



Culture at play

Spaces – Colours – Stories in Digital Games

University of Freiburg

Freiburg/Germany

March 4 - 5, 2022 (Online)

KEYNOTES BY:

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**UNI
FREIBURG**

PROGRAM

Friday, March 4

- 9:00 Opening and Welcome
- 9:10 - 10:00 **Keynote**
Andreas Rauscher (University of Freiburg)
"A Short History of Game Studies – Ludic Locations in Cultural Contexts"
- 10:00 - 10:30 **Coffee Break**
- Panel 1: Mother Knows Best | Ideology in Video Games**
Chair: Andreas Rauscher
- 10:30 - 10:50 Vickie Monthong (Freie Universität Berlin)
"Inside (2016): Social Order and Control"
- 10:50 - 11:10 Xuan Truong (University of Freiburg)
"The Death of Mothers and Life of Fathers: The Absence of Mother-Figures in Contemporary Video Game Narratives"
- 11:10 - 11:30 Käpernick, Rebecca (University of Oldenburg)
"From Zero to Hero? - The Outcast-Heroine's Journey in Contemporary Video Game Narratives"
- 11:30 - 12:00 Discussion
- 12:00 - 13:30 **Lunch Break**
- Panel 2: It's outside the Game | How Video Games Shape Social Relations**
Chair: Wolfgang Hochbruck
- 13:30 - 13:50 Kristina Seefeldt (University of Freiburg)
"Video Games and Live Streaming as Ways to Recruit New Soldiers: The U.S. Military's Strategy to Reach Young Prospects"
- 13:50 - 14:10 Alexander Schorn (University of Freiburg)
"The Relation of Religion and Technology in the *Warhammer 40k* Universe"

PROGRAM

- 14:10 - 14:30 Maren Kraemer (University of Konstanz)
"Decision-Making in Contemporary Video Games"
- 14:30 - 15:00 Discussion
- 15:00 - 16:30 **Rest and Recuperation**
- Panel 3: "Are we there yet?" | How Video Games Fill their Spaces**
Chair: Undine Remmes
- 16:30 - 16:50 Berenike Jakob (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz)
"A Player's Choice: Cultural Pluralism and Narrative Techniques in *Breath of the Wild* and *Fire Emblem Three Houses*"
- 16:50 - 17:10 Hannah A. Barton (University of Glasgow)
"Musical Spaces in Games: Exploring Non-Musical Spaces?"
- 17:10 - 17:30 Lisa Hinterleitner (University of Innsbruck)
"Measuring the Game World: Maps and Mapping in Open World Games"
- 17:30 - 18:00 Discussion
- 18:00 Closing Remarks

EVENING PROGRAM: Meet & Chat

- 19:00 - 21:00 Two Simultaneous Sessions
- Workshop 1:** Florian Schäfer (University of Freiburg) "Monetisation in Video Games – A Discussion on the Economic Culture between Audience, Developers and Publishers in Video Games"
- Workshop 2:** Undine Remmes (University of Freiburg)
"Aesthetics of Light and Shadow in Video Games: Gamification of Art concerning Light and Shadow"

PROGRAM

Saturday, March 5

- 9:00 Opening and Welcome
- 9:10 - 10:00 **Keynote**
Beate Ochsner (University of Konstanz)
"Building Trust in Online Gaming"
- 10:00 - 10:30 **Coffee Break**
- Panel 1: Are you a Boy, or a Girl? – Identity and its Politics in Video Games**
Chair: Nicole Falkenhayner
- 10:30 - 10:50 Arvid Kammler (University of Siegen)
"Fragmented Being and Knowing: Table and Tableau in Cultist Simulator"
- 10:50 - 11:10 Marko Jevtic (University of Konstanz)
"‘If You Look Like You’re Black, You’re Black’: Experiential Racism, Identity Tourism and the (Black) Power Fantasy in *Mafia III*"
- 11:10 - 11:30 Philipp Wehage (University of Heidelberg)
"Popular Utopias: The Actualization of Queer Romantic Scripts in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and the Commodification of Uncomfortable Love"
- 11:30 - 12:00 Discussion
- 12:00 - 13:30 **Lunch Break**
- Panel 2: But What about the Cake? – Putting the Future back in Future Fictions**
Chair: Beate Ochsner
- 13:30 - 13:50 Flavia Mazzanti and Manuel Bonell (Immerea OG, Vienna)
"Inhabiting Virtual Spaces in Sandbox Games"
- 13:50 - 14:10 Marie Zarda (Philipps University of Marburg)
"Becoming (Post)-Human? From Black Liberation to Android Sentience"

PROGRAM

- 14:10 - 14:30 Angelina Skuratova (University of Paderborn)
“Extinction Is an Opportunity.’ Playing the Post-apocalyptic Wasteland Together Apart in *Death Stranding*”
- 14:30 - 15:00 Discussion
- 15:00 - 16:00 **Rest and Recuperation**
- Panel 3: This is the Captain Signing off | What Binds Us and How we Depict it**
Chair: Kristina Seefeldt
- 16:00 - 16:20 Eva McLean (University of Glasgow)
“How strange and brief all of this is’: *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Empathy and Liminal Fantasy
- 16:20 - 16:40 Jasmin Bieber (University of Konstanz)
“Level(ed) up Landscapes: The ‘Social Realities’ of Video Games”
- 16:40 - 17:00 Discussion
- 17:00 Closing Remarks

EVENING PROGRAM

- 19:00 - 21:00 Two Simultaneous Sessions
- Workshop 1:**
Janna Kaiser (University of Freiburg)
“**Video Games and the Environment**”
- Workshop 2:**
Kübra Aksay (University of Freiburg)
Discussion on *Mutazione*

ABSTRACTS

Vickie WK Monthong

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Title: *Inside* (2016): Social Order and Control

Inside (2016) is a puzzle-platformer adventure game by the game developing company Playdead. The story centres around the player character, a boy in a red top, who sneaks into a heavily-guarded laboratory within a post-apocalyptic city. Within this facility, the player discovers large-scale mind-control experiments held by local authorities. While initially using this technology to progress through the world, the boy ends up finding, and becoming-one, with a large ball-like creature made of humanoid limbs (the Huddle). Although there is no dialogue throughout the whole gameplay, the motifs as well as the symbols in this game are strongly relevant to the notion of control in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) by Foucault and "Postscript on the Societies of Control" by Deleuze (1990). In this paper, I argue that *Inside* (2016) is a critique of the transition of social mechanisms, which progress from the modern age "disciplines" to "the societies of control" in the digital era. The first argument is based on social order and conformity: the facility demonstrates highly refined forms of discipline carried out by the unknown authority. Restrictive signs, barriers, walls and patrolling guards with guard dogs are implements of power in the game. The factory setting shows how humans are reduced into experimental subjects that fall into line and are constantly evaluated. The second argument focuses on the implication of the Huddle and its ending. The creature, as a result of the mind control experiment, visualizes a unified mind in material form. Although the boy is an outcast that lives off his individuality, avoiding the influence of society and its "disciplines", his integration with the Huddle leads them to an evolved form of discipline – based on technological advancements of the digital age. The ending suggests the illusion of freedom in "the societies of control", as the Huddle travels "freely" while being perfectly controlled in the forest, which has the same setting and rules as the confinement that it escaped from.

Keywords: *Inside*, Social Order, Power, Control, *Discipline and Punish*, Michael Foucault, Societies of Control, Gilles Deleuze

Xuan Truong

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The Death of Mothers and Life of Fathers: The Absence of Mother-Figures in Contemporary Video Game Narratives

The rise of father-figures across the video game canon has been thoroughly acknowledged and chronicled by both critics and players alike. This observation began to pick up some time in the last decade or so with many notable entries featuring a father-child relation which defined the nature of video games as more than just flashy entertainment but a worthy medium to express art and storytelling.

Such titles included Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012), Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013), and Irrational Games' *Bioshock* (2007) series. Other contemporaries that surround the relationship of father and child such as Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and Santa Monica's *God of War* (2018) also thoroughly explore the complexities of fatherhood and the maturity of their child. Regardless of the nature of these particular titles and others like them, it is noteworthy to chronicle the pattern of father-child relationships that show up in the contemporary.

But where are the mothers? In the world of fathers, where are the mothers that often take the reputation of being fierce protectors of their young across life and literature? In most narrative cases, mothers take the backseat of either being side-characters or deceased. Unlike the narrative fathers who fight the harsh world for their child, mothers exist in death for the sake of another character's development. If they're not dead, then these women become a part of the background, taking on a much simpler narrative role.

This presentation will explore the problematic treatment or lack thereof of mother-figures in contemporary video games, especially focusing on the 'Dadification' era of 2010's and onward. The narrative elements that I am planning to discuss will be the general role of mothers, the juxtaposition to the role of father figures (sometimes, even in the same game example itself), and to highlight the narrative treatment of both parents and their reception to the audience. Finally, I will relate the treatment of mothers in video games to several factors in order to explain this current state including the male-dominated industry and the cultural bias of mothers to fathers in literature and media.

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"From Zero to Hero?" – The Outcast-Heroine's Journey in Contemporary Video Game Narratives

The idea of the outcast on their own 'hero's quest' is a popular trope in various kinds of narratives. In recent years the gaming world has provided more space for diverse representations

of female protagonists, who undergo a heroic quest while also displaying their intersectional struggles with their place in society: Guerrilla Games' *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) discusses gender in relation to class and social background, by representing a female outcast, Aloy, who earns her place in her tribe and defies her exile that is grounded in her social background (as she is not born in the heteronormative sense). Ninja Theory's *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) also features a female outcast, Senua, who is shunned by her village as she is suffering from various forms of mental illness. While Aloy's objective is the education about her past and the acceptance into the tribe, Senua's journey is a retelling of the Orpheus-myth, as she tries to bring back her beloved from the underworld. These two games represent their female protagonists as disadvantaged by their social surroundings, and who, by fulfilling a heroine's quests that aims towards an extrinsic and intrinsic acceptance of their own identity.

For this analysis the conceptual, ludic and narrational differences in representing Aloy's and Senua's quests will be taken into consideration: *Horizon* is a grand open world adventure,

that provides for 50+ hours of gameplay filled with characters, side missions, and opportunities to shape Aloy's abilities, and takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where modern society and history have long been forgotten. *Hellblade* works on a much more minimalistic level, as there are no subplots or manual character-developments to distract from the much shorter journey that

takes Senua from 8th century Britain to the hell of Norse mythology. By analyzing these two heroine's quests I want to engage in the topic of the female outcast and the quest narrative that might be the tool of securing identity and/or community by either being accepted or even reevaluating the initial goal of the journey.

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Video Games and Livestreaming as Ways to Recruit New Soldiers: The U.S. Military's Strategy to Reach Young Prospects

The impact of video games depicting war and conflict is widely discussed by supporters as well as critics, with the focus usually on short- or long-term psychological effects. The use of such game scenarios to recruit members for the U.S. Armed Forces is a less known aspect of strategy game playing. These games, funded by the U.S. military, tend to blur the lines between virtual and actual war to a degree that might be considered harmful. Arguably, this can have a rather direct impact on player's heroic role models, and on their lives.

E-sport teams such as "USArmyEsports", which are sponsored by the United States Army, or video game series like "America's Army", are prime examples for outreach initiatives by the U.S. military which intend to shape young people's minds and educate them on the abilities and roles of American soldiers. In the case of livestreaming, a direct interaction between the military and potential recruits takes place, which can contribute to closing the civilian-military gap. The military is enabled to address issues young Americans might bring up, including answers to difficult or even unpleasant questions. They certainly aim to influence the way members of the U.S. military complex are depicted, and the shape of the discourse concerning the military in general, military personnel, and heroic military figures.

Analyzing video games endorsed by the U.S. military, as well as relevant streaming accounts, I will discuss how the Armed Forces are using digital strategies in order to reach a young, impressionable audience and how gamers react to these strategies.

Alexander J. Schorn

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The Relation of Religion and Technology in the *Warhammer 40k* Universe

In my presentation, I would like to investigate the relationship between religion and technology in the *Warhammer 40k* universe as it is articulated in 2018's turn-based strategy video game *Mechanicus*. Subsequently I will demonstrate how this reflects the relationship of those two phenomena in the real world.

This undertaking can be subdivided into four basic steps: The first step will be to clarify what 'religion' usually signifies in our everyday lives. This includes a short comparison of the two moments of the "ancient *religio*" and the "Christian *Religion*" as they have been described by S. N. Balagangadhara in *The Heathen in his Blindness*.

Step two will trace the evolution of modern science and technology, while at the same time arguing that such an evolution was only made possible by the emergence of the revelational religions.

The third step shifts the focus to the *Warhammer 40k* universe and introduces the "Cult Mechanicus" as it is portrayed in the aforementioned video game, while also showing the differences to the rival religion of the "Imperial Cult". Here I will try to give a quick overview of their histories and 'religious doctrines'.

Step four will fuse the previous three by showing how one could draw a (more or less) continuous line from the opposition of the 'ancient *religio*' and 'Christian *Religion*' to the two aforesaid fictional rival religions. I will further argue that, to a certain extent, the "Cult Mechanicus" can be seen as 'successor' of the 'ancient *religio*', while the "Imperial Cult" stands in the tradition of the revelational religions, i.e. Judaism, Islam and Christianity. As such, their relationship could be seen as a reversal of the proclaimed historic connection between Christianity and Technology.

Maren Kraemer

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Decision-Making in Contemporary Video Games

A key part of playing video games, is the opportunity to make in-game decisions that can change the outcome of the game for better or for worse. As such these decisions are located somewhere inbetween the narrative, the mechanics, and the player input as they require an exchange and negotiation among them. A term that is often associated with this process of decision-making is the agency of the player. (Cf. Matuszkiewicz) Agency as such can be defined as something that: "first [...] produces differences and transformations; second, that the characteristics of agency are multiple and do not reside in any one prototypical actor; and third, that agency is distributed and dislocated." (Muriel und Crawford 142) Therefore, agency must be given in order to be able to deal with the effects of the decisions in the game. In this regard, the decision cannot be assigned to one side alone; rather, it arises through a mutual exchange. In this process of decision making, players are often motivated to find their own 'ways', which can always be seen as limited and predetermined by the game. With my contribution I would like to present and analyze exactly this phenomenon within the gaming landscape in more detail. On the one hand, I would like to look at 'decision-based games' like *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream) and *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games) and analyze which options are available to the players at what time of the game. On the other hand, I want to look at the influences that make such decisions possible in the first place. More precisely, which influences the games take on the players through their actions and mechanics, in order to evaluate and shape their decisions

from the beginning. As such, I strive to provide a multi-layered overview that analyzes, classifies, and illustrates decision paths in the context of utilized their game mechanics.

Sources

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Berenike Jakob

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Title: A Player's Choice: Cultural Pluralism and Narrative Techniques in *Breath of the Wild* and *Fire Emblem Three Houses*

The Legend of Zelda and the Fire Emblem series both belong to Nintendo's oldest game franchises. In their latest instalments *Breath of the Wild* (BotW) and *Three Houses* (FE3H) respectively, the audience is faced with a destructive war that leaves a post-disaster world the players need to navigate. Since they are two of the most popular and most lucrative gaming series in the world, researching their representation of cultural pluralism can serve as a valuable model in connection to post-disaster studies. The aim is to examine the way in which political as well as cultural views or beliefs merge and influence each other.

Although cultural pluralism plays a significant part in the resolution of the conflicts in both games, it is not at the forefront of their stories. They differ significantly in how the different cultures, along with their respective political counterparts, are portrayed. *BotW* represents a binary worldview, whereas *FE3H* has a more multifaceted dimension, which is mirrored in their respective modes of gameplay: The question is therefore whether choices of how to structure video game narratives can influence the development of spaces for non-hegemonic cultures. Or, framed differently: what hope for representation do we find in the games' storytelling?

In this context, this paper explores the connection between world-building and cultural representation along with a focus on reader-response criticism in terms of player inclusion. By drawing on narration theory and popular culture, it therefore combines the fields of media studies, literary studies, and cultural studies in an interdisciplinary approach. The results show that a setting with less lifestyle binaries opens up more possibilities for non-hegemonic cultures and affirms how closely culture, politics, and personal choices are intertwined both in video games and in real life.

Hannah A. Barton

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Title: Musical Spaces in Games: Exploring Non-Musical Spaces?

This paper argues that the video game *Sea of Solitude* (2019) by Jo-Mei productions can be provided as an example for how music amplifies spaces that are occupied in games in 'non-musical' games. To understand that video games inherently rely on music to develop spaces, these spaces will be considered in games where music is not tied to the plot or with musical devices. *Sea of Solitude* will be utilized to investigate overlaps between video game music studies and spatiality studies to discuss three main points for analyzing 'musical spaces': environment, narrative, and immersion.

Environmentally, the protagonist, Kay, involves herself in different spaces that have musical connotations that are dependent on the environment. As in most games, these spaces are occupied with both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds that provide spatial value. Even with an inherently 'non-musical' game, the environmental value of music is impactful; however, it can be further analyzed by looking beyond pixels on a screen, but also what they can hear within those spaces. Narratively, *Sea of Solitude's* music impacts the emotional value of her story because of the spaces she occupies. Emotional stories like Kay's require powerful signifiers, both with music and space, to heighten the complexity of the world Kay occupies: a fantastical sunken Berlin. By creating musical signposts, using leitmotifs, and more, music provides motivation to a player to reinforce meaning. Lastly, the immersive quality of *Sea of Solitude* surpasses what space and music can provide individually: it empowers the player to absorb a storyworld that is beyond their own. For this, I will utilize Mark J. P. Wolf's 'absorption' to extend the definition of immersive qualities in video games. Both music and space work together to create a balance in *Sea of Solitude* that amplifies 'play.'

Lisa Hinterleitner

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Title: Measuring the Game World: Maps and Mapping in Open World Games

The computer game is a spatial medium in that the act of playing usually involves navigating and exploring virtual spaces and landscapes. In many cases (in open world games in particular), this is facilitated by various kinds of maps, which serve as a means of orientation as well as a driving force behind the exploration and the conquest of space. These maps tend to be ontogenetic in that they are constantly evolving and changing as a result of the players' (inter)actions within the game world, mapping both their progress and their movement.

The term *map*, however, is ambiguous when it comes to computer games: it can denote both a map of a given space and the space itself, and it is thus often used synonymously with

level or *game world/space*. In strategy games, for example, there is no clear-cut distinction between map and territory—the game space itself appears as a map.

In my talk, I would like to take a closer look at how game spaces can be experienced through maps and mapping processes. The focus will be on the first category of maps outlined above, i.e., representational maps of the game space as they are commonly found in open world games. I will discuss the **types** of maps employed in these games (such as world maps and mini-maps), their **functions and interactive potential** (e.g., orientation, quest selection, or fast travel), and their **relation to the game world**. Further points of consideration will include the **ontogenetic nature** of these maps (how they reflect players' actions), the **transformation processes** they undergo in the course of a game, and how playing itself thus becomes a **cartographic experience**.

Arvid Kammler

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Title: Fragmented Being and Knowing. Table and Tableau in Cultist Simulator

Games like *Cultist Simulator* still elude certain logics of description of the mediation of game and player that are often based on theories of (anthropomorphic) avatar constructions and thus receive comparatively little attention. The talk approaches the object of study from a perspective that allows to shed more light on the relationships of individual actors within the processes of mediation found in certain types of computer games. The question is how the mediation between game and player can be adequately described in the case of games which provide avatars that differ from the player representation of a corporeal whole.

The computer game *Cultist Simulator* will serve as an example to explore the bodyspatially distributed mediation situation, at the centre of which is the game table. The game table is not only the ground on which the players arrange their playing cards, but beyond that, and this is the central thesis of the talk, the connecting interface of two spheres that mediates between the physical and the diffuse and thus is not only a media-functionally *in between*, but furthermore puts processes of negotiation on display.

What is more, the ensemble consisting of the table with the playing cards on it can ultimately be identified here as the spatially overlapping interface, which in terms of its functionality relates recursively to the real-world arrangement of player, hardware/software and game, from whose reciprocal relationship to each other the game space emerges. The players arrange the playing cards lying on it according to personal organisational schemes; in other words, they create an overview of the game elements, manipulate them and thus allow the table to become a playing field of the ongoing juxtaposition of body and game world. As the avatar as well as the outlines and the knowledge of the game world lie side by side on the table, the various relations between player representation and game world become malleable in interesting ways. So for example with Georges Didi-Huberman, it is possible to describe the table as a kind of switchboard of this process, as a surface on which, in contrast to the completed tableau, things are repeatedly shifted, shuffled and rearranged. The process of play in *Cultist Simulator* thusly deals not only with its diegetic world but also with the inner workings of the game itself.

Marko Jevtic

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Title: “If You Look Like You’re Black, You’re Black”: Experiential Racism, Identity Tourism and the (Black) Power Fantasy in *Mafia III*

It is said about gamers that most of them are white men who often even hold bigoted beliefs against anyone not belonging to their “in-group.” The gaming industry seemingly agrees, considering the types of protagonists it overwhelmingly offers and its adamant repudiation of any attempt to read its games as political statements.

In my proposed presentation I will investigate what happens – on a narrative, ludic, and ludonarrative level – when a videogame features a Black protagonist while still assuming the player to be white. In doing so, I will look at the political, cultural, and identity-related processes that take place in this ‘playful’ translation of a Black experience. Furthermore, since such games often have both the player and protagonist use violent means to oppose White Supremacist structures, I will also analyze the resulting points of contact between intersectionality, activism, and interactivity.

My main example will be *Mafia III* (2016), which puts the player into the shoes of a Black man in 1968, shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., in a city full of racist police officers, racially segregated businesses and even the KKK. In doing so, the game creates a sensation of ‘experiential racism’ for the (white) player that is in and of itself limited, specific, and flawed while still illustrating that videogames can uniquely enhance the affective- and effectiveness of representation through interactive participation.

I will illustrate how the opportunities and limitations inherent in this form of ‘identity tourism’ are facilitated, shaped, and delimited by the game’s representative choices: In its ludically manufactured and encouraged encounters with racism, *Mafia III* provides not only a ‘safe’ experience of systemic oppression, but also systemic tools to live out a power fantasy that, due to its narrative context, is not just a ‘black’ power fantasy but can become a ‘Black Power’ fantasy.

Philipp-Thomas Wehage

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Title: Popular Utopias: The Actualization of Queer Romantic Scripts in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and the Commodification of Uncomfortable Love

Analyzing digital games not only as actualizations of pop-cultural scripts, but as *counterfactual reactions* (Apperley 2013,2018) to lived realities enables an understanding of game-texts as popular utopias. These nowhere-places of the fantastic imagination are structured along lines that strain against the borders of the commonly accepted and acceptable – and serve to make these lines visible thereby. At the same time as forming a protocol of desires newly spoken of, games are also bought and sold in a market and need to conform to the structural rules of a sales-driven industry. My exploration of the game-text of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* shall illuminate both angles in their reciprocal constitution. My specific focus in this case will lie on the way

queer romance is written into the game, especially as these scripts have found extensive positive reception in the literature (Pelurson 2018; Schallegger 2016a; Schallegger 2016b,2017).

Sources

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Title: Inhabiting Virtual Spaces in Sandbox Games

Over the last few years, the relationship between video games, architecture and urban studies has seen a significant growth. As Luke C. Pearson states, “we do not have to look far to see that most contemporary videogames are highly spatial, both thematically and in their mechanisms of play”.¹ If, on the one hand, architecture and spatial relations can be considered as main elements in the game design, on the other hand video games are also starting influencing the architecture of physical spaces.

Coming from a background in architecture and immersive media, in our research we are interested in analyzing spatial theories and new approaches to space through the medium Game. Our focus lies not (only) in looking at the architecture of games, but rather at how players shape and inhabit the virtual environments they are located in. For this reason, in this investigation we will limit our study to Sandbox games, or games where the players have a major level of freedom and creativity. Starting from a key representative sandbox game like *Minecraft* (2011), our analysis will be directed to sandbox games and games which present sandbox characteristics such as *Subnautica* (2014), *Astroneer* (2016) and *Terraria* (2011). Among the main factors taken in consideration: the level of creativity and involvement of the players, how the players decide to inhabit the specific virtual environments, and the different layers of freedom provided to the player by the game designers. In this realm, we are also questioning how our urban environment is influencing and limiting our creativity in the virtual, and what could be done in order to turn this process into a more inborn and organic one. Critics and reflections on the analyzed games will be confronted with our currently in development VR game – *Garden of Akori* (working title) –, a sandbox and exploration game focusing on creativity, perception and interaction, where the player deals with organic structures in a fragmented

world. The investigation will also deal with academic writings on spatial theory, architecture and philosophy – among others Gerber and Götz’s “Architectonics of Game Spaces” (2019), and Borries and Böttger’s “Space Time Play” (2007) –, with the aim to open up an interdisciplinary discussion on the relationship between spatial theories, architectural-philosophical studies and video games.

Sources

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Title: Becoming (Post-)Human? From Black Liberation to Android Sentience.

The question of the nature of humanity has been a reoccurring theme time and time again in cultural production all throughout the ages. Oftentimes subversively addressed, reflections about what it means to be human seem to be ubiquitous in storytelling, but are also crucial for the development of a universal understanding of humanity that has consequential effects on the history of humankind. In this context, the concept of artificial intelligence and cybersentience has always been the source of fascination for many, from Turing machines to cyberfictional androids that are indistinguishable from humans. While some variations of artificial intelligence have already found their way into our everyday life, true cyber-sentience is still far from a reality. Reflections about the consequences of such a technological advancement, however, have long found their way into literature, movies, and other products of media, and illustrate how the borders of humanity and human identity must be reexamined in the face of such a drastic change.

Arguably the most notable instance in history when a re-examination of definitions of humanity became necessary was in the 19th-century, when the institution of slavery was increasingly questioned and eventually abolished in the United States of America. The understanding of humanity did not apply to Africans brought to the country and turned into slaves, which legitimized their inhumane treatment and the exploitation of their labor. However, over the course of more than a century, Black slaves struggled to be recognized, not only as citizens of the United States with respective rights and liberties, but as humans. Their efforts eventually led to the liberation of African American slaves and, to some degree, to a redefined understanding of what it means to be human.

I would like to suggest that narratives of cyber-sentience can be read as a reimagining of stories of slavery and, consequently, Black liberation. In this context I will examine the video game *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) to highlight shared elements between the development of the futuristic Androids kept in bondage and African American slaves of the 19th-century. A focal point will be the question of how analogies of freedom and means to achieve that freedom within the fictional stories of cyber-sentience can be transferred and related to the non-fictional experience of African American slaves.

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Title: "Extinction Is an Opportunity." Playing the Post-apocalyptic Wasteland Together Apart in *Death Stranding*

Post-apocalyptic narratives have arguably become increasingly popular across different media, but particularly so in video games. For decades, video games have held a fascination for 'the end,' imagining the collapse of society and landscapes virtually in ruins. Games are said to "celebrate and explore spatial representation as their central motif and raison d'être" (Aarseth 161), which is why the genre's iconic space, the post-apocalyptic wasteland, frequently frames the player's aesthetics exploration of ruin and destruction and acts as their playground for survival in combative encounters. *Death Stranding* (2019), however, stands out from other post-apocalyptic games as it uses the wasteland to convey its ludo-narrative focus on connection and collaborative multiplayer interactions in what is ostensibly a single-player game. As it reflects the social isolation, political divisiveness, and apocalyptic expectations that many people experienced during the recent pandemic, the game's relevance has grown even more: the hopeful quest to rebuild and reconnect the fractured "United Cities of America" encourages players who are themselves in a compromised situation to engage in meaningful social transformations virtually. This paper, therefore, proposes that there is a shift in post-apocalyptic video games which depart from being engines of violence and stories of extinction to becoming hopeful experiences that allow players to collaboratively deconstruct exclusionary barriers, thus strengthening a global 'imagined' community (Anderson 2006). It will show that the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *Death Stranding* enables subversive spatial practices through asynchronous multiplayer gameplay that has the potential to reimagine and transform the ways how change is affected and how players are connected to one another. As a didactic trial space free of tangible consequences, the video game becomes the primary "culture-creating force" (Huizinga 211) to unite and imagine better futures.

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Title: 'How strange and brief all of this is': *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Empathy and Liminal Fantasy

What Remains of Edith Finch (2017) is not considered a horror game, but that does not stop it from being one of the most haunting games ever created. The BAFTA award winning video game features fantastical elements, but this paper argues that what makes the narrative compelling is the way that it manages to mirror the tragedies of reality. Each member of the Finch family meets their untimely demise as experienced by the player through the harrowing use of first-person gameplay. Whether this is down to a family curse, or a string of bad luck is never confirmed and this is only the beginning of the liminal space the text grapples with. There are no ghosts in the fantastical sense, but the Finch house is haunted with the memories of those who once called it home. Therefore, in this paper I will study this blend between the fantastical and the mundane with regard to liminal fantasy. To do this, this paper draws upon Farah Mendlesohn's taxonomy focusing on her category of 'liminal fantasy.' This paper also assesses how player agency can have considerable power in terms of creating investment and conjuring empathy. The inclusion of first-person gameplay places the player into this mundane setting to 'experience alternate situations and ways of being human' (Isbister 2017:8), highlighting the game as a unique medium for engaging in empathy. Ultimately, it is a game that features a great deal of death, but in doing so teaches us to embrace life. Edith is fearful of the house in the beginning, and she is right to be – while there are no ghosts within the walls, the game hints at something far more terrifying: our own mortality. Therefore, this paper further unpacks Jesper Juul's point that, 'perhaps: when playing games, we are all philosophers' (Juul 2013:43).

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Title: Level(ed) Up Landscapes: The 'Social Realities' of Video Games

The recent debate on video games' spatiality and how to account for it – especially in relation to literature, art and other media – foregrounds digital space as an enigma in video game research that needs yet to be properly accounted for. Espen Aarseth and Stephan Günzel, for instance, suggested in their papers respectively a diverse and carefully differentiated set of aspects with which digital spaces can be categorised and examined. This paper strives to add to this ongoing discussion not by introducing new dyadic categories to these lists but by considering the overarching implications of a digital game space as a Foucauldian heterotopia. Therefore, it will highlight video game spatiality as particular social spaces according to the definition of heterotopias as "spaces of representation" that "are produced by presence of a set of specific social relations and their space." (Cenzatti 81) In order to undermine this reading, I will take a closer look at two recent video games by *thatgamecompany*, which incorporate their spaces into their gameplay and narrative: *Abzu* (2016) and *Sky: Children of Light* (2019). By drawing on the

similarities as well as differences between these two game titles, both of which aim at discovering and preserving their Edenic surroundings, I will argue for an intrinsic connection between a video game's spatial, social, and narrative dimensions. Thus, while I agree with Aarseth's notion of games as "allegories of space" (169), I would like to add the essential yet commonly overlooked factor of socio-spatiality to assert and explore digital games as playable 'social realities.'

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EVENING WORKSHOPS

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Monetisation and Players – A Discussion on the Economic Culture between Audience, Developers and Publishers in Video Games

Monetisation has been an integral element of video game culture from the very beginning of the medium which has since seen profound and varied changes. From shareware to rising prices, implementation of DLC, games-as-service approaches, gacha, or the seemingly unstoppable arrival of NFTs, economic factors are reflected on every level of video games, from the surrounding culture to production, distribution, and artistic endeavors.

Join me in a discussion as I stream my Genshin Impact routine, reminisce about my experiences with monetisation over my years as a player of video games and work through my complicated feelings regarding these models.

Undine Remmes

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Light and Shadow - Points of Contact for Viewers in Video Games and Art

Paintings have properties that enable them to blur and expand the boundaries between reality and virtuality. Optical illusions, illusionistic painting and immersive spatial experiences existed many centuries before "virtual reality" applications. The potential for immersive experiences inherent in paintings can be explored particularly well through reception-aesthetic approaches. Using the example of the Rembrandt painting "The Anatomy of Doctor Tulp" and its digital implementation in the augmented reality app "Rembrandt Reality", the workshop will show the extent to which dark areas in paintings can function as reception-aesthetic "voids" in digital space and generate options for action.

In "Rembrandt Reality" they serve to enable the user to find his or her location in precisely these

areas. In this way, the app has parallels with video games such as Dishonored, Skyrim, Nox, Diablo and many others in which darkness is used to influence spectral dynamics. In what way is the image-viewer relationship of painting used and developed further in the video game? Which games are particularly suitable for generating a high degree of involvement?

Discussion: *Mutazione* (2019)

(moderated by) **Kübra Aksay**

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In this evening session, participants are invited to an open discussion focusing on the adventure video game *Mutazione*. Please join the conversation if you would like to share any of your observations on the game- and narrative design, writing, art style, and more within this game. I will be live-streaming parts of the game for those who are not familiar with it.

“Video Games and the Environment”

Janna Kaiser

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In this session, I will be playing and live-streaming *Raft* (2018) and will have a conversation with the participants about how pollution is handled as a basis for survival in this video game (as the only resources that can be gathered are floating wreckage in the ocean), but they might also be the cause for the player to be in the situation they are in (adrift in the middle of the ocean).