: In your monograph *Coming of Age in Second Life*, published in 2008, you object to the comparison of virtual worlds and simulations, such as the digital game *The Sims*. Fast forward to 2022, is there still no simulation in the virtual world?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** It depends on what people do with it, whether they try to simulate something or not. Nowadays, people often talk about digital twins when it comes to creating an

online version of a city or a university campus. In that sense, people are trying to simulate something by trying to create a very close connection between something in the physical world and something online. It really depends on what people are doing whether something is a simulation or not; it has nothing to do with the technology. The sense that you can only simulate as much as the current scripting capabilities in Second Life allow has implications. For example, scripted objects in the form of babies or pets can only do as much as the limits of script and mesh objects allow. It can be tricky because just because someone has a baby or a cat does not necessarily mean they are trying to simulate something in the physical world. It might happen that someone creates a scripted cat in Second Life that can talk because that is considered popular, but in the physical world cats cannot talk. Someone might build a house based on their physical home but not need stairs because Second Life offers the ability to fly, so in a sense the result can be more surreal in the virtual world. Simulation is more about people's intentions and goals than technological prescription. In education, for example, there is a debate about why we build tables and chairs in the classroom as we would in the physical world, when we could sit on a cloud or under the sea. Some people argue that it would be beneficial for education to recreate the physical environment, while others believe that this has no impact on the experience and educators should experiment with something else.

**A. R.: Instead of using the term simulation, could we perceive role-playing as a form of participation that is common in virtual worlds?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** Role-playing is an interesting aspect, because many of the biggest virtual worlds are online games where you have to play a role. In *No Man's Sky*, *Fortnite* or *World of Warcraft*, people role-play most of the time. In open-ended virtual worlds like Second Life, there are huge role-playing communities, but people do not necessarily role-play all the time. They might do it for a few hours and then go do something else, or they might go to a meeting. People do not have to choose one or the other. That is an interesting approach to thinking about who we are in the physical world, because even in the physical world we are constantly playing different identities in roles. You could say that in the physical world we do not necessarily only role-play when we are performing in Hollywood. You can be a professor, a parent or a teacher and the action that is the role is a form of role-playing or performance, depending on how you define it. It is a connection between online and offline about authenticity and social relations and how we think about identity and the idea of role-play in terms of something we normally do when we change who we are depending on the context. For example, I could be in a film or a play like *Romeo and Juliet* and pretend to kill someone with a knife, but in the physical world I am not really a murderer. These issues are raised in virtual worlds, but they can also come up on Facebook or a website, where people leave comments or log in and have different identities.

**A. R.: Do virtual worlds create a platform for experiencing fandom or participatory culture?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** Fandom role-playing of franchises like *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, or *Harry Potter* are widespread in virtual worlds. In addition, there are thematic role-playing communities, such as the 1920s Berlin regions in Second Life, which are not based on a fandom but represent the role-playing of a particular period in history. There are many medieval role-playing communities in Second Life that are not directly linked to a film or a book, so that is not a fandom. Another form of role-playing is when people create a mutual connection with other people and create a bond in the form of a marriage or a virtual family.

**A. R.: Are subcultures such as LGBT culture or disability culture prevalent, understood and accepted in the virtual world?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** That depends on what people do, especially for LGBT cultures or for people who go into a virtual world and see it as a place where they can remain anonymous. There are cases of people who think they might be transgender and use an avatar in Second Life to explore their gender identity. These kinds of things can be particularly impactful for people living in more rural areas. Of course, just like elsewhere on the internet, there is anti-LGBT activity and hate speech in virtual worlds. One advantage of Second Life is that because it is not advertising-based like Facebook, it does not try to find out a lot of information about members, and that might be attractive to some people. Of course, there are many members of LGBT communities in Second Life who are very open in the physical world. They are in the virtual world because they see it as entertaining and a way to socialize. With regard to disability, some disabilities can become more invisible in virtual worlds and for some people that can be liberating. This does not necessarily mean people are hiding disability, but a matter of control regarding when to reveal disability.

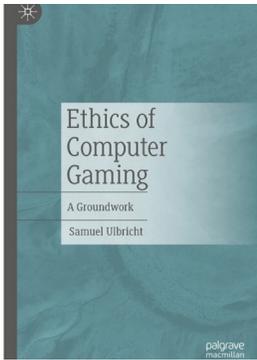
**A. R.: Is toxicity in the virtual world identified cross-culturally and can it be caused by people's anonymity?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** This is something that people have been talking about for many years on the internet in general, particularly regarding anonymity. If I go online and my name is just "Tom334", I might be toxic; I might be mean. When this happens in Second Life it is sometimes called 'griefing', but it is a broader online phenomenon known as disinhibition. But this obviously does not always happen. One factor is that in some virtual worlds, including Second Life, there is a difference between anonymity and pseudonymity. People with a Second Life avatar may under that name have a clothing store, a circle of friends, and so on. A pseudonym in this case is a real identity. For example, as a researcher, I protect people in the physical world during my research by changing their names. I do the same in Second Life: it is necessary to change screen names because they are real names.

**A. R.: What other attributes can we identify in virtual worlds across cultures?**

**Tom Boellstorff:** The media often emphasize negative aspects of virtual worlds, and those are real, but what always impresses me about virtual worlds like Second Life is the kindness and hospitality. There is so much altruism and kindness online that is not always talked about in the media. I do not want to ignore the negative things, because it is important to talk about them and prevent them, but I also do not want to make it seem like that is all that is happening. We need to better understand why people are kind online. It is certainly the case that generosity, kindness, helpfulness and voluntarism are found in Second Life all the time. People offer help to newcomers; groups of enthusiasts offer courses to acquire skills in building or other aspects of the virtual world. What we can learn from this?

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## ETHICS OF COMPUTER GAMING: A GROUNDWORK

ULBRICHT, S.: *Ethics of Computer Gaming: A Groundwork*. Heidelberg : Palgrave Macmillan Berlin, 2022. 111 p. ISBN 978-3-662-64397-6.

Magdaľéna Švecová

This publication aims to discuss the ethical context of digital games. The book thus analyses a rather current and important topic, as gaming is known to be an extremely popular activity across all ages, genders and nations. Digital games are a cultural phenomenon of our era and they are expected to become even more influential and important as a result of the fourth industrial revolution. The author of this publication, S. Ulbricht, who is based at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, seeks to answer the question of whether digital games can be or are immoral. He does not want to explain the issue in a broad and general way, but chooses only a detailed slice of this broad topic. This is due to Ulbricht's professional and scholarly orientation, having studied philosophy with a focus on applied ethics, aesthetics, as well as education. It is the philosophical aspect of the publication that can be felt on all its pages, giving the author a very theoretical perspective to the readers. This perspective of his is purged of the experience that a practitioner, professional player or developer would put into the publication.

The book is divided into three main chapters, with the first two dealing with defining computer games and computer gaming as an activity. Although the discussion of these topics may seem lengthy and unnecessary at first glance, the chapters have their relevance in relation to the last one, which deals specifically with the ethics of computer games and Ulbricht's thinking is based on whether gaming is a moral activity. Each of the chapters is supplemented with many examples, in addition to information supported by good and numerous literature, so that even the less philosophically-informed reader interested in game studies can better personalize the author's ideas. In addition, every chapter, except the first, and the book as a whole contains summaries, which is always an asset in this type of publication.

In the first and shortest chapter, Ulbricht discusses the definition of computer games and tries to figure out the difference between game and play and the boundaries that separate the two terms. The author asks whether computer games define computer playing or vice versa. By progressively considering the meaning of these two terms, Ulbricht arrives at an examination of computer gaming as an activity. He devotes the entire second chapter to this issue. He discusses what defines human directed activity as such and looks for similarities with computer gaming, assuming that if human activity has a moral dimension, so does computer gaming. He bases his reasoning on philosophers, in particular Aristotle's practical syllogism, which is followed by E. Anscombe and D. Davidson. Ulbricht admits that playing computer games, as he calls digital games, are fictional and virtual activities. In the next section, already using the rather concrete example of *FIFA 19*<sup>1</sup>, he shows how playing computer games can be a conscious or, on the contrary, unconscious activity and how gaming in general can be interpreted in different ways (from intervention

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1 EA VANCOUVER: *FIFA 19*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : EA Sports, 2018.

in the code to impersonation with a character in the game). This part of the theoretical work is extremely well done and has a popularizing character. The third chapter is the longest in scope and is directly devoted to the topic of the whole publication, i.e. ethics. As a philosopher, Ulbricht draws critically on Aristotle's utilitarianism and the subsequent work of P. Singer and H. Sidgwick. He reflects on the traditional questions of the issue of digital games, namely whether gaming can have harmful consequences and whether gamers behave maliciously. But a utilitarian approach does not resolve Ulbricht's questions, because he comes up against the fictional nature of in-game activities. He therefore goes on to look for answers in I. Kant's deontology, where he is already more or less inclined to the possibility that even virtual actions can have moral or immoral character. However, he is still unable to define the moral status of fictional action, which he seeks in the final 22 pages. Whether or not Ulbricht has found it, we will not divulge. It is, however, very pleasing to observe the thinking, synthesizing, and comparing of insights in this work of Ulbricht's. This is what makes the result of his reasoning believable and something to build any argument on in the field of the morality of digital games.

The *Ethics of Computer Gaming* was originally published in German and translated into English by artificial intelligence, so the book's stylistics may strike many readers as awkward, making both comprehension and the overall experience difficult. On the other hand, the content of the publication is full of substance, fulfilling the goals it set out to achieve at the outset. In addition to the basic question about the morality of games, Ulbricht asks many other questions, which he manages to answer, although he also leaves room for readers' own interpretations. He discusses individual issues in a complex way and from multiple perspectives, which is why he closes the topics in question on the one hand, but also leaves them open to a certain extent at the same time. Just like the whole issue of the ethics of digital games. The publication clearly contributes to the discourse in question and should certainly be read not only by students but also by educators involved in game studies. It may be a useful supplement to courses that deal with the ethical aspects of games, but it may also be of benefit to philosophers who wish to bring an up-to-date context to their studies or teaching.

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## Esports and the Media

Challenges and Expectations in a Multi-Screen Society

EDITED BY  
ANGEL TORRES-TOUKOUMIDIS



# ESPORTS AND THE MEDIA: CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS IN A MULTI-SCREEN SOCIETY

TORRES-TOUKOUMIDIS, A.: *Esports and the Media: Challenges and Expectations in a Multi-Screen Society*. London : Routledge, 2022. 134 p. ISBN 9781003273691.

Michal Kabát

Esports, or electronic sports, is a rapidly growing industry. The convergence of sports, digital games and media has created opportunities for a unique form of competitive entertainment. With an estimated audience of 550 million worldwide, eSports is becoming an increasingly popular form of entertainment, and media companies are taking note.

Competitive gaming has become the focus of many large companies, including tech giants like Microsoft, Amazon and Google. These companies have invested heavily in tournaments and leagues, with prize pools reaching into the millions of dollars. Media companies have also jumped onto the eSports bandwagon, with ESPN, Fox Sports and other major sports networks now streaming and covering eSports events. The media is also playing an important role in the growth of the industry. Many journalists have become devoted fans, using social media and gaming websites to broadcast games, interviews and news to larger audiences. This has sparked the growth of a whole new form of journalism, with reporters specialized in the eSports world and dedicated to bringing fans the latest news and content.

Esports are already a major part of digital media, with content across social media, streaming and traditional television. Twitch, YouTube and other services are streaming eSports footage around the clock, and traditional TV networks are devoting more and more time to eSports programming. Esports also has a strong presence on platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Reddit, with all major tournaments and leagues having active accounts and engaging with their audiences.

Finally, eSports has become an important part of the advertising industry, with major brands now investing heavily in promoting their products through this fast-growing industry. The eSports fan base is young, passionate and digitally-savvy, making them the perfect target audience for many companies. This has opened up a new avenue for media companies to reach potential customers, and with tournaments and leagues from all over the world, there is no shortage of opportunity.

The reviewed book is a collection of essays edited by A. Torres-Toukoumidis that examines the impact of eSports and their role in the entertainment industry. It covers a range of topics related to eSports, including the role of media platforms in the growth of eSports, the use of social media in eSports, and the marketing strategies used in the industry. The authors come from a variety of disciplines, including game studies, new media, leisure, sport studies, communication studies, transmedia literacy, and digital culture. It is intended for scholars, students, and professionals working in these fields. It will be published in 2023 by Routledge as a part of their "Focus on Digital Media and Culture" series and it is already available as a free download on their website. It contains seven individual essays, or chapters that deal with various related topics.

The first chapter covers the history and evolution of eSports, including its recognition as a sport discipline and its relationship with the entertainment industry. It discusses the characteristics of eSports, including the fine motor skills and brain effort required, the competitive level of events, and the formal organization of leagues and collegiate bodies. It also examines the economic system surrounding eSports and its potential to generate high revenues for professional players, organizations, and sponsors. The second chapter analyses the impact of social media, specifically Facebook, on the growth and development of eSports. The chapter discusses the ways in which Facebook has been used to promote and broadcast eSports events, as well as the role of social media in the creation and maintenance of eSports communities.

Chapter three consists of five texts. The first examines the relationship between eSports and the mass media, including the challenges and opportunities presented by the broadcast of eSports events. It discusses the role of traditional media outlets, such as television and radio, in the promotion and coverage of eSports, as well as the impact of streaming platforms and online media on the growth of eSports. The second essay focuses on the marketing and advertising strategies used in the eSports industry, including both traditional and digital marketing approaches. The chapter discusses the use of sponsorships, partnerships, and influencer marketing in the promotion of eSports events and teams, as well as the role of social media in eSports advertising.

The third text explores the impact of globalization on the development and growth of eSports, including the role of international events and the globalization of eSports communities. It discusses the ways in which the globalization of eSports has been facilitated by the growth of the internet and the increasing prevalence of streaming platforms, as well as the potential for eSports to promote cultural exchange and understanding. The fourth essay examines the role of merchandising in the eSports industry, including the production and sale of physical goods such as clothing and accessories. The chapter discusses the ways in which merchandising has been used to promote eSports events and teams, as well as the potential for eSports merchandise to generate additional revenue streams.

The final part of this chapter brings together a diverse group of communication experts to provide their perspectives on the role of eSports in society and the entertainment industry. The chapter includes discussions on the impact of eSports on education, the role of eSports in the promotion of social values, and the potential for eSports to serve as a platform for social change.

The book is a welcomed addition to reflections on the current state of eSports and it provides important information for conducting more research in these topics as the media landscape is definitely shifting towards eSports, and the debate is no longer about whether eSports are sports, but whether people enjoy watching them.

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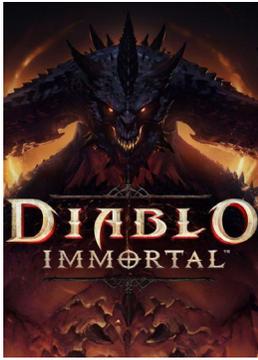
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## DIABLO IMMORTAL

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, NETEASE: *Diablo Immortal*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2022.

Tomáš Svetlík

*Diablo Immortal* is a digital game released in 2022 on smartphones and PC, and since its announcement it faced many problems. 6 years has passed since the release of the last game of the series, *Diablo III*, and during that time Blizzard was completely silent about the future of the franchise. After an announcement that *Diablo Immortal* will be released only on smartphones and is almost identical to the last game, the wave of critique hit the company. In fact, reaction was so bad that to this day the *Diablo Immortal* Announcement video on YouTube is the worst rated video in the history of the company<sup>2</sup> (only 4% out of 830 thousand people rated the video positively). One month before the release of *Diablo Immortal*, Blizzard said that they will port the game for the PC, but the game was banned in Belgium and the Netherlands because of 'predatory' monetisation.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of the playerbase could not access the game yet, so they had no idea what can possibly appear in the game.

The game starts like the ones before, with the class and name selection and after that, the player is thrown right into the intro of the story. It is needed to say, that even after initial fears of insufficient quality, *Diablo Immortal* plays like *Diablo III*, but simplified. There is still an emphasis on fast, regular and adrenaline-pumped combat with enemies that drop many items. Gameplaywise the game is really good and it seems that developers took a good amount of care in making the experience on smartphones good. After finishing the intro sequence that takes around 20 minutes, the game will create its first offer for players to buy a cache for real money. These offers shows up after every dungeon, around twice per chapter and always offer caches that contain certain amounts of in-game currency, items or cosmetic skins. Near every cache is the number of value those items will make and how much a player can save by buying it. The first offer is very cheap (around 1 EUR), but prices are going up as players progress through the game. The last cache costs around 50 EUR. By doing this, Blizzard can make a feeling for players that they can buy small caches for cheap prices and give a player a sunk cost fallacy. P. C. Loshe defined it as a state where players who already spend money in a game, will continue doing that, just because they do not want to risk losing it.<sup>4</sup> They can be led into a quick trap and endless loop, where players will spend money until they get what they want and the amount of money they spend is much higher than the actual worth of the item. The game does not even tell a player if the caches will stay in the shop permanently, or they will disappear after a while. Players are then under

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- 1 BLIZZARD TEAM 3: *Diablo III*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2012.
  - 2 *Diablo Immortal Cinematic Trailer*. Released on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2018. [online]. [2022-11-29]. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/RtSmAwpVHsA>>.
  - 3 SMITH, D.: *Diablo Immortal Won't Launch In Countries That Have Outlawed Loot Boxes*. Released on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2022. [online]. [2022-12-08]. Available at: <<https://www.kotaku.com.au/2022/05/diablo-immortal-wont-launch-in-countries-that-have-outlawed-loot-boxes/>>.
  - 4 For more information, see: LOHSE, P. C.: How Instability in Virtual Economies of mobile digital games drives and ruins profit. In *EAI Endorsed Transactions on Context-aware Systems and Applications*, 2019, Vol. 6, No. 18, p. 1-7. [online]. [2022-12-08]. Available at: <<https://eudl.eu/pdf/10.4108/eai.13-7-2018.162632>>.

a permanent *FOMO* (fear of missing out) effect, because they do not know if the cache will disappear and they will miss out on a good offer. This effect is strengthened by the fact, that player gets free daily caches. If they want to claim them in the in-game shop, they need to go right where those offers exist so that they are constantly influenced by them (Picture 1).



Picture 1: *Diablo Immortal's* in-game shop

Source: author's screenshot; BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, NETEASE: *Diablo Immortal*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2022.

During the playthrough, the player is introduced to a system called *Elder Rift*. Those Rifts are the main source for players to get good items and, at the same time, the main reason why the monetisation in this game is considered predatory. *Elder Rift* is a time challenge, where a player is sent to a randomly generated dungeon with randomly generated enemies. After killing those enemies, the player fills up the bar. Once the bar is filled, the final boss is spawned and after he is defeated, the items will drop. The problem is not with *Elder Rift* as a whole but what happens before entering. Before the player can enter *Elder Rift*, they can upgrade the Rift with Crests. They can insert only three crests at a time and there are two types of Crests. Rare Crests that players can buy for in-game currency or doing quests in the world – those increase the number of items that the final boss will drop at the end of the Rift. The second and much more controversial one is the *Legendary Crest*. Those can be bought for in-game currency, but it is very strict (only one per month) or with real money. After completing *Elder Rift* with *Legendary Crests*, the player will get a *legendary gem* that is the main source of power for them. Those gems drop randomly, and they can be randomly strong. That means if a player pays for those gems, there is no guarantee that they will get what they want or that the gem will be as powerful as they want. Players who do not pay, need to do quests every day and play the game often just for the one-per-month chance of getting a gem, that they might not even use or sell. Alternatively, they can pay 20 EUR and skip 6 months of playing every day. However, the game will psychologically push the player even when they insert the crests. If they place three *legendary crests* in the Rift, the crest slot will extend up to 10 from the previous three. Those slots are not visible until three *legendary crests* are inserted and are not visible for *Rare Crests* altogether. This is the system of '10 pulls' usually found in *gacha games*. G. Rentia defined those games where the main source of monetisation comes from

lootboxes.<sup>5</sup> After the player opens the box, they will get a random item from different qualities. The main system is basically a series of slot machines, where players can pull once, or 10-times in a row. A fatal difference between gacha games, such as *Genshin Impact*<sup>6</sup>, is that in *Genshin Impact* the player can earn enough currency to make a pull once every day. In *Diablo Immortal*, the player has to wait for an entire month just to have a chance to have one pull. In addition, the player cannot see the chances of getting a stronger gem, because gems are rewards for completing a challenge, so it is technically not gambling anymore, even though it clearly is. This fact is confirmed when they lose a rift. If players somehow lose a rift (which is hard because the difficulty is set low by design), the Legendary Crests will not be destroyed and just return to their inventory for another try, so players cannot lose their reward. By doing this Blizzard has bypassed regulations about gambling in games, where companies are obligated to show percentages of chance in those systems. The in-game shop is also built around giving players more offers. One Legendary Crest costs 160 Eternal Orbs (in-game currency that can be bought for real money), approximately 3 EUR. The shop only offers 320 or 1500 orbs. If the player wants to buy two Crests, it costs exactly 320 orbs, but if they want to do 10 pulls, they will be 100 orbs short. It means they need to buy more orbs, which they might not even spend.

Another strategy that forces players to pay is the system *Boon of Plenty*. Basically this is a subscription service for 12 EUR per month, within which player's daily rewards will be empowered for the next 30 days (Picture 2). The game shows which rewards the player will get over 30 days. However, those rewards are for cumulative login days. If the player misses even one day out of 30, they miss the reward at the end, until they pay for another *Boon of Plenty*. The player is actually paying for 30 days due to the FOMO effect, because if they forget to log in for one day, they will permanently miss the chance of getting all the rewards, and *Legendary Crests* (the most valuable rewards) are tied just to those last rewards.



Picture 2: *Diablo Immortal's* the *Boon of Plenty* offer

Source: author's screenshot; BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, NETEASE: *Diablo Immortal*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2022.

- 5 See also: RENTIA, G.-G., KARASEVA, A.: *What Aspect of Gacha Games Keep the Players Engaged?*. [Bachelor's Thesis]. Uppsala : Uppsala University, 2022. [online]. [2022-12-02]. Available at: <<http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1665022/FULLTEXT01.pdf>>.
- 6 MIHOYO: *Genshin Impact*. [digital game]. Shanghai : miHoYo, 2020.

If the player still thinks they can play the entire game without paying once, it is true, but only to a degree. After completing the game on normal difficulty, the game will open harder difficulties, where better loot drops. However, those harder difficulties require a certain amount of power from the player's Legendary Crest gems. If the player does not have them and enters the higher difficulty, the game will let them but warn them that their power is insufficient. That causes a *debuff* – every enemy deals 175% more damage to a player, and a player deals 75% less damage. This creates a wall, letting the player see the higher difficulty, but sets the enemies so unfairly above the player that they basically have no chance until they pay. The systems that support microtransactions are more in this game, but the mentioned ones seem to belong to the most criticised and negatively perceived. In addition, until very recently, all those systems that players paid for, all cosmetic and other items were tied to a single character. If the player wanted to try a new character or different class, they needed to pay for everything all over again. This feature was recently removed, but there still remain many questionable systems in the game.

In conclusion, *Diablo Immortal* could be a great game. The gameplay is good, the story is exciting and the classes are fun to play. On smartphones, gameplaywise, one would hardly find a game like this. It even has the polish of older Blizzard games. But the game is heavily damaged by the predatory monetisation designs that only require players to pay as much as possible. Those systems significantly interfere with any good experience from the game. Although predatory systems are currently quite common in mobile games, there are not many games that would do it in so over the top a manner as *Diablo Immortal*. It indicates this game crossed the line of what developers can ask from a player.

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**ACTA LUDOLOGICA**

# "We Play and Slaaay": Cosplay as a New Form of Art, even in Slovakia

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If someone had told me 15 years ago that the innocent hobby of dressing up as popular heroes from movies would turn into a global phenomenon, I probably would not have believed them. At the beginning of the millennium in Slovakia, only a select few knew the concept of cosplay. Even within pop culture festivals, which were held regularly at that time (since 2007), fans in costumes appeared only very sparingly. One of the breakthrough years was 2008 (specifically, *Animeshow 2008*), when a group of teenagers came onto the scene and decided that creating costumes from popular anime would become part of their fandom identity. Compared to today, the creation of costumes back then was mainly based on materials such as cardboard, cheap fabrics and repurposing old clothes. They did not even dream of wigs and contact lenses. Today's young, beginning cosplayer, on the other hand, is saturated with a huge number of available materials (thermoplastics, specialized paints, EVA foam, wigs, makeup materials, sfx materials) and free tutorials available on the Internet. These materials should make their work on the costume much easier. But is it so?

If the amount of effort that today's cosplayers must make when creating a costume, so that they are considered at least average within society and the fandom (we are talking about Slovakia and the Czech Republic), were to be compared to their predecessors, it is immeasurable. Mistakes are not tolerated very well in today's cosplay society. Fifteen years ago, it was enough for a person to have clothes that remotely resembled the imagined character, and other fans of the given fandom were excited about it. Sometimes, even then, there were individuals who excelled in the execution of the costume – they were considered no less than the cosplay gods of that time. If by some miracle a cosplayer from fifteen years ago teleported to the festival in 2022, they would probably wonder how much time has advanced and why no one wants to take a picture with them. However, the availability of materials and instructions is not the only thing that has changed. With the advent of social networks and the global connection of artists around the world, the reception of cosplay as a phenomenon associated with art has also changed. Today, cosplay is not only discussed by a narrow group of fans on social networks and the Internet, but also in public media and news.<sup>1</sup> Such publicity, of a small and narrow-profile fandom until then, opened the door to new possibilities of presenting oneself and one's art.

The public also became interested in cosplay, and artists from other industries began to enter cosplay competitions (Picture 1). That is why I like to talk about cosplay as a new art that combines elements from several classic arts. Cosplay could be the closest thing to musical art, which is also based on the very composition of the words *costume* and *roleplay*, where a prominent part is the very rendering of the character, the so-called role-play. The skit is often a mandatory part of cosplay competitions and is evaluated as one of the most important parts in the presentation and performance of the given character by the cosplayer. An inseparable part is also the creation of costumes, which I would certainly include in visual arts. Cosplayers use techniques and procedures from painting, sculpture, graphics, and photography.

Cosplay is a very interesting type of modern hobby that combines elements of classical arts and has become the primary source of livelihood for many cosplayers abroad. It is reasonable to believe that Slovak fans of this pop culture phenomenon will also be recognized in this direction in the coming years.

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1 See: CVIK, A.: *Cosplayerka Asumi prezradila, ako na Comic Cone reprezentovala Slovensko | ROZHOVOR*. Released on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019. [online]. [2022-11-20]. Available at: <<https://www.rewind.sk/asumi-rozhovor/>>.



Picture 1: Group photo of cosplayers at the convention AnimeShow 2019

Source: © Butterfly Creative, 2019.

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- **Game Studies:** theoretical articles in the extent of 21,600-54,000 characters (12-30 author pages); research results and their practical implementation in the extent of 12,600-54,000 characters (7-30 author pages);
- **Interview:** interviews with people, whose contribution is important to the development of game studies and the digital game sector (scholars and scientists of games studies and related fields, game developers, professionals of the gaming sector, game events organizers, etc.), to the extent of 5,400-18,000 characters (3-10 author pages);
- **Reviews:** reviews of monographs and textbooks from the fields of digital games and game studies, which are not older than one year, in the extent of 5,400-9,000 characters (3-5 author pages); reviews of digital games based on specific context of theoretical or research framework, in the extent of 5,400-9,000 characters (3-5 author pages);
- **Add-ons:** short-ranged scientific, philosophical and artistic reflections on phenomena of the comprehensive game world in the extent of 3,600 characters (1-2 author pages).

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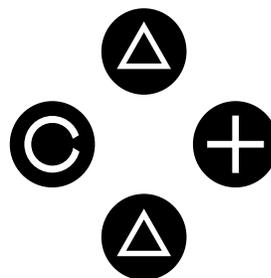
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