

**AFFECT & PLAY: SOCIO-POLITICAL VIDEOGAMES AS A SITE OF FELT-
KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION**

SARA SHAMDANI

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Abstract

Videogames are affective networks, made up of organic and in-organic matters that come to create a space, where the player learns through doing and watching herself do. For decades, videogames researchers and players have discussed the myriad of ways in which videogames carry enormous pedagogical potentials through their procedures and the creation of a space of play that immerses the player in those procedures and the story of the game. This dissertation builds on this body of knowledge by bringing together the different understandings of affect and affective capacities to further examine the pedagogical potentials of socio-political games through the creation of a felt-knowledge-producing assemblage.

I argue this felt knowledge is achieved through the processes of acting in the space of play, watching that action while it takes place, and then engaging with the consequences of the said action. The socio-political videogames curated for the purposes of this research are primarily from the perspectives of civilians living in a warzone, engaging in revolutionary efforts, or civilians who are forced to cross borders as refugees and immigrants as a result of chaos and violence of their homelands. I examine the affective capacities of the space of play through the works of D. W. Winnicott, and I assert that the unique space of videogame play is not only a space where we work through sensations that impact us through play, but we also experience affective intensities that would otherwise remain invisible. In order to access this space of play, I claim the player becomes an assemblage, a network of connectivity, with the power to observe itself forming and reforming through the connections that make the entity: the player+avatar. For this I turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze and assemblage theory.

This dissertation, itself, is an assemblage of affect theories and socio-political videogames that capture the invisibilities of our socio-political reality and make them known through the process of play. These games put the player in the story of another's suffering and

oppression by capturing the affective sensations and intensities of a refugee camp or a war zone and ask the player to engage and experiment with what would have been otherwise remained unknown. These socio-political videogames are a new genre of art for an age of digital (mis)information that bring forth a space of play where we can experience and experiment with sensations, vibrations, and affective forces of oppression in order to *feel* something of it and to *know* it differently.

For Mom and Dad, whose stories of revolution, war, and immigration could be made into many videogames,

and

For Barry, who kept saying 'you've got something here, keep going.'

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Chapter 1: An Affective Play, an Introduction

The Play's the Thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. – William Shakespeare,
Hamlet

The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? – Brian Massumi, Forward in *A Thousand Plateaus*

Child, tuck yourself in bed and let me tell a story,
Of Lemuria, a long lost kingdom, and a girl born for glory.
In Austria was a crown land ruled by a duke, Aurora was his daughter,
Child of a duchess mysterious, beloved by her father.
He raised the girl alone, they were rarely apart,
Until the duke felt lonely and misplaced his heart.
It was the great Friday, before Easter, 1895,
Players performed for the duke, his new bride at his side.
That night Aurora went to sleep, the fire burned down low.
She caught a chill that spread, her skin was cold as snow.
At dawn they found her, vacant, Aurora's light was gone out.
Her father wept and pleaded but there could be no doubt.
For all intents and purposes Aurora was dead and yet...
Once upon a time, she awoke in a strange land instead... (*Child of Light*, 2014)

This is *Child of Light* (2014), a role-playing videogame produced by Ubisoft Production.

I am that *child*. With my controller in hand, tucking myself in the folds of the story, I am about to enter a space of play and grow *into* and *with* that 'girl born for glory'. I am simultaneously that girl: a princess lost in space and time looking for ways to get back to her home and her father, and a woman: a gamer in the privacy of her home playing a videogame. Sitting on my couch, looking at my TV screen, holding my controller, surrounded by the material things around me, I step into a mysterious digital realm of a videogame, where giants walk in the background and flying creatures occupy the skies signaling of the monsters yet to come. In this place the treetops dance in the wind and the forest, resembling a secret garden adorned with ruins, points to puzzles to be solved, clues to be followed and stories to be understood. I am called upon to enter a fantastical realm to learn of a story and to become part of that story. I am beckoned to act, to play

both with the game and within the game. Through this beautifully designed synesthetic space of the game, I enter a zone of play that is neither fully digital nor fully material and I *become* someone/something else: a part-subject, part-object being. Bodies, and objects around me arrange and re-arrange themselves so that I become an augmentation of what I was, of who I was. I become more than I was. Aurora and I, me and Aurora, meet in a particular space and move along to discover, learn, and grow together. I play the game, I play *in* the game and *with* the game, and in my playing, the game and I, Aurora and I, co-write and co-create a story.



Figure 1 *Child of Light* (2014)

This research project was born out of the in-between space of play and was forged with the sensations and forces that affected and changed me. I played and experimented with those affective sensations because each repetition of play made other invisible sensations visible. I played a game and it changed me, so much so that I dedicated my entire research project in order to capture and translate something of those sensations and attunements that had impacted me. This dissertation is an attempt to do just that: to translate the forces that make themselves known

through play and specifically in the space of a videogame. Throughout this dissertation, I investigate the affective potentials of what I will call socio-political games (SPG). My aim here is to shed light on a series of videogames as aesthetic creations that make visible the affective sensations of a material reality that might have otherwise remained invisible. I am interested in how these games not only capture something of the realities that have impacted their artists but also provide a space wherein through playing, the gamer comes to feel something of those forces, merge with them and potentially create something new. The central questions animating this dissertation are: What happens to us when we play a videogame? Where does that type of playing take place and how do we gain access to it? What are the ways in which socio-political games illuminate the unknown by putting the player face-to-face with complexities of life, multiplicities of stories, and who/what we become through play? And ultimately what potentialities does such becoming-through-play carry?

I trace these questions through socio-political videogames including: *1000 Days of Syria* (2014), *This War of Mine* (2014), *Papers Please* (2014), *Neverending Nightmares* (2014), *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (2016), and *Bury Me, My Love* (2017) and analyze them affectively. By unpacking the definition and understanding of affect through different ontological branches, I investigate how utilizing affect both as a theoretical and a methodological framework can help further our understanding of the gravitational pull that videogames have on gamers. My aim is also to build further upon theories of videogames, not only as a pedagogical tool or as aesthetic creations that they are, but as a unique space of play deserving of attention and engagement within cultural studies.

This chapter is meant to orient the reader to this genre of videogames that capture the sensations of the living conditions of marginalized people. These videogames, often defined

under the categories of ‘indie’, ‘serious’, or ‘political’ games, influenced by the socio-political realities of people’s lives, capture the affective intensities of the brutalities of life and the wretchedness of living under oppressive conditions in order to make an impression, to be felt, and to make certain sensations visible. I come to define these games as socio-political games (SPGs) and in the following pages I will further define this category and contextualize these games in the broader videogaming context. These videogames are meant to create a sensuous knowledge through play, to borrow from Avery Gordon (1997), ‘out of a concern for justice’. I will introduce the theoretical frameworks of affect and their various interventions in cultural studies by re-centering the body as a site of knowledge production. In this process, I will explain how writing about affect, intensities and attunements requires a method of writing affectively and will demonstrate how I will exercise this kind of writing throughout the dissertation.

Socio-political videogames: Ambassadors of sensual knowledge

One of the earliest videogames, *Tennis for Two* (1958), created by Willy Higinbotham, was intended to create a demonstration program that would make the computer/the machines more accessible and friendlier to the general public by showcasing what they could do through simplifying their complexities (Anable, 2018; Malliet & Meyer, 2005). “From the very beginning computer games had both pedagogical and affective dimensions that were premised in part on making what was invisible or difficult to see – how they work – visible and sensible” (Anable, 2018, p. 23). *Spacewar* (1961), created by Steve Russell, is considered the first example of a computer game, programmed on a computer and for entertainment purposes alone (Malliet & Meyer, 2005). The purpose of this game was simple: prevent your spaceship from being destroyed by the black hole and destroy the opponent before he destroys you. This game contained several crucial elements of simulation, action, and reward (Malliet & Meyer, 2005).

These early games, by allowing the player some control and manipulation over the game, managed to create an interaction, a relationship, between the machine and the human, and by extension with the human who had programmed the machine.

This was a relationship primarily formed out of play and it has evolved over the past sixty years from short and technically limited monochrome experiences to expansive open-worlds rendered in virtual reality. Playing videogames “is a cultural phenomenon” transcending various mediums of entertainment and social development (Reid & Downing, 2018, p. 43). Games and gameplaying have always existed in a “lived culture of gaming” where, “games are not just played, they are talked about, read about, ‘cheated’, fantasized about, altered, and become models for everyday life and for the formation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (de Castell & Jenson, 2003, p. 651). Playing a videogame, in fact playing in general, always includes creating new connections and relationalities, whether they are connections or *reconnections* with parts of ourselves, our past, other bodies and/or other things. This relationality and its potential is something that gamers have known and experienced for decades and then in early 2000s, out of this lived culture of gaming and out of the post 9/11 socio-political reality, a new genre of gaming emerged.

The past two decades of the War on Terror, catastrophic displacement and refugee crises, increase in border policing, racial tensions, and international and roboticized murder particularly in the Middle East, has resulted into politics of, what Giorgio Agamben (2005) calls, the state of exception. Under such a state, pervasive surveillance, oppressive sanctions, dehumanization of ‘terrorists’, and above all the suspension of the law have become normalized. From this socio-political climate a genre of videogames emerged that attempted to capture something of these crises and create a space where through playing, the issues and the messages of the games could

be felt, sensed and possibly discussed among other players. These games are at times considered ‘political games’ (Bogost, 2007a; Nielson et al., 2008) or ‘critical play’ (Flanagan, 2009), that shed light on the stories of the margins and the marginalized.

September 12th (2003) was one of the first of such games. In *September 12th*, I – the player – am tasked with killing terrorists who walk about in a middle-eastern looking market. It quickly becomes obvious that it is impossible to kill terrorists without killing civilians, whom then mourn and grieve their losses and some turn to ‘terrorists’ themselves. Gonzalo Frasca, the creator of the game, stated that the game’s goal was not to convince people that The War on Terror was wrong, rather to generate discussion around the ethical dilemma of civilians becoming the ‘collateral damage’ of war which can lead to their alienation and sometimes their shift towards ‘extremism’ (Thompson, 2006).

Games like *Food Force* (2005) – a UN game where the player is tasked with distributing food in famine-affected regions, *Darfur is Dying* (2006) – a game that highlights the terrifying experiences of foraging for water, *A Force More Powerful* (2006) – a game that teaches principles of nonviolent actions with a dozen scenarios inspired by historical conflicts against dictators and occupiers, as well as struggles for securing socio-political rights, and *Peacemaker* (2007) – a game that tasks the player with peace initiations between Israel and Palestine by being either the Israeli prime minister or the Palestinian president, have all been among the pioneers of games that have attempted to capture and bring to light complexities of power, people, and life.

These games aimed to create a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of the war on terrorism and challenge their predecessors and the traditional first-person shooters (FPS), wherein the player often plays a member of a military Special Forces unit. More aptly they were created out of the need to render something of the wretched reality of human condition in war,

displacement, and conflict more palpable. These games weave an intricate fabric of history and fiction to ask the player to reckon with moral dilemmas and experience something of their haunting impacts: would you steal medicine from an elderly couple in order to save your friend's life? Would you leave your dying friend on the street in order to save your own life? In your peace attempts, would you declare ceasefire by removing settlements from an occupied territory while assassinating militants from that occupied territory? What will ensue in the game and in you, the gamer, because of what you did? What sensations are unleashed through your actions and what will their impacts be on the game and you as the player?

These games are aesthetic creations that do not simply criticize materially powerful systems; instead they ask the player to judge the circumstances for herself by putting the player in the centre of the enacted crisis. They reveal complexities of those crises. They, by tapping into the affective powers of identification, allow the player to go beyond just sympathizing with the Other, but to feel *something* of that suffering – no matter how imaginary and fictional the Other is. What manifests in and emerges through these games is the need to disclose truths of bodies through art, a need to communicate through means which unleash forces and sensations that allow the player to *feel* something of truth and its multiplicity through the engagement with movements, sounds, colours, and sensations.

I must note that exploring such ethical quandaries have been the themes among some games that might not even be considered 'serious' play. For example, *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), which received significant negative criticism regarding the ability of the player to inflict violence, is written extensively about as a game that in fact demonstrates the duplicity of "the American Dream", toxic masculinity, class struggles and corruption (Allen, 2014; Owen, 2017). In fact, in his dissertation research into *Grand Theft Auto V*, Paul Darvasi (2019) found that the

young men who were the participants of his research study became much more aware of race and racial inequalities, and gained new perspectives on the relation between race and masculinity by playing the game and critically analyzing it. As I will explore in more depth in the following chapter, the pedagogical potentials of games to guide the player to think about underlying messages of the game through play, is extensively explored by game theorists (Bogost, 2007b; Gee, 2007; de Castell & Jenson, 2007; Weir and Baranowski, 2011). The procedures of the game “through authorship of rules of behaviour and the construction of dynamic models” (Bogost, 2007a, p. 29) put the player directly in situations where the consequences of their actions in the game play out and alter the story. Serious or political games tap into this potentiality of games in order to tell a deeper story, or as Dina Georgis (2013) calls it, ‘a better story’. In the procedures and processes of gameplay, which will inevitably include the ability and the need to re-do the game, a more complex, multilayered story is created. And in multiple stories, complexities of life reveal themselves. These games deliver messages that could only be delivered through the medium of videogames because they do not deliver them directly to an audience, instead they deliver a reality to the player+avatar to act in and to sense.

These socio-political games have been ‘ambassadors’, to borrow from Aubrey Anable (2018), of the forces and sensations of inequalities. They are created by people who felt the forces of injustice in the world and wanted others to feel *something* of those sensations and forces with all their horror, nuances, confusions and complications. I must pause and note here that I argue that these games reveal *something* of the wretched reality they are born out of, since no aesthetic creation can ever fully capture all the horrific forces of conflict and violence as it happens around and to people. These games are able to capture such sensations because videogames have the ability, unlike any other cultural medium, to blur the boundaries of bodies:

between that of the machine and the body of the player. This allows the player to witness and feel how the demarcation between bodies – the player and the avatar – dissolves and this dissolution and its subsequent *re*-emergence as a new entity is filled with new potentialities. As I will investigate in depth in chapter four, these bodies – organic and non-organic – merge together to move the characters both on and off the screen. Videogames have the ability to move the player both literally, through the movement of the gamer’s body, and metaphorically through the impact of sensations and feelings stemming from the game. Movement is an essential part of any type of play, and by extension videogames.

One reason accounting for such blurred boundaries, as David Owen (2017) asserts, is the way in which in any videogame, unlike other cultural mediums such as a film or a book, the player is not simply encouraged to empathize with the protagonist, but she is encouraged to *be* the protagonist. “Inhabiting the avatar’s social personal allows the player to try out social qualities they may not normally possess” (Isbister, 2017, p. 11). In videogames, the player is the protagonist of the story with a unique form of agency to shift and move the story (Goldstein, 2005; Owen, 2017; Tavinor, 2009). This type of agency shapes the story and can alter the ending of the game. Although such alterations must be written by the developers and the designers of the games, the player chooses which actions to take and this choice forms a particular connection between the player and the avatar (Calvert, 2005; Jenkins, 2007; Owen, 2017). In her book, *How games move us: Emotion by design*, Katherine Isbister (2017) argues that the player through the control she has over the avatar, projects herself onto the character on four levels: visceral, cognitive, social and fantasy, and thus the player’s “prosthetic body, with its specific capabilities and tendencies, becomes a vehicle for action” (p. 11). The actions of the player decide the outcome of the game and in that a different time-space continuum is formed every time the

player restarts the game. Every repetition of the game changes both the player and the avatar. In the space of videogame play the avatar and the player merge forces and through the repetition of actions in the game and working through failure both the avatar and the player move forward together. Nowhere this connection is more palpable than in the player's recounting of the game. Because of this unique emersion and formation and *reformation* of bodies, the gamer uses "I" statements in recounting the story of the game, not only in the articulation of the game but also in that of the gameplay.

Players often use simple yet profound utterances such as: "I died"; "I killed"; "I saved". Although it is very clear that the player did not physically die, if the actions result in the 'death' of the on-screen character, it will be recounted in such way that makes the avatar part of the gamer in that particular time and space. In videogames not only we are invited in to play, to act, to do, but we are also invited to watch ourselves play, act and do. The act of doing is accompanied by the act of watching ourselves doing. In chapter three, I will further discuss these two specific traits – doing and watching ourselves do – and the ways in which they contribute to a formation of a very different experiential space where the affective potentialities of play, experimentation, and working through failure are enormous. I will specifically draw on the work of D. W. Winnicott and his formulation about the space of play and its importance for human creativity and cultural formation.

In this space, indexed between the material and the virtual reality, the gamer becomes an augmentation of herself which might include an immigration officer at the border who is tasked with distinguishing between legal and illegal entries while balancing the needs of those fleeing violent situations (*Papers Please*), or a husband of Syrian woman who is leaving Syria in order to get to Europe and set up the path for him to join her as a refugee claimant (*Bury Me, My*

Love), or a mother who is forced to choose between working in an illegal ammunition factory or smuggling gas in order to ensure her children do not go hungry (*1000 Days of Syria*), or a revolutionary student fighting to overthrow a dictatorial regime (*1979 Revolution: Black Friday*). Through these socio-political games (SPG) which make up the main focus of this dissertation I investigate how the combination of the techniques of branching story lines, and failure and repetition, creates a place of connecting, assembling and coalescing of forces where the avatar and the player merge in each play-through, and at the same time the player integrates the experience of an amalgamation of the often failed or killed avatars. Repetition in play and by extension in videogame play, works as a way to work through the challenges of the game and to *re-write* the story of the gameplay, and each re-write offers significant potentials for new connections.

Why these games?

Although socio-political games (SPGs), and videogames in general, have become much more popular in recent years, such SPGs still exist within the fringes of both the gaming community, as not many gamers play them, and cultural studies since many cultural theorists do not consider videogames as aesthetic creations worthy of engagement and discussion. This research is my attempt to add to the voices of gamers and game theorists writing about these games and to shed more light on the affective powers of these games and their pedagogical potentials with the hopes that others will also play and engage with them, and will come to have a different *knowing* through play. Like many other game theorists who write about games, I wrote about the series of SPGs that had affected me in ways I did not know was possible. I played these games and grappled with my own contradictions, weaknesses, brutality, and duality. I observed myself act in ways that I would not think I would act and my own humanness shocked

me. I played these games and I learned things that my extensive formal education could not fully teach me.

I played these games and I was affected. But the story of ‘why these games?’ is more complicated than that, and its complexities would come to reveal themselves only after I started writing chapter six and the analysis that ensued from it. In the writing of that chapter I realized the extent in which my personal history and propensity had led me to games such as *This War of Mine* or *Papers Please*. Through that analysis, I became more aware that almost every game chosen as a subject of this dissertation had acted as a personal processing where I have worked through *something* of my own life whether I had known it at the time or not. As Joan Didion said “I don’t know what I think until I write about it” (as cited in Gilbert, 2015, p. 135); similar to Didion, the writing process of my gameplays, and the translation of those affective intensities that took place through that writing, ultimately made a fracture in my theoretical analysis and forced me to re-think my theoretical framework.

This was both an interesting and a painful realization as it shifted my theoretical position on affect. *It shifted my position*. I gravitated towards affect theory because I believed I found freedom from the rigidity of poststructuralism which maps out our bodies on a grid of systems of powers that intersect with one another and operate, control and change us. I gravitated towards affect theory because I did not want to be imprisoned by my positionality, identity and my history and the games chosen as the subject of this research became ways of looking at that very positionality, identity and history that I wanted to transcend. I did not want to begin with my positionality, but my positionality – as poststructuralism would argue – found me.

I was born into an eight-year long war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, the first child of my parents. The war, on a country already in turmoil and flux after the 1979 revolution,

ravaged Iran and with it changed the lives of millions of people on both sides of the border.

Although I have no conscious memories of the war, the bombs, the sirens, and the deaths, I have many stories of the war told to me by my elders: stories of loss and separation, of the last goodbyes, of hungry children in search of food, of pregnant women bleeding, and of bravery and ‘stupidity’. I grew up with these stories and they shaped who I am and here is one of those stories, a story within a story:

Iraq was bombing Tehran heavily in the attempts to demoralize the people especially in the early years of the war. Most of the bombing was happening at night. My parents were witnessing high levels of PTSD, in its different variation and impacts, in the children of their friends and other family members. In order to prevent any of these from happening to me, my parents in a brilliant and a brave way told me a different story of the bombs that would create a different connection. When the sirens would blare throughout Tehran communicating that the jets were on their way and that people should take shelter, my parents would tell me that the sirens signified the beginning of fireworks. They would then bring me out to the yard, foregoing taking shelter, firmly believing that if a bomb was meant to drop on them, it did not matter whether they were in a basement or in the middle of the yard. The flares would light up the sky to identify Iraqi bomber planes so the anti-aircraft artillery could shoot them down. In the yard, my parents would point to the bright colours of white, green or red of the flares illuminating the night’s sky and with as much excitement and joy as they could muster they would say: ‘Sara, look at the fireworks!’ and I would clap and giggle, loving what I was seeing, no doubt understanding my parents’ anxiety but mistaking it for excitement. They would go on to tell me this story for many months, to the point that I came to associate the sound of the siren with the beginning of fireworks and I would then proceed to tell my parents to hurry so that we could go

to the yard and watch the fireworks, as to not miss any of it. My mother says that in those moments, as the bombs would drop elsewhere and the bombing would finish, she would be filled with relief and gratitude that it was not them who was hit and then immediately she would be filled with regret and sadness that the bomb had just killed someone else's daughter or mother.

Stories of life at that time and the collective history of the community that I was growing up in, were repeated and their repetition left deep grooves in my mind. The aftermath of the war and the increasing economic disparity, government crack-downs on dissent, arrest and executions, and the continual deterioration of women's rights, ultimately led to our family leaving Iran.

I played these games and wrote about them because forces of revolution, war, and immigration have made me up as I am today. I was pulled towards these games because something in me called out to the game as much the games called out to me. My play and my subsequent analysis became a way to work through a deeper understanding of my parents, my grandparents, and by extension myself. I worked through the brutalities of these games because I needed to work through the brutal forces and sensations of my own childhood experiences. Through play, I processed, made new relationality and connections. Ultimately this analysis led me to one of my fundamental shifts in conceptualizing affect. Affect is a force that is both pre-personal *and* is subject to the personal and the collective history that makes up that body. This analysis makes up the whole of chapter six. Playing these SPGs was partially about learning "how to make contact with what is without a doubt often painful, difficult, and unsettling" (Gordon, 1997, p. 23).

In addition, I dedicated two chapters specifically to games about the Syrian war, a war which is now close to a decade old and is considered one of the worst humanitarian crisis of our

time (Amnesty International, 2015). A different kind of processing was done through these games. I wanted to have a different kind of *knowing* of this crisis, a crisis which forces both inside and outside of Syria have contributed to, including the Iranian regime that has and continues to provide economic and military support to Assad's government and his allies. I played *1000 Days of Syria* and *Bury Me, My Love* and *felt* sensations that none of my news sources, films and images relaying similar information could evoke in me. I wanted to know on a deeper, visceral, affective level beyond the headlines. These chapters were an attempt to work through knowing what war does to people and communities and reckon with the intensities that some of the soldiers killing Syrian civilians are members of the Iranian militia, or trained and backed by them. I wanted to know more and as a gamer I knew that my *knowing* would stem from *feeling* my way through the games. I wanted to have a different kind of knowledge, a bodily knowledge, of what I, as an Iranian-Canadian, would be saying 'I am sorry' for years to come.

Thus these socio-political games became important to me as the subject of study on several different levels: they are games that attempt to bring to light particular affective sensations and intensities of the material conditions of millions of people living in war-zones and revolutionary times, people trying to cross borders in hopes of a better life, people trying to survive in the wretched realities that many of us only read about in the news. I wanted to write about these games because I wanted to shed light on the significance of this cultural medium through these specific games and with it point to the potentials of this form of art for this era of (dis)information, where bodily knowledge is even more important than facts, statistics, and arguments.

An affective analysis and a methodological tool

This project advances a theoretical analysis of employing affect both methodologically and theoretically to understand the gravitational pull of videogames. I investigate the ways in which affect allows us to understand the potentials of videogame play, especially in SPGs to produce a felt knowledge of injustice, power and its complexities. As I will explain in more depth in chapters two and six, affect, intensities and forces and their varying analysis led me to a site of understanding where what is invisible is considered real and filled with potentialities.

In different branches of affect theory, stemming from the works of Baruch Spinoza, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud, affect is considered to be a form of intelligence about the world, a set of embodied practices and a form of thinking (Thrift, 2004). From the Darwinian perspective which considers emotional expressions universal and the product of evolution, affective expressions are the means of preparing the individual for an action (Thrift, 2004). In its psychoanalytic translation, affect is produced through one's physiological drive such as sexuality and desire, making emotions the primary manifestations of these underlying drives (Thrift, 2004). In its Spinozist rendition, and then its Deleuzian trajectory, affect is a body's capacity to act and be acted upon, making affect the outcome of an encounter between bodies and things and their relations (Massumi, 2002, 2015; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

My own personal fascination with affect theory has been because affect, in its many variations and theorization, but specifically in its Spinoza-Deleuzian trajectory came to give me a vocabulary, a way of reading, writing and understanding of the moments that caught me off-guard, the seemingly innocuous everyday moments that are suddenly charged with something electric, an intensity that arrives by a simple utterance of a word, an image, or a song. As Kathleen Stewart (2007) explains, affect is something or things that:

Happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency and in public and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something*. (p. 2)

Affect as it is defined in this camp, as a movement of sensations or a force or forces of encounter existing in moments of raw intensity (Massumi, 2015; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010), was something that spoke to me when I played videogames. My experiences were not simply emotional responses, such as frustration or anger at the challenges of the game, or joy for having defeated those challenges. There were and always have been other forces at play during gameplay. My experience of gaming has always contained forces that I could only describe as ‘pre-discursive’; it contained “ideas and problems that would come to present themselves affectively” (Stewart, 2007, p. 40). As Felicity Coleman (2011) writes “the idea of affect is easily embraced by all lovers of play, as affect articulates the sense of a passion; *the power of something to move something else* into a different place of conscious being as a continual becoming” (p. 6, emphasis added). *The power of something to move something else*. Movement is a profound concept in both theories of affect and in videogame studies where we can observe a co-constitutionality between the player and the game through how both the player and the game are moved by each other. The game moves forward through the actions of the player, and as I will demonstrate the game moves the player through the feedback loop of action-reaction created in the game.

Some affect theorists strictly fall in either the Spinoza-Deleuzian trajectory, such as Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant, or Kathleen Stewart, and others, such as Sara Ahmed and Avery Gordon, in the psychoanalytic trajectory of understanding affect. Most affect theorists fall

somewhere in between. Although these two theoretical frameworks argue for a different ontology of affect – which I will briefly touch on in the following chapter – in both affect is considered a form of thinking (Thrift, 2004), a feeling-sensing-moving form of thinking. Regardless of their ontological claims of affect, all theoretical branches of affect highlight a system of a felt-knowledge production. They emphasize relationality, the exchange of forces and their circulations among bodies, as a site of knowledge production. The aim of my dissertation is not to bridge these ontological divides, rather it is to utilize the underlying commonality of affect in order to investigate the power and potentials of videogames. Affect in all these frameworks is understood as a different kind of intelligence about the world: a bodily intelligence (Thrift, 2004). *A different kind of intelligence about the world* that requires us to pay attention to the gaps, to the in-between, to the space between bodies and their relations.

Although I draw heavily from the Spinoza-Deleuzian tradition of understanding affect, I also rely on the psychoanalytic understanding of affect, especially affective responses that are shaped by both individual and collective experiences. As I will explain in more details in the next chapter, although I define affect as a movement of sensation, as a force that is *often* pre-discursive, as an intensity that is different than emotion, I must note that I do not define affect as purely pre-personal or impersonal. I draw a distinction between the two categories of affect and emotions but I do not argue or belong to the camp of affect theory that believes affect to be inherently a pre-personal force, existing outside of history and language. Experiencing affective forces inarguably becomes personal and nowhere was this more evident for me than playing *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* and *The Cat and The Coup* (2011), wherein both spaces of play happen within twentieth century Iran, a temporal setting that overlaps with the first-hand

accounts from my own parents and grandparents, which formed my foundational understanding of that time.

In chapter six, I will explain how the intensity of what I experienced in playing these two games was so powerful that the games and my interaction with the games became a different kind of play: a haunting play. The intensity that merged with my own personal history stunned me to the point that movement, one of the pillars of affect, became near impossible as I kept failing at very simple tasks and procedures within the game and kept ‘dying’. My affective response to this game paralyzed me and that paralysis was surprising, since I had played games such as *This War of Mine*, & *1000 Days of Syria* repeatedly to experience different endings of these stories, and here with *1979* I could barely bring myself to play the game to the end for only the second time. In order to explain this reaction I turn to the other root of affect: its psychoanalytic one. I specifically turn to Avery Gordon’s work on haunting, repetition, and working-through.

These videogames, like many other aesthetic creations, are created out of the affective intensities impacting the bodies of their artists, merging with that body’s affective capacities and creating something new: the game, which itself arrives carrying affective attunements. But this does not mean that all the affective potentials and intensities of a game can be felt by all the bodies that come to interact with it, nor do I argue that the affects of the body of every gamer interacting with a game results in the same affective vibrations and intensities. I will examine how different forces are formed through the encounter that happens between the game and the individual player and the ways in which not all forces can be felt at the same level of intensity by every player. This means that my definition of affect includes the personal dimension of the affective response. I use affect, as Aubrey Anable (2018) writes, as a way of “talking about the

myriad ways everyday experience is felt but is not articulated or is inarticulable [and] the ways these felt but unexpressed feelings might be held in common *and* also might stem from actual, material, and nameable conditions” (p. xviii, emphasis added). I follow the tradition and trajectory of affect theorists, who argue that affect is not inherently counter-discursive, although it might also include pre-discursive sensations, and that it circulates between bodies and that circulation subjects those affective forces to change and history (Ahmed, 2004; Anable, 2018).

In order to investigate the blurring of boundaries between the gamer and the avatar, I draw on the concepts of *de-* and *re- territorialization* of the body which happens through interactions with other bodies and beings. I derive from Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation that a territory, such as the body of the gamer, or the body of the console on which the game is played, is not a fixed and an unchanging entity. Rather bodies are always changing, *de-territorializing* as previous relations, linkages, and formations are undone, and *re-territorializing* by forming new connections and relations (Deleuze & Guattari, 2016). Deleuze and Guattari (2016) named this body that forms through *de-* and *re-territorializing*, an assemblage.

An assemblage is the materialization of an entity “by placing it in a specific social and technical constellation, making it perceptible, outlining form, drawing out possibility and investing meanings by virtue of its linkages, effects and relationships” (Murphy, 2006, p. 13). These coming-together and linkages through the game, the console, and the avatar, augment my body, the body of a gamer, creating a cyborg (Haraway, 1985; Owen, 2017). This cyborg, the hybrid body of the gamer (Owen, 2017), now has the ability to enter a space and feel things otherwise unavailable without the augmentation of that body. Through this theory I investigate how the body of the console, the digital codes of the game, and my body assemble together through their connections to make something new for the short or the long duration of the game.

They come together to create a particular time and space that allows room for playing and thus creating a space of experimentation.

Just like the analysis of the gamer as an assemblage, this dissertation itself is an assemblage of theories and methodologies that come to augment one another, build further and create a new entity with the aim of contributing further to theories in game studies, and to also illustrate the significance of these games within the broader cultural landscape. The theories that are brought together in the following chapters are thought-assemblages, thus making the method an assemblage itself (Law, 2004). They are a ‘cross-fertilization of ideas’ (Probyn, 2005) that are meant to highlight the importance of a felt-knowledge production system and move us towards relationality. As Mieke Bal (2002) writes about method, “you don’t apply one method; you conduct a meeting between several, a meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field” (p. 4). This is a playful meeting between different methods of reading and writing. And since this is an affective project, I write my experiences of affect into the theorization of the games.

Affective theorization involves a methodological re-writing or rather a way of writing that creates space, where writing itself becomes a tool of translation of forces that have affected the body. In this sense, this project is also an exercise in *writing affectively*. By writing affectively, I mean that in order to write about sensations, I must first attempt to *write the sensation*. Borrowing from Deleuze (2003), as I will demonstrate in chapter five, one of the functions of art is to capture the sensations that were previously invisible and make them visible, sonorous, and palpable through painting, film, and literature. Deleuze (2003) specifically claimed that the affective powers of paintings, such as those of Francis Bacon, laid in the artist’s

ability to “paint the sensation” (p. 55). Work of art viewed this way is a process of translating forces of sensation into more visible and palpable entities.

On translating, Walter Benjamin (2002) wrote that the job of the translator is to prove the relationship and connection between the original art and the words of the translator. For Benjamin (2002), who was focusing on the translation of literary works, the act of translation is a form. Since translation of the original work of art comes later than the original, translation marks the artwork’s continued life, its “afterlife”, where the work grows and changes through the translation process (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 254-256). “Translation instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the originals’ way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 260).

Further elaborating on Benjamin’s work, Laura Marks (2002) beautifully argues that writing translates embodied experiences into words, sounds, colours, gestures or feelings must be translated in order to be communicated in words, and thus the very act of writing is a translation of those forces. “When translating from one medium to another, specifically from the relatively more sensuous audiovisual media to the relatively more symbolic medium, of words, the task is to make the dry words retain a trace of the *wetness* of the encounter” (Marks, 2002, p. X, emphasis added). Here let me take you back to the example of *Child of Light* from the beginning of this chapter and the ways in which the affective translation of a videogame manifest.

Child of Light is a game narrated exclusively in rhymes as the opening of this chapter illustrates. All the conversations between Aurora and her helpers along the way, any advice that she receives, or any part of the story, are told in rhythmic prose. In fact, rhyming appears to be the language of this realm and those who are not able to rhyme while speaking are poked fun at.

Some players, translating the affective attunements of the rhythmic space of the game, wrote their reviews of the game entirely in rhymes:

Such a lovely space, puts a smile on my face.
 As I wonder and fight, battling Lemuira's plight.
 Such beautiful melodies, creating such memories,
 I will treasure this game, hope it rises to fame. (Aqua BlueDuck, 2019)

Awoke in Lemuria, a strange land in distress.
 Wearing nothing but bravery and a cute yellow dress.
 Through each region a new companion was gained,
 After relieving them from a burden once pained. (Mr. Perry, 2016)

In the world of Lemuria everything rhymes,
 While you pleasure your ears to the game's beautiful chimes.
 Artwork painted in fine watercolours,
 This game could be yours for a couple of dollars. (KawaiiNekoWaifu, 2018)

Not only these players use first-person narrative to explain the games, but also they use the very same language of the game to write about it even after the player has left the space of the game. Since the translator will bring her own ways of understanding and sensing the original work, the process of translation will necessarily be marked by the person who does the translating. My translation of affects of these games are invariably personal, yet through tracing other gamers' translation of their affective understanding of the same games I demonstrate the similarities of feelings that come to make themselves known through playing. In order to do that, I centre my analysis on a combination of auto-biographical accounts and online narratives and reviews of gameplay. Feminist theorists have long argued that personal experiences provide the grounds from which socio-political issues can be investigated, examined, and addressed (Harding, 1987; Merrill & West, 2009; Young & Skrla, 2012). The narration of my affective experiences of gameplay serve as a jumping board onto the analysis of the game and the linkages made between videogames and their affective potentials. The auto-biographical translations of the games are meant to breathe life and movement into the writing, in order to further make

visible the forces that I am attempting to write about. I aim to write the sensation of those games so that I might be able to “render the relationship between the words of the original and the third thing that it indexes” (Marks, 2002, p. Xi).

Here is an example of this affective narration of my own gameplay:

I am in a dark hallway of an abandoned factory. I have been here before. I have chased him down this very hallway. After months of investigation and follow-ups I have solved the mystery and have the criminal cornered. This time I won't make the mistake of my last attempt. This time when he begs for his life before his arrest and subsequent trial, where he is found guilty but manages to escape, I will not spare him. I know what he will do if he is allowed to live. This is a re-play, a re-write, a re-attempt at his capture and this time when I arrive at the fork in the story of whether to arrest him or do a citizen's justice and kill him, I choose to kill him. I choose a different path. I choose that path and watch with horror as my character, the sheriff, strangles the criminal. His limp body slumps down the wall and more horrific still, I watch as my friends and allies hear this news with shock and disgust at what I have done. They are speechless and horrified by my abuse of power. They walk out never wanting to speak to me again.

I am affected. I feel a movement of a sensation, something resembling shame and disappointment, a hotness creeping up my spine towards my head, a tightening of my gut, and a sense of disbelief. ‘What have I done?’ Some part of me protests ‘no, no, no!’ I put my controller down, wanting another re-do, another re-write, knowing full well that although this can be re-done, it cannot be un-done.

This is a narrativization of the gameplay of *The Wolf Among Us* (2013), a videogame based on the comic book series *Fables* wherein the player is Bigby Wolf, the embodiment of the Big Bad Wolf, who is investigating a murder of a woman. In order to capture these gameplay experiences I must insert myself within the story of the game. This narrative is a blurry one because the experience of the gameplay is a blurry one. The lines between Sara the gamer and Sara the avatar are obscured. Therefore the obscurity of this narrative is meant to create a space wherein the boundaries which are constantly de-territorializing and re-forming can be felt. I become different people, and material objects constantly change, all of us lending ourselves to the functions and procedures of the game.

Not only is this writing a translation of play through which I hope to invite you, the reader, into that space of playing, but the writing is a form of play itself. A play in which to experiment with what can be built with words when forces, sensations and bodies meet up and assemble as an entity; to see what invisibilities come to reveal themselves, no matter how temporarily; and to see what potentials could be uncovered through this type of playing.

I write about the invisibilities.

This method of writing is influenced by feminist writers such as Kathleen Stewart's (2007) *Ordinary Affect* and her commitment to experimentation and play as a methodological attempt to "slow the quick jump to representational thinking" (p. 4); or Avery Gordon's (1997) *Ghostly Matters* as a way of writing which requires me to pay attention to "what is not seen, but is nonetheless powerfully real" (42). This mode of paying attention stems from what Sedgwick (2003) named a reparative method of reading, which does not dismiss this mode of knowledge as "merely reformist or about pleasure" (p. 144). Such reparative reading can lead to formulating what Dina Georgis (2013) calls 'better stories'.

Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) work on depression and performative writing, where different pieces of writing such as personal journals and academic papers can be pulled apart and reassembled differently, Helen Palmer's (2016) research on the importance of feminist and queer re-writing, and Sara Ahmed's (2017) poetic *Living a Feminist Life*, have all been among the inspirations for a particular way of thinking and writing that challenges the traditional academic writing through inclusions of poems, journal entries, and alternative forms of writing.

These authors and many others, who experiment with non-traditional academic writings, attempt to bring theory into life through personal narrative and examples. There is something of the self visible not only in the theorization but also in the writing itself. In the attempt to capture

the forces that affected the author, the writing becomes animated with such forces which then come to be felt through the ways in which these books are written. For example, there are repetitions of words or sentences as a form of re-calling, repeating, and emphasizing (See Gordon, 1997; Stewart, 2007). The writing leaves behind traces of some sensations, perhaps the very sensation that it is trying to make visible. The writing is an assemblage of personal stories and theories coming together to offer a sensuous pathway towards the knowledge it seeks to present.

One of the reasons that I was drawn to the works of D. W. Winnicott, specifically, is not only his formulation of play which answers many of my questions about videogames but also because of how Winnicott formulated and posited his arguments. Winnicott wrote plainly, presented his formulation tentatively as suggestions and possible interventions rather than established paradigms and doctrines. Malcolm Bowie (2000) writes that Winnicott's rhetoric is:

One of collaboration between co-equals rather than one of solitary exertion and insight. In writing up his case histories, he attends primarily not to the verbal medium itself in which the dealings between analyst and analysand occur, but to the whole behavioural pattern of their interaction and to the part-real and part-fantasized space and time in which this interaction unfolds. (p. 12)

Borrowing from Winnicott, this dissertation is a collaboration, augmentation, and assemblages of other theorists and players who came before me and it is a further addition to the conversations that have been taking place. I went searching for a method that could explain my gaming experiences and I found it in the mode of writing employed by these theorists, where feelings, affect, attunements, ghostly matters, intensities, and emotions are called upon and worked through. These works are alive with movement because the playfulness of words and

syntax provides a vessel for the movements, vibrations, and resonances to be held together and played with. My writing, along with the inclusion of personal narratives of gameplays are meant to do just that.

Chapters' summary: where are we headed?

Although affective forces and intensities are part of everyday existence and operate through everyday interactions of bodies and their relations, my dissertation focuses on videogames not only as the subject of my study but also as an aesthetic tool of this affective theorization. Through the analysis of videogames in the following chapters I simultaneously investigate the importance of socio-political games (SPGs) and affect theory as pathways of understanding the body.

In chapter two, I will contextualize SPGs in the broader theories of videogames and the ways in which videogames impact the player. I will provide a literature review on the significance of gaming and will use this context to then further build on videogame theories, by bringing together theories of affect and the ways in which affect is explained in the broader field of cultural studies. This includes further elaboration on how the different understandings of affect, including its psychoanalytic trajectory, come to augment one another. This chapter is meant to set the theoretical foundation from which the following case studies will be investigated.

Chapter three opens up by unpacking the nature of the space of play and its implications for human development. For this I turn to the significant work of D. W. Winnicott on playing, where it takes place and what happens in that liminal, in-between space of play. Borrowing from Winnicott's formulation of the 'good-enough' mother-figure in creating and facilitating a space of exploration and play for the child, I examine the qualities of what I come to define as 'good-

enough' games, which include all the SPGs that are the subject of this research. I develop this idea by focusing on the affective power of branching storyline in rewriting better or worse stories, along with the affective potentials of failure and repetition in play. I particularly examine the 19 different branching storyline of *Bury Me, My Love* and the ways in which re-writing a story through play reveals complexities and multiplicities of stories.

In chapter four, I investigate how the blurring of the boundaries between the bodies of the avatar and the player is achieved in a videogame. I draw on assemblage theory following Deleuze and Guattari (DeLanda, 2006, 2016; Massumi, 2002, 2015) in order to examine how the body is re-shaped through the interaction with other bodies and forces. In this interaction a hybrid creature is created. This is where Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of *de-* and *re-territorialized* bodies becomes a tool of understanding the body's capacity to change and become through play. In this chapter, not only do I focus on the theories of the 'gamer as a Cyborg' (Haraway, 1985; Owen, 2017), but I will also demonstrate how even the body of an object, such as the phone during the gameplay of *Bury Me, My Love*, loses its boundaries in order to lend itself to the function of play. In addition, through the analysis of the gameplay of *1000 Days of Syria*, I will illustrate the augmentation of the player+avatar assemblage through the repetitive play as different characters.

In Chapter five, I analyze the capture of sensations through SPGs by focusing on several prominent indie games: *Papers Please*, *This War of Mine*, and *Neverending Nightmares*. Here I draw on the Deleuzian affective interpretation of art not as a cultural product that reproduces life, rather as one that captures the forces and sensation of life. Here I bring together affect theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Ann Sauvagnargues with game theorists such as Ian Bogost and Felan Parker in order to further demonstrate the aesthetic powers of videogames. Within this

framework I examine how the function of art is to bring forth something of reality and the ways in which these games in particular capture specific intensities of life under brutal living conditions.

Chapter six is the continuation of the above conversation through the lens of art as a method of working through sensations. I will do this by exploring the affective intensities that are subject to the personal and the historical forces of the body through examining *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (2016) and a shorter game: *The Cat and the Coup* (2011) and my responses to them. The self-reflection contained within this chapter is meant to be a direct conversation with that particular branch of affect theory positing affect as a pre-personal force. It is here that I unpack how my experiences of these games demonstrates how in speaking of affect and its circulation, one cannot not consider the affective powers of the bodies that encounter one another and therefore the circulation of affect that takes place between them bears the marks of the bodies that enhanced or reduced those forces. Here I turn to the writing of Avery Gordon on affects of haunting, erasure and working through, which are marked by our collective histories

Chapter seven concludes the dissertation by circling back and bringing together the theories of play as an indexed space that could be all consuming. Here I discuss how not only can the player get consumed by the game, but she also consumes the game, each becoming part of one another. This becoming is facilitated by getting lost in play, losing at the game and overcoming that loss. This process creates new modes of relationality and identification with the stories and the people within these games. Videogames, as Henry Jenkins argues, are “a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of

experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible” (p. 177). In this sense, I discuss how socio-political games are modern tools resisting current forms of fascism and neoliberalism.

What this dissertation is not

I am sometimes asked a variation of this question after a conference talk: ‘What is the purpose of these videogames when those who play them are mostly ‘white-liberal subjects’ with enormous amount of privilege, whom after the game finishes can resume their lives?’ and ‘Don’t these games trivialize the pain of others for the purpose of profit and entertainment?’ Embedded in these questions is an expectation, and a desire, that a game which addresses something of our socio-political realities, must be able to translate that through bringing about social change particularly through legislative or material changes. Change and shifts towards justice is the presumed desired outcome. These questions stem out of this understandable need to change those horrific conditions and to help fellow human beings, while simultaneously being vigilant about how that help is dispensed so that if help cannot be offered, at least no more harm – read: the videogame – should take place. I want to address these two concerns here and separately.

As I will explain in more details in chapter two, there is a vast volume of research dedicated to understanding the pedagogical potentials of videogames. These research studies have now shown that videogames enhance motor, cognitive, and memory skills (Bavelier et al., 2012; Corbeil & Laveault, 2016; Gee, 2003), enhance empathy through identification (Sharpe, 2015; Williams & Williams, 2011), enhance planning, management skills, and critical thinking and have been used as teaching tools in classrooms (Allen, 2014; de Castell & Jenson, 2007; de Castell et al., 2010, 2016). Therefore, we know that videogames have a powerful effect on individuals, as we know that from other kinds of artistic productions. Questions such as ‘how can these skill-enhancement and empathy-building processes in socio-political videogames affect

people's actions in their material reality?'; 'how do the new relations and connections made in socio-political games translate to material interactions and relations?' Or 'how can these games alleviate suffering which they aim to make visible?', are all important questions but outside the scope of this project.



Figure 2 Vincent Van Gough "Shoes" (1888)

I assert that to expect an aesthetic creation to bring about immediate and palpable changes on a broad scale and then to judge it based on that ability, is to dismiss all its other potentials. To critique a videogame as a frivolous engagement that does not result in bigger changes in the systems of power that the game is representing would be equivalent to critiquing Vincent Van Gough's painting "Shoes" as shown in Figure 2 – which beautifully captures the affects of tiresomeness and a long day's work of a field labourer – for not changing the peasants' working conditions in 1886. The purpose of art, which I argue that videogames are, is to capture and make visible the forces that could only be felt in this way and to allow the audience or the player to engage with those sensations. It is to make something of reality visible, so we come to

feel, sense, and understand it. If for no other purpose than that purpose alone: so that we come to share something of that reality through that aesthetic work; so that we come to connect with others and create new forms of relationality. It is first this type of change, a new form of connection and understanding, which then enables other forms of change and it is in fact fundamentally necessary to feel what was invisible, in order to then imagine new possibilities. I maintain that it is only this type of change, through forming new relationality, which creates possibilities that then may be utilized for other forms of change. Videogames, especially SPGs, are not a “nice to have”, rather they are fundamentally necessary to imagine other possibilities, paths, and ways of being.

Isbister (2017), especially addresses this issue with respect to the game *Waco Resurrection* (2004), wherein the player is the cult leader, David Koresh, and in charge of defending the Davidian compound. Isbister (2017) argues that such games have the ability to reopen a historical episode for visceral re-exploration and a deeper understanding of the issues of that episode. It is worth quoting Eddo Stern, one of the creators of the game, and his response to a common criticism of the game:

The most common criticisms we have heard about *Waco* were that the game is in bad taste, that the game is exploitative, that the game was pro Davidian/pro Koresh. The bad taste and exploitation criticism stem from people struggling to consider that games can be made about serious issues while still providing some ambiguity. The second criticism of the game being politically skewed assumes that Koresh as a protagonist = a Hero in the game – a unique issue that games reveal as a film about Hitler would likely not draw this criticism or a film about David Koresh. (Stern cited in Isbister, 2017, p. 15)

The power of this videogame, and I would argue other SPGs alike, is to make a powerful use of the avatar to put the player in the shoes of another being so that a different kind of dialogue is created between the game, the player, and the historical event (Isbister, 2017).

In interview after interview the developers of these games have generally repeated that the impetus for their development was to show the gamer something of that particular conflict. For example, in an interview with Navid Khonsari, the creator of *1979*, he stated that the point of the game, a fictional/historical account of Black Friday in 1978 Tehran, was to show something of that time to the player and to simply ask the player: ‘What would you do?’ In those most brutal circumstances of life and death, wherein you too might be fighting for your rights, what would you do? Would you collaborate with your prison guard to give up the names of your friends to save your life? Would that even be enough to save your life?’ (Tortum, 2015). These sentiments, expressed repeatedly by the creators of these games, are testaments to the objectives of these games: to make visible something of sensations and intensities of a specific reality. They ask the gamer to engage with those intensities ‘out of a concern for justice’.

The critique that these games trivialize people’s pain through play, stems out of the assumption that playing itself is something trivial, insignificant, and wasteful or that there cannot be any enjoyment in playing a serious game¹. This dissertation takes the position that playing is a critical process of development, formation and re-formation, and creativity and in chapter three, I unpack the importance of playing. I do this from the perspective of what happens to us when we

¹ Embedded in this idea, is the thought that no one should “enjoy” any aspect of art relating to or being about something horrible. Although it is outside the scope of this research, there is much debate about whether games should be “fun” or not. In other forms of art such as in literature it is perfectly acceptable for a book to be hard to read, same exists in music and film. However, there is not much clarity when it comes to videogames and playing, and whether or not games are *allowed* to be “not fun”. This dichotomy of “no enjoyment allowed” for serious games or that “games must be fun” severely clash partially because of a misconception that playing must always involve ‘enjoyment’. As I will explain in chapter three, “having fun”, although often is part of playing, is neither the only nor the most important function of play.

play and how playing opens up the body to feeling, sensing, thinking, and working through. This dissertation builds on the theories of videogames as aesthetic creations that capture and communicate sensations only accessible through this medium. Hal Barwood explained to the readers of *Game Developer* magazine that “art is what people accomplish when they don’t quite know what to do, when the lines on the road map are faint, when the formula is vague, when the product of their labours is new and unique” (as cited in Jenkins, 2007, p. 177). Socio-political games are the new artwork, created by people who have understood that the knowledge which emerges out of bodily experiences and sensations often influences people in ways that statistics, facts, and news articles do not. The following chapters will illustrate and examine the ways in which videogames make all the above abilities possible by creating connections between the game and the individual. I am more interested in the hybrid being that comes into existence in order to play, learn, and feel, no matter how briefly and the ways in which this feeling-thinking assemblage changes the player, no matter how minutely. This research is about examining the affective potentials of bodies coming together to create something new, and not about how and by what measure the new thing could have a direct and large-scale influence.

What follows, in the upcoming chapters, is a series of assemblages that come together to form an image, create a theory, demonstrate a function, and illustrate a sensation. These bodies, whether they are the literal body of the players, the body of the gaming platform, the codes of the game, or the metaphorical bodies of thoughts, analysis, forces and sensations come to connect and through their relations create something new. With that, *child tuck yourself in bed and let me tell a story...*

Chapter 2: Assemblage of Theories

The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity.—Carl Jung

Everywhere I go I find a poet has been there before me. —Sigmund Freud

In the introductory chapter, I discussed the idea that my theoretical framework is a coming-together of bodies of thoughts, ‘thought-assemblages’ (Law, 2004), that lend themselves to the formation of the theoretical underpinning of this dissertation. In this chapter, I focus on each body of thought, its genealogy, impact and objectives. I examine how the connections between these modes of thoughts create a new understanding of playing socio-political games. This chapter is organized in the following format: in the first section I review videogame literature pertaining to the theoretical analyses of the pedagogical capacities of videogames and play. Here I want to highlight the already-existing body of thought, theory and research dedicated to the importance of videogames. In the second section of this chapter, I turn to the literature that makes up the affective (re)turn of the early 2000s in the academy. Here I specifically focus on two branches of affect: the Spinoza-Deleuzian understanding of affect and its psychoanalytic variation and the limitations and the advantages of these different conceptualization of affect. I will also explain how I use the term affect in this dissertation. I will follow this section by addressing the significance of affect in understanding videogames as an affective medium of communication by capturing and thus highlighting intensities of human experience. I will end this chapter by explaining my methodology for this dissertation.

The pedagogical potentials of videogames

In order to examine what happens to the player when she engages with a game and to understand the gravitational pull of videogames, I want to briefly lay out the extensive research

which has been conducted into the educational abilities of videogames and the power of play. For the past several decades researchers and educators have studied how players can learn from playing videogames and digital game-based learning has become an increasingly important area of study (Jenson et al., 2016). Meta-reviews (such as Barab, et al., 2009; Fletcher & Tobias, 2012; Sitzmann, 2011; Young, et al., 2012) of literature on games highlights both the philosophical conceptualization of games and the dilemma of measuring how videogames create an effective learning environment. Many of these research studies examined the therapeutic, cognitive and pedagogical potentials of videogames (Anguera & Gazzaley, 2015; Corbeil & Laveault, 2014). For example, some studies specifically point to the use of videogames in increasing the cognitive processes in various populations such as individuals with dyslexia, attention deficit disorders, and memory retention (Tobias & Fletcher, 2012). Others have shown that videogames tend to increase spatial visualization, reaction time, hand-eye coordination, and concentration and memory skills and have been used in rehabilitation with the elderly, in pain management clinics and psychotherapy (Calvert, 2005; Griffiths, 2005).

Playing, in fact, has been part of a therapeutic tool since Anna Freud's and Melanie Klein's work with children (Griffiths, 2005). Much has been written on videogames's capacity to support critical thinking and discussion (de Castell et al., 2010; Flanagan, et al., 2007; Weir & Baranowski, 2011). They are used to teach critical thinking skills, problem solving, and a space to ponder complex moral and ethical dilemmas (Bogost, 2006, 2007b; Gee, 2007; Tavinor, 2007). In his widely-cited work *Videogames of the Oppressed*, Gonzalo Frasca (2001) argued that by becoming an actor in formulating possible solutions and outcomes in the game, a space for critical thought and subsequent discussion is created. SPGs attempt to elaborate and engage

with the forces of power and the ways in which they manifest themselves by addressing “real-world issues and foster[ing] critical thinking” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 245).

Research has shown that playing videogames can increase empathy through role-playing (Crogan, 2007; Sharpe, 2015; Isbister, 2017). In this sense, simulation learning, especially when it comes to political, serious and socio-political games, “offers an interactive environment in which formerly abstract concepts can come alive” (Williams and Williams, 2011, p. 442). There is a significant relationship between the “frequency of adolescents’ civic gaming experiences and civic engagement” (Bachen et al., 2012, p. 439). The interactive nature of videogames and their narrative as opposed to a propositional organization shifts the control to the player where opportunities for learning are ripe (de Castell & Jenson, 2003).

There are different ways that videogames theorists have attempted to explain how videogames achieve all such changes in the player. For example, Multiple Identification Theory, claims that the way in which a simulation can change a player’s attitude is if the game results in cognitive, affective and behavioural identification of the gamer with the characters in the game (Williams and Williams, 2011). From this position the potential for change comes out of the role-playing abilities of the videogames wherein the player is tasked with *being* the protagonist and therefore identifying with the plight of the protagonist of the story (Owen, 2017; Williams and Williams, 2011). Others have argued that the ability of a videogame to move the player, both literally and figuratively, becomes one of the foundational processes of the game to elicit strong visceral and emotional responses such as empathy, fear, joy and shame (Dahya, 2009; Gee, 2005, 2007; Jenkins, 2005; Sharpe, 2015). It only takes a simple internet search to see numerous videos of children and adults contorting their bodies in ways that are parallel with the movements of their avatars. These could range from jumping up, dodging what is coming at them, tilting to the

right or the left, screaming, frowning, squinting, gapping, and exclamations (Calvert, 2005). As Henry Jenkins (2005) points out, such responses reflect the enormity of how much players not only feel like controlling the game, but also on some level they are “own[ing] the space of the game” (p. 183). This ‘ownership’ over the content, direction, and actions of the game becomes a fundamental part of the power of videogames as I will explain in the upcoming chapters. The body of the player is moved through the game and the movement allows the player to identify with the characters in the game.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory is another significant stepping stone and used numerous by game theorists, as a way to explain the affective powers of videogames (Nielsen et al., 2008; Owen, 2017; Whitton, 2011). In his book: *Finding Flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) specifically pointed out that games, which are developed over centuries with the purposes of enriching life, are excellent producers of the state of flow which include a merging of action and awareness, loss of self-consciousness, and an altered perception of time and place. From this perspective the optimal experience of play is when both the sense of immersion and the aliveness of the experience of the gameplay are enjoyable so that people engage in playing for the sheer experience of that immersion (Owen, 2017). Isbister (2017) argues that the very language that players use to discuss their emotional states in a game, such as curiosity, elation, and excitement, relate to the concept of flow. The ability of a videogame to absorb the player and for the player to be absorbed by it, the flow, results in the creation of an affective learning environment where the body learns through feeling (Whitton, 2011).

More recently there has been a move towards a philosophical trajectory of analyzing the affect(s) games make visible (Anable, 2018; Owen, 2017). This affective explanation of

videogames particularly is built on the philosophical position which argues videogames are aesthetic creations and similar to any other artwork they draw out emotional and affective responses from the player by capturing and then making visible the affective reality of the material space from which the game emerged (Clarke & Mitchell, 2007; Tavinor, 2009; Parker, 2013). Over the past decade there has been a rise in literature that advances videogames as a legitimate art form. Books such as *Philosophy through video games* by Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (2008), *The meaning of video games* by Steven Jones (2008), *Playing with videogames* by James Newman (2008), *The art of videogames* by Chris Melissinos (2012), *Videogames and art* (2014), *Player and the avatar: The affective potentials videogames* by David Owen (2017), *How games move us: Emotion by design* by Katherine Isbister (2017), and *Playing with feelings: Affect and videogames* by Aubrey Anable (2018) are all written from the desire to understand the psychological and affective powers of videogames as an aesthetic cultural medium.

This dissertation borrows and builds further on these theories by particularly drawing on the Deleuzian concept of de and re-territorialization of bodies to explain how the connection, the flow, and the identification between the player and the avatar takes place. The absorption of the player in the game is what I come to argue is the re-alignment of the boundaries of the body as it merges with others bodies, namely that of the avatar, and is reformulated into something new and temporary. What I argue in this research and particularly in chapter four is that the sense of the flow and identification takes place precisely because the player transcends the boundaries of the self, becoming a new entity each time: the player+avatar assemblage. Videogames tap into the potentials of such visceral opening up of the boundaries of bodies, partly because the very process of play is about blurred boundaries in an indexed space between the material reality and a virtual one.

The ‘Affective (re)turn’

Parallel with the rise of videogame research and literature in the past two decades there has been a rise in academic projects and literature which urge us to attend to the affective capacities of the body and a felt intelligence that operates at the intersection of the material and the non-material plane. Critical theorists have argued that mid-2000s marked a shift in cultural theory away from language and towards the body, with the emphasis on the relationship between bodies, how they come to affect and be affected and relate to one another (Hardt, 2007; Bewes, 2018). This shift has been called the “affective turn” (Clough, 2007), and thus a departure from poststructuralism.

It is important to note that the attempt to theorize the body and to include the corporeal realities of different bodies in examining and understanding structures of power have always been part of feminist and queer theorization. For example, as Sara Ahmed (2004) points out, the ‘turn to affect’, positions feminist and queer work outside of this turn. “Even if they are acknowledged as precursors, a shift *to* affect signals a shift *from* this body of work” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 189). Therefore, not only do I want to underline that this mode of knowledge production and paying attention to the body is not new, but also in my analysis I will turn and return to feminist theorizations of the body.

However, I want to highlight that the increase in the rise of the literature that uses affect as a theoretical framework and the body as a site of knowledge production that cannot be necessarily captured through language points us to this need to answer questions that seem to have been left not fully answered by poststructuralism. The recent turn to the senses in academic work is because historically the body, and by extension the senses were excluded in academic writing due to their denigration to the rational mind (Brennan, 2004; Howe, 2003; Mignolo &

Vasquez, 2013; Stark, 2016). The residual effects of Cartesian dualism, where rational thinking was divorced from the senses and the idea of sensation became less scientifically respected, has made the discussion around affect in the academy difficult (Brennan, 2004; Howe, 2003; Gregg, 2006; Mignolo & Vasquez, 2013). This is evident by the historical dismissal of works of writers such as Henri Bergson, Silvan Tomkins, and Raymond Williams as universalizing and the current criticism of affect theorists such as Massumi and Sedgwick as positivist (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). The critique leveled against affect and its various genealogical branches must be taken seriously and this chapter will address them shortly and I will elaborate in depth in chapter six. However the dismissal of affective potentials of the body, the dismissal of sensation as a source for knowledge-production, because it is deemed too positivist or too intangible, has made it difficult to write and talk about an already difficult and slippery concept. The (re)turn to affect has been an attempt to reclaim and re-establish affect as a legitimate and a significant mode of theorization.

Affect, even with its varying definitions, depending on the ontological trajectory which defines it, is understood as a kind of thinking produced in and through the body. Affect is a bodily-felt intelligence about the world (Thrift, 2004). In each of the cleaves that come to make up the school of thought addressing affect, affect lends itself to an “ ‘inhuman’ or ‘transhuman’ framework in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate” (Thrift, 2004, p. 60). And in all the way it is theorized affect comes to signify the importance of paying attention to the body (Hardt, 2007). As I outlined in the previous chapter the genealogy of affect is traced back to the works of Spinoza, Darwin, and Freud. Each of these approaches has their own strength and limitations, but for the purposes of my research, I only focus on the Spinoza-Deleuzian trajectory

of affect along with its psychoanalytic variation. Here I will first provide a brief ontological context for each of these trajectories, how they understand the body and its relations, and how each of these understandings augments the other.

Tracing Spinoza's understanding of affect

In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze (2001) claimed that for Spinoza the body, no matter how small, was defined through its relation to motion and rest, and the speed of that motion between the different particles of the body and bodies. This body, no matter how small, affects other bodies that it comes in contact with and is affected by them (Deleuze, 2001). Thus the body is defined in relation to its power or potential to act and be acted upon and by extension to affect and be affected (Massumi, 2002, p. 15). Spinoza rejected the Cartesian dualism and the superiority of the mind over the body and thus the subjugation of feelings to rationality (Deleuze, 2001; Seigworth, 2011; Stark, 2016). For Spinoza there was no hierarchy of being, no superiority of human over non-human bodies, no transcendence of God over the rest of the universe, and certainly no domination of mind over the body (Kodalak, 2018). From this position, which was what Deleuze and Guattari used to formulate their significant theory of assemblages, the individual modality does not exist in a vacuum as a self-contained entity (Kodalak, 2018). The body which is an aggregate of assemblages is “always coupled, multiplied, and penetrated by a myriad of affections coming from other bodies and underlying forces” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 404).

Deleuze furthered Spinoza's definition of the body, by positing that the body is understood through its relations to rest and motion and that it is never separable from its relation to the world in which it exists (Deleuze, 2001; Thrift, 2004). Through this interaction and interconnectedness, the body is continuously de-territorialized and re-territorialized (Deleuze & Guattari, 2016). For Deleuze (2016), a territory, such as that of a body is not an unchanging and

a fixed entity, rather it is continually in a process of becoming undone and redone through its interactions with other bodies. And it is in this constant de- and re-territorialization that potentials for transformative changes exist.

Both human and nonhuman bodies are comprised of assemblages, capable of affect and being affected, making them simultaneously concrete and virtual (Deleuze & Guattari, 2016); Massumi, 2010). “When a body encounters another body, or an idea another idea, it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a powerful whole and sometimes one decomposes the other, destroying the cohesion of its parts” (Deleuze, 2001, p. 19). Deleuze claimed that there is an ever-changing bodily capacity that exists in complex assemblages that come to make up the body and the world and that ever-changing bodily capacity is affect (Hemmings, 2005; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). This theoretical framework sets the foundation for my argument of the gamer as a hybrid creature, composed of not only the avatar, but also the other bodies, such as that of the game console, the computer screen, and the codes of the game. All of which come to mediate and help create this co-constituted body: the gamer+avatar.

As I will explain in more detail in chapter four, this conceptualization of the body, not only de-centers the human figure, but it also stresses the importance of individual as well as the collective (Stark, 2016). This collectivity that comes to make up a being, does so through the coming together *and* relations that all the parts make with one another. This collectivity constantly *becomes* through the interaction and relations of the parts. This concept of the body *becoming* “acknowledges that things exist in a state of perpetual movement and flux [and] it invites us to think about processes rather than static states” (Stark, 2016, p. 37). This becoming, evolving or changing, allows us to understand the body not as a static being, rather one in *movement and flux*, as an assemblage of forces and relations which constantly make and re-make

that body. It focuses on the in-between processes rather than end-points and permits us to come to view bodies, any body, whether it is a body of a human, an animal, an apple or a videogame console, as imbued with affective potentials and the capacity to change other bodies that come in contact with it. The body is shaped and reshaped through the forces that come to touch it and from the forces that the body itself exerts onto its environment.

From this position, affect has a transitive quality, signifying the passage from one state to the next (Deleuze, 2001). It is an active outcome of encounter between bodies and their surroundings (Thrift, 2004). Affect, from this position, is not merely something that is done to the body or what the body does towards its milieu. It is the simultaneous forces that act upon the body, move it, and alter it, *and* the forces that escape the body to impact its surrounding. Affect is a force or forces of encounter that act/s and is/are not separable from cognition (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). It is a movement of sensations, an intensity, related to a capability and potential to act (White, 2008). It is something that is found in the in-between, in the intensities that pass through the body and between those bodies and their environment. It is a part of a feedback loop, which exists in “the oscillation between bodies and/or things, in the ever shifting synaesthetic encounter” of bodies with their surroundings and the encounter between two planes of existence: the material and the virtual (Massumi, 2002, as cited in Lafleur, 2009, p. 57). Affects are sensations, as Deleuze would argue, that are shared between the subject and the object and they are not reducible to only the subject or the object and their relations (Grosz, 2008, p. 8). In this sense, sensations that impact the body are registration of affect (Massumi, 2015).

Many affect theorists argue that attending to affective forces, vibrations and attunements offer us at least a partial answer to the question of what enables the popular and the everyday culture to be a site of struggle (Grossberg, 2010; Massumi, 2015; Stewart, 2007). Everyday life

does not simply consist of the material relationships, rather it also constitutes how we move across those relationships, where we can or cannot invest, and where we make connections (Grossberg, 2010).

For example, how does the transmission of intensities alter the biochemistry and the neurology of a body (Brennan, 2004)? How is the intensity which is often talked about as ‘a tension that could be cut with a knife’ is registered and circulated among the bodies in that space? How does the multi-coloured threat code system of the post-9/11 US impact bodies and through that process how can a non-threat be experienced as a felt threat (Massumi, 2002)? And how can a game about border control and immigration (*Papers Please*) – a politically charged topic – draw millions of players to experience the complexities of the job of a border immigration officer? An affective mode of attention allows us to better understand the feedback processes between the material and the virtual plane of existence. It is this mode of attention to the virtual alongside the material which allows for us to question the rigid boundaries of the body, subjectivity and positionality, and come to think of the body as assemblages; an entity that is co-constituted through its interactions with other bodies and forces within its environment (Deleuze and Guattari, 2016).

The Deleuzian branch of affect theory is criticized as being only interested in exploring connectedness and relational modes of power over oppositional ones (Hemmings, 2005). The concern and the argument is that affect theory tends to negate the important work of post-structural and post-colonial theories which shed light on positionality and subject formations and relations to power and oppressive forces (Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011). Central among these critiques is the universalizing argument about affect as a pre-personal or an impersonal force existing between bodies and impacting them, existing outside of subjectivity and language

(Massumi, 2002, 2015). Affect theorists following the Spinoza-Deleuzian trajectory of affect, consider affect to be trans-individual and not prescriptive (Massumi, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2001; Sedgwick, 2003). It is considered to “encompass[es] the nonconscious ‘body knowledge’ of habits, reflexes, the many functioning of autonomous nervous system, including the enteric nervous system or ‘gut brain’” (Massumi, 2015, p. 211). This argument seems to put forth a universality of affect.

Thus a central question animating this debate is how can one place affect outside of socio-historical context when the bodies that carry affective potentials are bodies that exist within a specific socio-historical milieu? In our interactions with other bodies, how do we account for relationalities that have grown out of the socio-historical context which we have inhabited? The concern here is that any claim of universality reduces individuals’ experiences that have been shaped primarily through systems of power and discipline. Perhaps the heaviest charge laid against this version of affect theory, is the seemingly erasure of subjectivity, positionality, and identity formation.

My own question to this cleave of affect theory is precisely about the conceptualization of affect only within a pre-personal, pre-historical epistemological view. If affect exists purely outside of history and thus language, how can I explain my affective reaction to *1979*, which was imbued not only with my personal family history but also the collective history of the Iranian revolution of 1979? Particularly since I do take the position that videogames are works of art, and I draw partly on the Deleuzian trajectory of art as a capture of sensation, how do I reconcile the way in which what is captured and made visible is inevitably done so through the body of the artist(s) who has given birth to that artwork? How do we account for the ways in which we individually and collectively digest, process and work through sensations that have impacted us?

What I discovered through my analysis which I will relay in chapter six, is that it is not only the process of working through sensations that are personal; it is not only affective responses that are personal to each body rather affect itself is subject to both our individual and collective histories. In fact, I discovered that conceptualizing affect otherwise, only from the position of a pre-personal and a pre-historical entity, takes away the moving dimension of affect *itself* which is subject to time, space and historical realities of bodies.

This understanding of affect falls short on accounting for the passage of historical experiences and traumas from previous generations, not only through intergenerational transmission of trauma but through the change in the genetic codes of the bodies which are then passed on to the next generation². Although it is outside the scope of this research, it is important to point out that scientific research has proven that trauma results in molecular changes in the body, to the point that gene expressions are altered and can be passed down up to four generations of off-springs (Wolynn, 2016). Additionally such genetic changes can be reversed through positive experiences of working through those inherited traumas. Here we must concede that even the body of an infant – whom Eric Shouse (2005) argues relies on affect alone to communicate her needs because it does not have any language capacities and thus functions within the pre-discursive realm of affect – does not exist outside of the history that has brought her into existence. The body of an infant or a toddler who hears the sound of the sirens and the bomber jets flying overhead and who senses the anxiety of her caregivers, is invariably affected by the intensities of war. Affect from this perspective cannot exist outside of history and its forces that can genetically alter bodies. It is here that I believe the psychoanalytic understanding

² For more see Mark Wolynn's (2016) *It didn't start with you: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*. In chapter six, I will briefly return to epigenetic research and its connection to affective capacities of people.

of affect and particularly the affective capacities of art are especially important in allowing us to recognize different affective responses such as haunting.

Affect from its psychoanalytic trajectory

Psychoanalytic theory from its inception has been about paying attention to what is invisible but remains very real nonetheless (Gordon, 1997). This ontological branch of affect, tracing back to the works of Freud, privileges a human's physiological drives such as libido and desire as the source of human motivation and action and from this position emotions or affects are the primary vehicles in manifesting the underlying libidinal drives (Thrift, 2004, p. 61). As Gregory Seigworth (2011) claims for Freud affect is a palpable charge, "not entirely unlike a charge of electricity" (p. 78). Freud posited that affect must be considered as a discharge phenomenon; it is "captured by the psyche and expressed in the body. As a charge phenomenon, it is manifested through intensity and through the significance of the representational field" (Aguillaume, 2008, p. 144). Here affect activates the drives, and emotions are a primary manifestation of those drives (Aguillaume, 2008). This focus on a handful of drives has resulted in a complicated relationship between this branch of affect theory and its Deleuzian variation³.

From this position, affect can be attached to things and bodies (Thrift, 2004) and is created, enhanced or reduced through its circulation between bodies (Ahmed, 2004). Sara Ahmed (2004) conceptualizes affect in her seminal work: *Cultural Politics of Emotions* as something that "does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation" (p. 45). From this perspective, affect is produced through its circulation among

³ In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari (2009) criticized psychoanalysis' conceptualization of 'lack' leading the formation of sexual desire and the subordination of sexuality to reproduction. They argued that desire is a social, non-human, pre-personal force which is everywhere and invests in different collective sites, such as the workplace, politics, family and religion (Stark, 2016). It is productive by producing connections between and within bodies (Stark, 2016). As I will argue in later chapters, this trajectory of thought is in fact very similar to the British psychoanalytic school of thought regarding connections being made and re-made in the spaces between bodies.

bodies. Movement is important, but from Ahmed's position it is the movement *between* bodies and signs that creates, enhances, or reduces affect. What is significant in this tradition of affect is not only paying attention to the body but also to the history of that body, and how that body has come to *be* through the experiences that have come to shape and formulate it.

Moreover, the psychoanalytic understanding of aesthetic cultural formation following the works of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott are great points of interventions in understanding art as a potential space of processing and working through events and forces that have impacted us. Adam Phillips (1988) claims that objects relation theory, originally formulated by Klein and later reworked by Winnicott, attempted to translate psychoanalysis from a theory of sexual desire into a theory of emotional nurture. Contrary to the French psychoanalytic school of thought where language was elevated as a means of accessing the unconscious, the British school of thought stressed the importance of non-verbal communications between infant and mother and later expanded that to the individual and her surroundings (Phillip, 1988; Kristeva, 2001). This theoretical framework sought to investigate the relationship between real and imagined objects such as the external understanding of the mother and the internal imagining of her for the child (Klein, 2002). Here the body becomes the summation of interactions that take place between it and other objects and their surroundings.

One of the major contributions of this school was analyzing play as a significant space where forces of social relations are worked out (Phillip, 1988). For Melanie Klein play rather than an "abstract dramatization of objects of desire or hatred symbolized by toys, was a road to the unconscious" (Kristeva, 2001, p. 49). From this position, play was considered this road to access the unconscious because it was rooted in the body (Kristeva, 2001). Winnicott furthered this thought by positing that there exists a "potential space or a transitional space", a gap,

residing neither on the inside, nor on the outside wherein play, creativity and cultural creations emerge out of (Phillips, 1988; Winnicott, 2010). “Cultural experiences begin with creative living first manifested in play (Winnicott, 2010, p. 135).

Winnicott (2010) argued that this potential space of play depends on experiences that have created trust between the infant and her surroundings, particularly through her primary caregivers and it is here where the individual can experience creative living. As I will discuss in more depth in the following chapter, if playing exists in the in-between of the material and the psychic/virtual worlds, the potentiality of this space is a highly variable factor between different individuals depending on early childhood experiences. In this sense, our interactions with the affective powers of other bodies are mediated through the very bodies that are subject to history. Although I do not use the terminology of object relation theory, what I draw on is the theoretical analysis of relationality and connection between bodies and the ways in which those social relations are worked through during play.

Repetition and working through are important psychoanalytic concepts that shed light in our understanding of play, art, and cultural formation. Following a Winnicottian understanding of the space of play as a space where cultural creation emerge, art then provides a potential space of working through and mourning injuries that have been inflicted on the body (Georgis, 2013). In art we find a space more capable of illuminating complexities of human relations and dimensions of human reality that are not often easily accessible otherwise (Georgis, 2013). And by extension, in videogames we find that such ability to make sense of sensations and intensities are not only for the artists who created the game, but also for the player who plays the game. This process of working through and integration in videogame play is facilitated primarily through the failure and repetition of the game.

Videogame theorists such as McKenzie Wark's (2007) *Gamer Theory* (2007) and Jesper Juul's (2013) *The Art of Failure* have investigated the repetitive nature of videogame play and claim that 'failure' within gameplay provides a unique opportunity of learning since it signifies a sense of deficiency which then is overcome through repetition in the game. I further draw on their work in the next chapter in order to demonstrate that this process of 'fail and repeat' is a requirement of a 'good-enough' game where through repetition, the players are pushed towards self-development, enhanced strategic thinking and at times the re-conceptualizing of the self. I will further examine how does allowing the player to safely fail, create an environment wherein through repetition we change, rewrite stories, and become. Each failure and its subsequent restart of the game is a form of re-write that has the potential to make known some sensations that exist through that specific version of the story alone and other sensations that come to light only in the context of the rest of the stories that were played before that particular version of the game.

In my dissertation, I argue that the socio-political games are aesthetic creations that not only are meant to capture intensities of a particular realities, but they are also the result of the processing of those intensities felt by the artists which then creates a new entity: the videogame. The game becomes a mode of processing for the artists and for every other gamer who plays that particular game. This is why *1979*, as I will explain in chapter six, was the hardest game I have ever played. This was not because of the techniques or strategies of the game, but rather because my socio-historical proximity to the story of the game, my personal history, created a space of gameplay that was imbued with haunting, mourning, and reckonings.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue from the position that not every body has the capacity to register affective intensities at the same level or at all. This is precisely because the intensities that make themselves known through registering on the surface of the body and the

ones that are felt through the body, do so in correspondence with that body's capacity to be affected. Not all bodies can be affected on the same frequency or intensity of affect. The degrees to which we sense sensations and feel intensities are formed and reformed through our experiences with other bodies that we come in contact with. My position throughout this dissertation is that affective forces are subject to history and change and are not inherently pre-discursive or impersonal (Anable, 2018), however they are often slippery, difficult to contain in language and exist beyond purely linguistic boundaries.

Affect & emotion

Although I do not take the position that affect is a pre-personal and thus a pre-historical force, I draw a distinction between affect and emotions. It is important for me to pause and distinguish between these two terms that are often used interchangeably among some affect theorists: affect and emotions. Intensity, as Massumi (2002, 2015) argued, is an essential trait of affect and it belongs to a different order, existing on a different plane of existence. Following this trajectory, I use affect interchangeably with intensities, sensations and vibrations that are registered on and through the body and are often abstract, slippery and pre-discursive. Emotions, on the other hand, while existing on the same continuum are the verbalization of those sensations checked against the vast personal, societal, and historical experiences and are deeply cultural (Shouse, 2005; Berlant, 2010, Massumi, 2015). "Emotion is the articulation of affect...emotion is the ideological attempt to make sense of some affective productions" (Grossberg, 2010, p. 316). I claim that experiences of a gameplay are never merely emotional experiences; they are also affective born out of the intensities and sensations that merge through the process of play. Allow me to provide an example of a game that I will return to for an in-depth analysis in chapter five:

Neverending Nightmares (2014), a game about horrors of depression and anxiety, is primarily an affective game. In this game, I play a character named Tom, who is stuck in a perpetual cycle of nightmares attempting to decipher the dreams and the mysteries they reveal. I/Tom can die easily by being chased by monsters in the dreams, only to wake up in the same or a different dream. My/His movements are labored because of his asthma leading to a slow walking and wandering in the halls of the house, the graveyard, and the psychiatric facility. And this slowness of movement within the game contributes to a quick repetition of dying and being awoken again to repeat the same or a different variation of the story. The game certainly elicits emotional reactions. Responses of frustration at dying, fear of monsters, anxiety and excitement about what is next, and the desire to know more, are just among a few of these emotional states. However, the game is much more than these emotional reactions. The game makes visible the affective forces of depression: the slowness, the inability to move the body, the inertia, the heaviness, the darkness, the fogginess of one's mental capacities, all of which are not necessarily emotional states of the body, rather they are affective states of the body.

Matt Gilgenbach (as cited in McElroy, 2013), the creator of the game, explained that this game was an educational project aiming to raise awareness around mental health, loss, and trauma. Regarding his own mental health battles, Gilgenbach says:

In my darkest hours, I felt like I was completely alone, and no one understand what I was going through. It was just this hell. I hope that with the game I can reach out to people like that and say, 'You're not alone; I've been there.' But more importantly, 'I got through it and you can too'. (Dark Places section, para. 8).

What is captured beautifully in this game is the nightmarish sensations of depression, the neverending daily cycle of it, its repetition, and the realization that the only way out of it, is

through it: with small, labored movement of the body. Ann Cvetkovich (2012) writes “what gets called depression is an affective register of [our] social problems and one that often keeps people silent and too numb to really notice the sources of their unhappiness” (p. 12). And this mode of attention to affective politics, specially through art is a way of rethinking activism in ways that it pays attention to these registers in the attempts to display what living under the tyranny of capitalism *feels* like (Berlant, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012). It is the *feeling*, the sensation, the intensity of depression that is illuminated through playing *Neverending Nightmares*, through the processes, failure and repetition, and the movements within the game.

Attention to affect

One of the key strategies of Deleuze and Guattari was to reframe a central epistemological question from ‘what something is’, to ‘what something does?’ (Buchanan, 2000). Furthering this idea, Ian Buchanan (2000, 2017) asserts that by shifting our focus from what a concept is to ‘what it allows us to do’, we are able to look at the space where a concept is emerging out of and the space that it is mapping out. This is a space of potentiality. As Brian Massumi (2002) inquires “What would it mean to give a logical consistency to the in-between?” and to the “being of the middle- the being of a relation”? (p. 70). Theories of affect above all consider the moving dimension of the body and thus examining and investigating the processes of passing through, unfolding, becoming, and relationality (Grossberg, 2010; Massumi, 2002). Grossberg (2010) argues “affect is the engine of articulation. Affect is what constitutes the relationality” (p. 327). Ideological accounts of subject formation and positionality are important theoretical perspectives that explain how the individuals become so through the sum of all their experiences with the other bodies, such as systems of power that affects every aspect of person’s life. However, if we only focus on subject positions, where people are on a

grid system of positionality, the moving dimension of the body becomes secondary and minimized (Massumi, 2002). And with that the potential for change, transformation and becoming is also minimized. The emphasis on relationality, change and movement allows us to understand a different way of bodies interacting with and relating to each other. Affect has the power to shift our analysis from purely a “discursive subject” towards a “becoming that is nonlinguistic, nonsymbolic, presubjective, and transpersonal” (Anable, 2018, p. 53). Although, as I will come to demonstrate in chapter six, there are limits to this nonsymbolic and presubjective conceptualization of affect, this conceptualization of *becoming* that is not simply linguistic, or purely representational provides a vast possibility and potentiality in forming new connections.

The transpersonal conceptualization of affect points us towards transcending boundaries of the bodies. It points us towards a place where we can come to view our bodies not as separable entities rather as an ever-shifting and changing circuit of connection and relations. The body viewed this way is no longer solely defined and fixed in a particular time and space (Massumi, 2002). The focus of affect as a mode of knowledge production produces a different kind of knowledge: a sensuous one, a bodily one, a knowledge that pays attention to things that are not visible but are still powerful (Gordon, 1997). It is a way of looking that proposes more feeling than seeing. It is a practice that is “attuned to the echoes and murmurs of that which has been lost but which is still present among us in the forms of intimations, hints, suggestions and portents” (Gordon, 1997, p.xvi).

I bring these theoretical blocks together to demonstrate that videogames emerge out of this in-betweenness of the material and the virtual reality, where we engage with affective forces that have impacted us. Through interplay of the forces of these bodies coming together, that of

the gamer, the artist, the avatar, and the console, unknown forces are felt and new ones are created.

Out of an interdisciplinary practice of bringing different theories together, I created an assemblage of theories and thoughts that were most relevant to my research and could provide answers to my questions. I was interested in the idea of affect as a mode of explaining life experiences, including those experiences during play particularly during videogame play. The theories that I applied to answer my questions around potentials and powers of videogames was affect, and I simultaneously used videogames as an example of aesthetic creation capturing affective sensations, to further the conversation around conceptualization of affect. In this process what was and became more important was not a fidelity to a particular philosopher: such as Gilles Deleuze or D. W. Winnicott, rather the concepts that these philosophers had put forward and what other theorists who followed these philosophers had done with their concepts. What became increasingly significant in this process were the possibilities that could arise out of putting these theories together. This dissertation is an attempt to add to those voices and to fill in the gaps in the conversation around the affective potentials of videogame play, particularly SPGs.

Methodology: ‘*What method have you adopted for your research?*’

There is a story about Luce Irigaray during her PhD defense in 1968. When asked ‘what method have you adopted for your research?’, she said “[sic] a delicate question. For isn’t it the method, the path to knowledge, that has always also led us away, led us astray, by fraud and artifice (Irigaray cited in Gordon, 1997, p. 39). Decades later, Sara Ahmed (2017) wrote of her experience during her PhD, when she was encouraged to maintain a fidelity to a theorist by following his theories thoroughly. These encouragements would come in seemingly gentle

questions: “Are you a Derridean; no, so are you a Lacanian; no, oh okay, are you a Deleuzian; no, then what? If not, then what?” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 16). I have been asked similar questions specifically around my use of affect theory and its different cleaves.

Since I am neither a Deleuzian nor a Winnicottian, this dissertation is not so much about fidelity to a theoretical framework as it is an interplay of those theories and theorists who have attempted to translate affect and affective capacities. Rather than relying solely on one mode of understanding affect, I use these different ontological branches as building blocks coming together to augment one another in the hopes of creating something new. This formation and the methodological path taken towards it, is not the one created by the “official paths laid out by disciplines” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15). Affect and its varying conceptualization are both my theory and method. This research is about linkages and connections that are made and it is about a method of negotiating “the always unsettled relationship between what we see and what we know” (Gordon, 1997, p. 24).

My aim is to translate the affective powers of these socio-political videogames and I use these different building blocks that best lend themselves to this translation. What I want to evoke for you are the sensations and intensities that leave their marks on the bodies of the player and the ways in which these engagements and exchanges transform those bodies. In order to fully sense the affective forces of a game and to engage with them, a player often plays a game for hours, if not for weeks or months, at a time. In addition, these gameplays are done voluntarily outside of lab experiments (Nielson et al., 2008). An hour or two of gameplay, which would be typical for an in-depth and in-person interview, would not be sufficient in any of these games in order to fully immerse in the experience of the game, to fail at the game and restart, nor to explore different storylines of the game and thus experience different versions of events against

the backdrop of the bigger event of the game. Some games require hours to play and years to master and a different kind of appreciation for the game can ensue because of the level of mastery (Isbister, 2017). As Jeffery Goldstein (2008) argues, around qualitative studies on violence and videogames, being required to play is not in fact *playing*. Playing, as I will come to examine in depth in the next chapter, requires a certain level of autonomy over one's actions in playing, which includes the ability to leave the gameplay or enter it when the player wants to do so.

In addition, the games that are the subject of this dissertation are all affectively and emotionally charged games. For example, *This War of Mine*, as I will write in more depth in chapter five, carries a sense of heaviness, the darkness of war, desperation and depressive mood which after days of playing had their effect on my mood and my affective and emotional state. *Spec Ops: The Line* is another example of a game wherein my own mood was severely affected by the processes and the theme of the game. For these two reasons combined, I did not deem it ethical to ask any participants to engage for several hours with games that not only I do not believe several hours is enough to fully *feel* the game, but also to engage with that *feeling* which might leave the participants in a depressive mindset. I assert that for such games, wherein heavy affects, intense feelings and sensations are dominant, the lack of complete voluntary participation of play changes the way a player engages with the game. The autonomy of people playing games is a fundamental process of working through sensations and challenges and once that autonomy is reduced so do the potentials for both immersion and affective understanding of the game.

Instead, I rely on my own personal experiences of the game and online discussion of gamers who have played these specific games. As I wrote in Chapter one, videogames are played in a context of a gaming culture. In fact, no discussion of a videogame can take place outside of

this context of play and connection among gamers themselves. Videogames's teaching potentials are exponentially increased because games are played within a gaming culture wherein they are talked about, altered, cheated, and fantasized about (de Castell & Jenson, 2003; de Castell et al., 2010). Discussion of strategies, comparing ways of success, asking questions, watching others play, and simply talking about games in person and in online forums are part of the experience of playing a videogame (Nielson et al., 2008). These reviews, conversations, questions about the gameplay are significant sites of research, which I use to augment my own explanation of games. Such conversations around games are so powerful that they connect gamers to each other's interpretations of the games and philosophical discourse around those interpretations.

For example, *Factorio* (2020) is a strategy game where I, as the player, am an engineer who has crash-landed into an alien planet and survived. I must extract resources in order to rebuild my spaceship and get back to my home planet. The game is a combination of constructing and then managing elaborate and more and more complex production plants. In this process, I must protect the factory plants from any invasion by the indigenous life-forms, who come to destroy the industrial complex because it is extracting resources that they use. The survival of the plant depends partially on my success in eliminating the indigenous population by building more and more complex military operations. The game seemingly is about a construction site, managing that site, and extracting resources in order to build a spaceship. The indigenous life forms of the planet look more insect-like than anything else, thus making any form of relationality, communication or connections with them feel even more abstract. Yet when looking at the online conversation between the gamers, the topic of colonialism and the violence of it are among the issues that gamers discussed especially during the early release of the game.

On /r/Factorio, a subreddit dedicated to the game, there is a conversation thread dedicated to the question: “Do you ever see *Factorio* as a metaphor for the industrial revolution and colonialism?” On this thread, there are discussions on whether or not what happens in this game would constitute as colonial or environmental exploitation, the problems around the colonial discourse of ‘savage’ vs. ‘civil’, and even a conversation around the “Doctrine of discovery”⁴. I rely on these online narratives as part of my methodology, as such online discourses are a significant part of the gaming culture and where potential for greater understanding through discussion takes place.

My own autobiographical accounts of the games and the online conversations of players who have played the same games, come to make up the other major components forming this ‘thought-assemblage’. These thought-assemblages are presented in single-space block format, in order to make it easier for the reader to be able to distinguish between the narration of gameplay and my critical analysis of it. As much as I try to separate these two narratives, they often leak into one another, blurring the lines between play and the analysis of the play. This blurring of the lines is a function of play which translates itself in the process of writing about play. In addition, the narrativization of gameplay is a spatial and a temporal travel to the in-between space, the space of play, in order to translate the intensities of that travel. I quote players at length because in order to fully grasp an analysis of the game, one has to either have played the game or have read or listened to the narration of the game.

In her book *Chaos, Territory and Art*, Elizabeth Grosz (2008) argues that her project in the book was not to replace art history or criticism and it was not about creating a way of assessing the value, quality or the meaning of art. Rather through talking about art, Grosz (2008)

⁴ A doctrine put forth by European colonizers in order to legitimize colonization of the lands inhabited by Indigenous people.

asserted that her project was about “addressing the common forces and power of art...and the peculiar relationship art establishes between the living body, the forces of universe” and creation of futures to come (pp. 2-3). That is my attempt in this dissertation: to look at the relations and connections that are made between the player and socio-political videogames.

Chapter 3: Play and the Space of Playing

Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*. – Friedrich Schiller, *On The Aesthetic Education of Man*

First games and first lessons. The garden soon became the centre of my world; the library, an enchanted cave. I used to read and play with my cousins and schoolmates. There was a fig tree, temple of vegetation, four pine trees, three ash trees, a nightshade, a pomegranate tree, wild grass and prickly plants that produced purple grazes. Adobe walls. Time was elastic; space was a spinning wheel. All time, past or future, real or imaginary, was pure presence. Space transformed itself ceaselessly. The beyond was here. – Octavia Paz, Nobel Lecture 1990

Bury Me, My Love - ت قبري ني يا اح بي

“Why do they hate us?” Nour texts her husband despondently, after a hard day on the road. “They don’t hate us, they are scared” Majd writes back. *Bury Me, My Love* (2017) is an indie interactive narrative SPG, developed by The Pixel Hunt, Figs and ARTE France, and it is about the plight of the Syrian refugees. The game is a text-based conversation between a husband and a wife whose lives have forced them to separate to seek refuge elsewhere, in hopes of a better future. In this game, the player assumes the role of Majd – the husband – who must stay behind in Homs, Syria, to take care of his mother and grandfather and to provide advice to his wife, Nour, who after losing most of her family members including her younger sister, decides to leave Syria. The journey towards Europe begins with a goodbye: ‘*bury me, my love*’ is a Syrian farewell phrase roughly translated to ‘I hope I don’t see you die/don’t think about dying before me’.



Figure 3 *Bury Me, My Love* (2017)

The game follows Nour's journey from Homs in Syria towards Germany. In this space of play, I play as Majd, who chooses what to text-message his wife, and my decisions either help or hinder Nour's attempt towards safety. For example, should I tell her to stick with a mother with two young children even though they are slow travelers, or with a guy travelling alone who seems to be a much faster walker? Should I encourage her to wear the hijab so that it might offer her a bit more protection on the road from the fellow male refugees, or to encourage her to stick by her beliefs? Should I tell her to spend her limited money to buy anti-nausea medication for the boat ride or tell her to save her money for what is yet to come?

This socio-political game (SPG) provides an emotionally and affectively charged space, with nineteen different endings, where not only the wretched conditions of displacement and migration come to reveal themselves, but also through the actions of the player and the repetition of the story, the complexities and contradictions of humanity including that of the player come to make themselves known.

The game branches out to multiple endings, inviting the player to enter this space again and again to re-do, re-write, and co-create. Through the text-messaging format of the game, closely resembling that of WhatsApp's and Lifeline's messaging mediums, a third space is created; a space neither fully digital nor fully material. A space opens up where I step in to play, act, do, and experience. In this realm where I become someone or rather *something* else I am invited to experiment with what life could be and the forces that make up the lives of people, their violence and their humanity. The game is a playground beckoning the player to enter, not promising an easy or a 'fun' interaction, as evident by its title. It only promises play. It promises an experience and an experiment with certain life forces that can only happen through this space of play.

This is a serious play, but it is play nonetheless.

In order to better understand the affective forces and powers that are felt and experimented with while playing a videogame and the co-constitutionality of the player and the avatar, we must first examine and unpack the space of play itself. To be able to answer the question, 'What happens to us when we play a videogame?' and to analyze the potentials of SPGs, it is important to consider *where are we when we play?* In other words, where does playing take place?

The question of *where are we when we play*, occupied much of the works of D.W. Winnicott, and in this chapter I turn to his influential work on the subject of play, specifically play as an action that takes place in a liminal space between the individual and their environment. By doing so, I attempt to show how in this in-between space we play *with* different forces and sensations that have impacted us, and in playing we come to reinterpret stories, create new connections and make sense of the old ones differently.

This chapter is divided into the following sections: First I examine Winnicott's formulation of the transitional phenomena and the transitional space as the foundational concept in understanding play and human relationality. I will then explain Winnicott's conceptualization of the space of play and what the process of playing makes possible for individuals. From this position, I then argue that socio-political videogames create a space of play where human relations and complexities can be experimented with. Through a human-centered design process SPGs carry enormous pedagogical potentials to become a source of felt-knowledge production. I examine the ways in which branching storylines and the process of failure and repetition which all games possess, are utilized in SPGs to make a varied space of play wherein forces and sensations previously unavailable can be felt and experienced. In my analysis I will specifically refer to *Bury Me, My Love (BMML)* and *1000 Days of Syria (1000 Days)* as my case studies. This chapter is meant to serve as a foundation for the following chapters so that by understanding play and the space in which playing happens in, we can better understand the co-dependency of the player and the avatar, their becoming, their affective forces that merge in this space to create something new every time the restart button is pressed.

Winnicott and the transitional space

Winnicott, as both a practicing psychoanalyst and a philosopher, was interested in understanding the space between a mother and a child, between different bodies and their relations (Phillips, 1988, p. 1). He argued that the psychoanalytic writings influenced by Freud had a tendency to either “dwell on a person's life as it relates to objects or else on the inner life of the individual” (Winnicott, 2010, p. 141). He was adamant that placing extreme emphasis only on the internal functioning of the individual, the psyche more specifically, neglects the impact of the environment on the individual and the ways in which that impact comes to leave its marks on

the individual. He argued that in psychoanalysis the focus had been primarily on the state of ego defenses to define what is a healthy versus an unhealthy state of a human being with a particular attention on the unhealthy state (Phillips, 1988). Winnicott thought that health was a far more difficult state to deal with it than disease and thus it was neglectful to not examine healthy state of being (Phillips, 1988, p. 1). What he rather sought to answer was “what is life itself is about”? (Winnicott, 2010, p. 133). In this he distanced himself from Freud’s teaching by emphasizing “the pre-sexual creativity in children and on the independent dignity, as it were, of cultural experience” (Bowie, 2000, p. 16).

Rather than believing that the unconscious interrupts the operations of the consciousness through the return of the repressed matter – like his predecessor Freud or his contemporaries in the French psychoanalytic school of thought – he directed our attention to “an intermediate zone which is full of primes and dangers and to the two realms that border that zone and are “separate yet interrelated”” (Bowie, 2000, p. 14). Winnicott (2010) formulated the central tenant of his philosophy: the transitional phenomenon, marked by a transitional object and the transitional space which exists between an infant and her mother-figure.

Following the tradition of the British psychoanalysis, and furthering the work of Melanie Klein on early childhood development and object-relation theory between the infant and the mother, Winnicott (2010) posited that there exists an intermediate space, between the mother and child, a third space of experiencing life, that both the inner psychic reality and the outer reality contribute to. He called this area the “transitional space”, where the child, with the help of a transitional object, such as a toy, and an adaptive mother-figure, plays, acts, does, and works through the processes that have affected her (Winnicott, 2010, p. 3). For him, contrary to his predecessors, Freud and Klein, infants seek contact with their caregivers not simply out of an

instinctual need for gratification and alleviation of desire, but also because they are wired for intimacy and relatedness (Phillips, 1988).

In this intermediate and a transitional space, the child oscillates between reality and fantasy or illusion as she slowly comes to the realization of individuating from the mother-figure (Winnicott, 2010). In this process of individuating, the child begins to understand that her mother is a separate entity from her, and the child uses the transitional object as a soothing tool to help this process of separation (Winnicott, 2010). This object which is often a toy or a blanket functions as a temporary substitute for the primary love object: the mother-figure (Winnicott, 2010). The child begins by playing with the transitional object on her own. Eventually she starts to play with the parent, even offering the transitional object to the parent and thus beginning her interactions with the material reality (Winnicott, 2010).

Winnicott (2010) claimed that attachment to this transitional object is a healthy one that eventually runs its course by the child working through the loss of the primary love-object and by being able to create new and healthy attachments to others around her⁵. The parent, as Winnicott argued, must engage in this exercise and gradually encourage the participation of others in play. This, he posited, is crucial for the development of the child. According to Winnicott (2010), the 'good-enough' mother facilitates the space of exploration by creating a sense of safety and adapting to the changing needs of the child, so that the child can play in the knowledge that she is being safely watched by her mother.

⁵ Winnicott (2010) was adamant that the transitional object was not the internal object that Melanie Klein had written about. He wrote that in a state of health "the transitional object does not 'go inside' nor does the feeling about it necessarily undergo repression. It is not forgotten and it is not mourned. It loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between 'the inner psychic reality' and 'the external world as perceived by two persons in common', that is to say, over the whole cultural field" (p. 7).

For Winnicott (2010), the transitional phenomena and the transitional object provide the child with a significant neutral area of experience that ought not to be challenged in respect to whether it belongs to the inner or the shared external reality. In infancy this third space is necessary for the initial relationships the child makes with her surroundings and “throughout life [it] is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living and to creative scientific work” (Winnicott, 2010, p. 19).

Although Winnicott almost always wrote about the mother and the infant and their relations, as Adam Phillips (1988) argues it is important to not read Winnicott’s writing literally. According to Phillips (1988), Winnicott used the two figures of mother and infant to demonstrate other issues, including a person’s relationship with others and themselves. In Winnicott’s (2010) writings, it is clear to see that this intermediate area of life-experience, which is “in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is ‘lost in play’”, is a significant part of cultural formation (p. 18).

Play

Winnicott (2010) claimed playing is not just something that only children engage in; rather playing is a fundamental aspect of change and growth even in adults. He was more interested in the space that playing existed in and its potential (Winnicott, 2010). He claimed that early psychoanalytic texts neglected to engage not only with what we are doing when we engage with an artwork, such as listening to Beethoven’s symphonies or participating in a collective hip-hop dance routine, but also they neglected to consider *where* are we when we play? (Winnicott, 2010). What is the space that play and creativity emerge out of? Playing is a critical part of this transitional phenomenon as it exists somewhere between the psychic and the internal reality of the individual and the external reality of their environment. Winnicott (2010) writes:

Playing has a place and a time. It is not inside by any use of the word (and it is unfortunately true that the word *inside* has very many and various uses in psychoanalytic discussion). Nor is it *outside*, that is to say, it is not a part of the repudiated world, the not-me, that which the individual has decided to recognize (with what-ever difficulty and even pain) as truly external, which is outside magical control. To control what is outside one has to *do* things, not simply to think or to wish, and *doing things takes time*. Playing is doing. (p. 55)

In this time and space, the child – and by extension the adult who plays – has intense experiences between the “me-extensions and the not-me” (Winnicott, 2010, p.135). In this space the child begins to separate herself from her mother-figure through playing with another object that symbolizes the union between her and her mother (Winnicott, 2010). Playing happens in a potential space and it can only manifest when the child feels confident in relation to the dependability of her mother-figure or the environmental elements (Winnicott, 2010). The confidence around the dependability of the external world allows the individual to engage more freely in play, creativity and cultural formation.

“*Playing is doing*” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 55, emphasis added). It happens in a third space, an intermediate area of experience where both the internal reality and external life contribute to. This space is both a moving space and it is multidimensional (Bowie, 2000). Both the spatial and the temporal dimensions of this space create a realm where the subject/the child directly develops from the transitional phenomenon to playing, to shared playing, and then to cultural and artistic creations. Winnicott (2010) wrote that “it is play that is the universal, the natural thing is playing” (p.45). While playing “belongs to the child”, it is also shared between her and others

around her, thus making playing a meeting place between the child/the adult player and other bodies (Bonaminio & Di Renzo, 2000, p. 101).

Play as a *meeting place* is a powerful idea that allows us to tap into the potentials of videogames. In videogame play we come to meet other characters, beings, objects and stories, and experiment with them. Building on Winnicott's transitional space, Alexander Kriss (2016) argues that games and by extension videogames act as a type of potential space, a transitional space, not fully belonging to the inner psychic reality nor the material reality, but they make contact with both. From this perspective, "play ceases when potential space collapses" because there needs to be a tether between the physical and the digital realms in videogame play (Kriss, 2016, p. 576). This tether is often offered through the platform that the game is designed for, such a console, a computer or a smartphone. In *BMML*, it is the phone⁶ that facilitates this tether between the external world and the digital one. In the transitional space that videogames provide for us, ethical dilemmas and moral complexities, varying socio-political realities, and *feeling* different stories are brought to life so that *something*⁷ about them can be experienced.

"Play is grounded in the concept of possibility" (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971, p. 45). This possibility is predicated on the process of becoming and change that take place in the space of the game. Not only playing is an action, the process of doing things, and movement, but

⁶ This game in its original format was released for smartphones alone and in 2019 was released on Nintendo Switch. I will illustrate later in this chapter how the mere change in the platform of the game changes the experience of gameplay.

⁷ As I will elaborate in the following chapters, my dissertation takes the position that the function of art is two-fold: to capture the forces of material reality in order to make them visible, and simultaneously work-through those experiences. What is often captured in art is not the whole of life, but rather something, some force, some sensations of life and their affective responses are made visible. In this sense, no videogame can ever capture the full forces of complexities and complications that exist in life. No game is meant to substitute the material life experiences for those that happen in a simulation. For example in *BMML*, the player will never experience the full force of what it is like to be a refugee, unless they themselves were a refugee and even in that there are complexities of cases and journeys that vastly distinguish them from each other. Many games such as *BMML* are meant to capture *something* of the wretched reality of human suffering and make that visible and experiential for the player. So that through feeling the game and the experiences of the game, the player may come to learn and re-imagine what that particular life might be like. It is this *something* that I come to analyze as the affective capacity of videogames.

it is also action “generating action” (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971, p. 45). Each action will have a consequence and a reaction which can be felt immediately or later on in the process of the gameplay. The consequences of actions taken in the game can be felt and experienced much easier and faster and without nearly as much consequences as those actions might have in the material world. Consider this narration of the gameplay for *I Am Alive*, a survival game set in a post-apocalyptic world, by Alexander Kriss (2016):

The most memorable moment in my play-through of *I Am Alive* came when, while searching abandoned subway tunnels for food, I accidentally stumbled across two men who had a young couple imprisoned in a cage. As the men threateningly told me to “walk away,” the prisoners begged for my help, saying that their captors were cannibals. The bloody human remains lying in the corner nearby confirmed their accusation. I knew that saving the couple would not help me win the game; in fact, I would have to use at least one or two valuable bullets to free them, and even then they may require further food or supplies to be stabilized. Though the game would not punish me for sacrificing them, I felt compelled to intervene. I attempted to intimidate the cannibals by pulling out my gun, and when they rushed at me I was forced to kill them both. I freed the prisoners and gave them medicine. They thanked me, offering no concrete reward. As I left the area, I heard one say, “I was starting to think there were no good people left in the world.” I did not regret my decision... I did not have full omnipotent control over the game world, but I had far more control than in the real world – after all, in the game I could always restart from an earlier point if I disliked the outcome. In this potential space, I was free to explore the consequences of my wishes, fantasies, and impulses, knowing that they were real enough to be felt but unreal enough so as not to become overwhelming. (p. 581)

As Kriss (2016) explains a space of experimentation and possibilities is opened up through the process of play wherein the player has some degree of autonomy and agency over the actions that take place in that space. In fact the existence of this intermediate space with all its possibilities is a function of play. The impact of exploring these possibilities is just real enough to be felt but unreal enough so that it does not become overwhelming. In the above passage, experimenting with such moral dilemmas would not be possible in any other space than in the in-betweenness that is created purely to explore the possibilities and the consequences of our behaviours. This feedback loop between the videogame and the player creates a powerful

space filled with potentials of learning through feeling. As a result of the interplay of action and reaction and the control of the player within the game, a felt knowledge is produced.

This third space is a bridge between the inner reality and the material reality; playing functions as a form of connection between the two worlds and by extension with other individuals (Bonaminio & Di Renzo, 2000, p.98). Vincenzo Bonaminio and Mariassunta Di Renzo (2000), relying on Winnicott, argue that in both play and art “the *illusion of oneness* is crucial, the fusion of *me* and *not me* which expresses faith in a personally created reality” (p. 98). This illusion of oneness is what many game theorists argue makes immersion and flow within the game a powerful site of connection with the stories and the people of the game world (for more see Nielsen et al., 2008). “Playing and art, then, share the same paradox: through the form given to it, play, like art, makes the “not-me” real and understandable by infusing “not-me” objective material with the subjective “me” psychic content” (Bonaminio & Di Renzo, 2000, p. 99).

Through the participation in play the body is opened up and “made vulnerable to expansion, negation and transformation by the other players and the play space itself” (Kriss, 2016, p. 576). From the Winnicottian perspective, in playing we come to understand our relations to ourselves and others, since from birth human beings are concerned with the ‘me and not-me’ relationship (Winnicott, 2010; McDonald, 2012). “Playing is magical” wrote Winnicott (2010, p. 64), since in playing we come to act and to repair. Winnicott believed that playing belonged to a healthy state of being as it facilitates growth, leads to formation of groups, can be a form of healing, a therapeutic process, and a creative experience since there is a sense of omnipotence and control that the child/the player has while playing (Winnicott, 2010). Playing

allows for forces and events that can at times carry enormous intensities to be processed and incorporated into one's understanding.

In addition, videogames unlike any other space of play make this transitional space even more visible. As I will elaborate more in the next chapter, in playing videogames we become augmented versions of ourselves and thus are able to watch ourselves play. This capacity to do, to act, and to *watch ourselves act* is what makes the space of play in videogames incredibly unique and filled with enormous potential for learning, developing, connecting and relating.

Videogames not only create a space of play but also can create a time-space continuum in order to make visible something of the history of that specific time and space. In their book, *News Games: Journalism at Play*, Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari and Bobby Schweizer (2010) posit that one of the ways that videogames engage the player in actuality is through explorable spatial reality. They argue that documentary games such as *Berlin Wall* (2008), which recreates the stretch of the infamous wall dividing East and West Germany, encourages the player to engage and experiment with the processes of crossing the wall. "Space provides a context for actions and systems; its contours hold the memories of past events and the possibility of future occurrences" (Bogost et al., 2010, p. 64). Thus by re-creating that space through a videogame, a spatial reality that no longer exists takes form and begins to re-emerge and with it something of the experiences of those who tried to cross that space and move within it. As Bogost (2010) explains such reaction of the spatial reality is an attempt to preserve "a sense of what it would have been like to be present in a Berlin now decades gone" (p. 65).

Games such as *BMML*, *1000 Days of Syria* and *1979* do precisely this. They create a realm so something of a particular time and place, its brutality, pain, wretchedness and suffering can be made visible not only visually through the images on a screen, but also somatically

through what is felt in the body. *1979* comes closest to the above example of *Berlin Wall* as it is a direct spatial recreation of the 1978/1979 Iranian revolution in Tehran.

It is important to note as I will expand on this in the following chapters, videogames like any other aesthetic creation cannot fully ‘preserve a sense of a space’, rather through art something of the sensation of that space is captured and made visible. What is being captured and attempted to become known are the affective attunements, sensations, and feelings (not necessarily emotions) that come to reveal themselves through the processes of gameplay. I posit that this is not about the preservation of a space, rather it is about the experimentation with something of the forces that existed in that space in that particular time. It is therefore about the connection with those bodies who had to cross that treacherous wall in Berlin or protest on the streets of Tehran as bullets were being fired at them. These games create a space, not to remember or immortalize, rather to feel in order to connect and in order to know oneself. The space of play is a feeling-moving-thinking space.

The most powerful method that *BMML* utilizes to create this feeling-moving-thinking space that has the potential to increase connection and empathy with the Syrian refugees and those separated by the war, is through the use of its text-messaging format in conjunction with the phone itself. As I wrote earlier the text format resembles that of WhatsApp’s and Lifestream’s mediums very closely, giving the game the power to invoke life-like sensations as though I, the player, am texting a real person in my material reality. Through this format, the game effectively sculpts a space within which after several attempts at the game, the game’s messaging application begins to blur with other messaging apps on my phone, contributing to a sensation that these text messages are coming from a real person. Through this brilliant technique, a wide space is created where the lines between the material and the purely digital realms are blurred,

wherein the phone is no longer simply a phone, rather it is a doorway to a space that beckons the player to enter, just as it is window to see my own loved ones in my material reality. This realistic messaging app-like interface purposefully piggy-backs on to the existing relationship between the player and her phone, where as we will see in the following chapter, not only the body of the player is augmented with that of the avatar, the phone itself becomes de-territorialized as a conduit to enter another realm.

Human-centered design and ‘good-enough’ games

Winnicott (2010) posited that a ‘good-enough’ caregiver must be present while the child plays and that a ‘good-enough’ parent anticipates the needs of the child and can meet and accommodate the child’s needs by adapting to them. Thus the anticipating parent keeps the child in mind as she/he participates in the creation of that transitional space of play for the child. The child’s experience of this intermediate space is shaped by her reality. For Winnicott (2010), the history of the individual cannot be written only in terms of the individual alone, rather the environmental provisions and demands contribute enormously to whether or not the external reality/the ‘good-enough’ parent is able to meet the dependence needs of the child. As I have explained from Winnicott’s position, the facilitation of play and the extent in which play happens relies on the ‘dependability’ of the mother-figure/the environment to be able to be present without interference, unless it is requested by the child. If the care-giver is merely ‘good-enough’ to be able to provide this space, if the environment is ‘safe-enough’, the child is able to play, repair, reconnect and grow.

There are mechanisms by which the game can adapt en-vivo to the player, just as the parent does for the child. Even before the development of these mechanisms, such as providing more power-ups or reducing the enemy’s powers if the player dies repeatedly, games still

mirrored the ‘good enough’ parent by anticipating the players’ needs and creating a virtual environment in which they can play successfully; one that appropriately challenges and facilitates the player’s development. By anticipating the need of the player, most games succeed in creating a ‘good-enough’ space of play for exploration and experimentation.

Game developers have since employed player-centered approaches in order to enhance the play experience through the involvement of players in alpha/beta testing, game patching after the release of the game, and even making software development kits so that the player can modify the game (Charles, et al., 2007). Charles et al. (2007) argue that such player-centered approaches could be even further enhanced through the adaptability of the games. Just like Winnicott argued decades earlier about the creation of the space of the play and the adaptability of the mother-figure to the child’s need, these game theorists argue that the adaptability of the game lies in its ability to “make appropriate responses to changed or changing circumstance” in the game world (Charles et al., 2007, p. 256). Videogames can adapt through the changes to the player’s avatar, to the non-player’s characters in the game, or through the changes to the environment of the game (Charles et al., 2007; de Castell et al., 2010). For example, often in games when the player’s avatar is hurt, it hinders the progress and the process of the game until the injury is treated. The feedback loop in play that involves action-consequence-action, offers a great sense of immersion in the play (Charles et al., 2007).

Learning and adaptation is considered a crucial part of play, therefore a ‘good-enough’ transitional space of play is one that adapts and learns about the player’s actions in the game in order to respond to the way the player is engaged with the game, such as adjusting the opponent’s strategy (Charles et al., 2007). The adaptability of videogames to their player’s actions requires an understanding that not every player is the same, and not only the involvement

of the player in the production of the game is important but also that such adaptability written in the design of the game creates a more meaningful play experience. Some games silently adapt the game itself to become less challenging, or make the avatar stronger in response to the player having difficulty completing levels through “dynamic difficulty adjustment” (Zohaib, 2018). For example, *Crash Bandicoot 2: Cortex Strikes Back* (1997) does both of these things without the player knowing, by slowing obstacles or increasing power-up frequency. This adaptability of the ‘good-enough’ game allows for a more immersive experience of play⁸.

Drawing on the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett on ‘possibility’ as a condition of space of play, Mary Flanagan (2009) argues that the very design of games require attention to this concept of possibility. She posits that in order to design games ‘critically’, such as those SPGs that are the subject of this research, requires a method that shifts “authority and power relations more toward a nonhierarchical, participatory exchange” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 256). This necessitates not only play testing with a diverse audience but designing strategies and procedures of the game with a diverse range of players in mind (Flanagan, 2009). This human-centered approach to designing a game would encourage the designers and developers to “offer many possibilities in games, for a wide range of players, with a wide range of interests and social roles” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 261).

In an interview Florent Maurin, the creator of *BMML*, explained that he was inspired by an article which told a story of two Syrian refugees whose only mode of communication was through their phones (Campbell, 2017). Grappling with questions such as “As European citizens,

⁸ While there is often heated debates in popular culture and academia about what constitutes a ‘good’ game and a ‘bad’ game, I follow Winnicott’s lead in not talking about ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ games, rather to direct our attention to a ‘good-enough’ space of play and some of the qualities that contribute to their creation. This formulation helps shift our understanding that regardless of the actions that the player is allowed to make in the game, such as enacting violence, the game can still be a ‘good-enough’ space of play as long as it allows the player to reckon with the consequences of their actions in the game world.

what is our responsibility in all this?”, Maurin explained that he wanted to create a game where without romanticizing all refugees and without attempting to reach for epiphanies for the players, the player could understand similarities that they shared with the characters on the screen and thus the refugees off the screen (Campbell, 2017).

He explained that the very process of creating this game was a learning opportunity even for him, by realizing that refugees and asylum seekers are held to a much higher standard of behaviour by those in the host country, without considering what they have lost and what they have gone through (Byrd, 2019). In this sense, the creation of the game became a type of working through for him as the artist. This theme of videogames as a space of working through not only for the player but for the creator as well is an important theme that I will come back to later on in this chapter and also again in Chapter six.

With the human-user, the player, the child, in mind during the development of the game and using techniques such as branching storylines, player movement, or progression difficulty, the game can create a space of exploration and experimentation. In such games, a space of play is created with the player in mind to allow the player to safely, or as safely as it could be expected⁹, to explore, experiment and be challenged through those experimentations.

Videogames, if they are ‘good-enough’ spaces of play, provide a safe space of experimentation with the forces and intensities that are captured out of the material reality, with a realization that

⁹ I want to emphasize here, that the ‘safety’ that I am describing is not about a ‘safe space’ free from prejudice and discrimination. As it is written extensively on, and as the Gamergate situation in 2014 demonstrated, online misogyny and homophobia is pervasive in some gaming communities and can alter the sense of safety of the space of play (for more see the works of Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn). My argument here about a safe space of play revolves around the ability of the game itself to provide a space to safely engage with sensations and feelings that might not otherwise be available to the player, or the actions that will not be doable in the material reality. I define safety in terms of a space where the repercussions of making mistakes are not catastrophic, where the game balances the experience of being rewarded for success and being punished for mistakes. For example, generally speaking, games do not let the player play for 60 hours, make a mistake, then lose all her progress (permadeath games are usually short), nor do they allow for the player to go into “more dangerous” areas until the player has shown she has enough skills or character abilities to meet the challenges there. The safety that I refer to here is about the safety of experimenting with possibilities and the potentials of what can be done, built, created while playing.

engaging with the same forces in the material reality would be near impossible or bear great costs and severe consequences. Videogames, if ‘good-enough’, create a field where the player plays with the forces otherwise unavailable to her.

For Winnicott playing involves the body, must be spontaneous, and it implies trust. Videogames, if ‘good-enough’, have specific traits that allow the player to explore and engage with the affective forces of that transitional state and to do things while in that space. I posit that this transitional space uses some specific tools in order to be able to do this, two of which I will explore in depth, due to their relevance to SPGs: 1) if the space of play is able to hold multiplicities through branching story line; and moreover, if it can maintain a fidelity with the truth of the game world that it sets put to create; and, 2) if through the significant ability of failure and repetition, videogames create a safe space of experimentation with forces, sensations, and feelings through simulation. I must note that a videogame does not need to have these qualities simultaneously to formulate a ‘good-enough’ transitional space, however these qualities are among the fundamental pillars that I argue make many videogames, not just SPGs, ‘a good-enough’ space of exploration, transformation and relationality.

Branching storylines

Branching storyline is a technique in videogames which provides alternate choices over the direction of the story, some of which lead to alternate endings of the game (Bizzocchi, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2008). This strategy offers the player the ability to influence the outcome of the game through her actions (Isbister, 2017). In the branching storyline technique, similar to that used in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, the videogame take a nonlinear approach to play. In such games the player is provided choices at critical junctures of the game, allowing for more control by the player, and these choices often decide the different outcomes of the game. These

games allow space for multiple versions of the same story, for the creation of different time-space continuum where the player interacts, experiments and plays with the forces that impact her as the result of each variation of the story. Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum (2011) argue that well-designed narrative components of a game, which includes the story world of the game, the narrative progression of the game – characters that populate the game and their emotions and the emotional responses that they elicit from the player – all have the power to increase learning by enhancing the interactivity of the player within the game.

Many game designers now generally accept that forcing the player through the fictional world without many options and choices to impose on the game, does not make for a very good videogame (Nielsen et al., 2008). The most successful games allow the player to feel a sense of contribution to the plot of the game and change the direction and the outcome of the game (Nielsen et al., 2008). One of the strengths and the gravitational pull of such games comes out of the sense of control that the player has over the actions within the game; thus, being part of the creation of the story of the game. In fact, more games are offering such nonlinear, branching storyline play, signaling how appealing such techniques are and how powerful the needs of the player are to repeat, to do over, to do differently, and to see how a different story might be possible out of different actions taken within (Hinton, 2020). Blockbuster games such as *Life is Strange* (2015), *Until Dawn* (2015), *Telltale's The Walking Dead* (2012-2018), and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), just to name a few, use this technique of storytelling.

Interactivity is a function of play, and videogames just like any other space of play must be interactive. Henry Jenkins (2003) argues that videogames tell stories in their own unique spatial and environmental capacities, because game designers do not simply tell a story, rather they “design worlds and sculpt spaces” (p. 3), thus allowing the player to enact the story for

herself. In videogame play, the player does not simply consume what the game designers have created in the game, rather she makes things happen in the game (Gee, 2007). “In good games, players feel that their actions and decisions – and not just the designers’ actions and decisions – are co-creating the world they are in and the experiences they are having” (Gee, 2007, p. 332).

This co-creativity and co-writing the story is one of the fundamental aspects of videogames that SPGs utilize in their attempts to ask the player to co-write and thus *become* part of that story. In videogames that employ branching storylines there is space for multiplicity, not only through failure and repetition that every game possesses, but through multiple stories, endings and truths that come to augment one another and formulate a fuller picture. There is no singular story, rather the story of the game is multi-layered, offering a vaster image and understanding, and thus more varied and complex sensations.

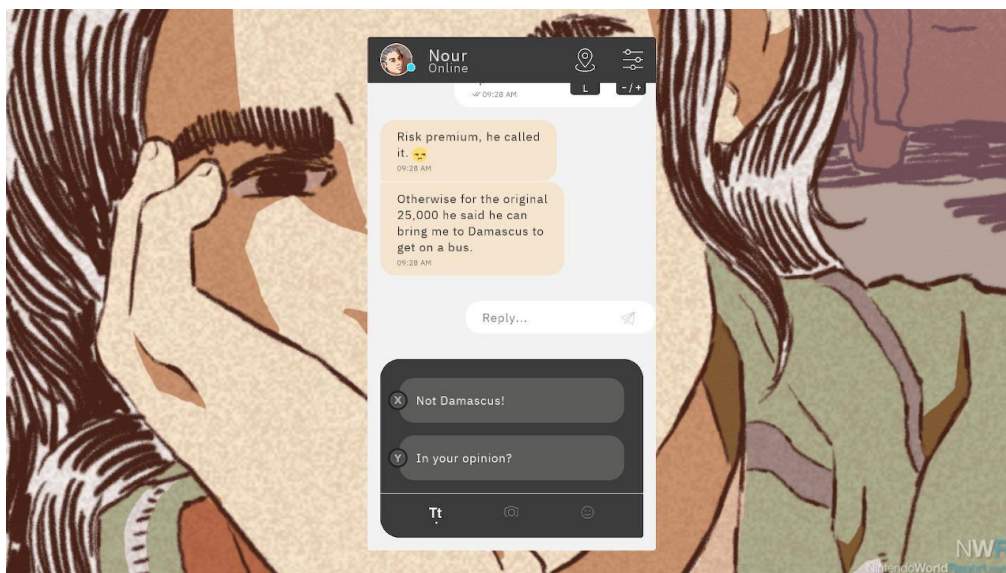


Figure 4 *Bury Me, My Love* (2017) - An example of the branching storyline

BMML has nineteen different endings, as the example in Figure 4 shows; with the character Nour visiting a total of 40 different locations the game creates a vast space of exploration. Each branch of the story is capturing something of how life could be for a Syrian

refugee and indeed how life is for a Syrian refugee trying to cross borders. Each different version of the story attempts to get Nour from Homs to Germany with little success. Some endings are better than others, such as arriving in Austria and being offered transitional housing by the social services set up there to help the refugees. But many versions of the game end with the brutal reality of being arrested at a border, being sent back to a refugee camp, or simply getting stuck in a camp with nowhere to go. The hardest ending for me as the player was a final voicemail from Nour, where she cries as she leaves a despondent message for me: “They are sending us back, the border is closed and they are sending us back. They are going to have me do things...fuck” and the line is forever cut off. There is a haunting quality to this message, the only voicemail that the player ever receives from Nour is the end-game message and this one is full of pain, fear, and desperation.

The game, although seemingly about one woman’s journey through the brutal path of migration, through its repetition and multiple endings, becomes about *stories of women* who have had to walk this path. Through the branching story technique, the story is no longer about the singular story of immigration, rather it is about multiplicities. We travel together with Nour in different variation of the game, and Majd and I see something of a world that we did not know: underground schools for orphaned children, young pregnant teenagers in refugee camps, a network of European helpers, and the take down of the refugee camp in Calais, France.

Bad things happen to Nour on this journey and their complications and contradictions reveal themselves only in the multiple variation of the story. She has to constantly be on guard around men, whether it is in the form of co-travelers, in refugee camps, or the men who offer her a ride, and even with her husband/Majd/the player/me. She has to defend her decisions and her existence at times even to her husband as he pushes her to provide him with the details of the

events that have happened to her. In its multiple endings, the game reveals itself as a feminist game about the plight of refugee women, pointing to the constant threats to the bodies of women attempting to cross borders into safety.

It is not only Majd who so desperately wants to know the details of what has happened to Nour. I, as the player, find myself being challenged by the same desire and the need to ‘know’, wanting to force her to tell me the details of an assault and each time I/Majd attempt to ask her that, it strains the relationship further and further. In fact, too many attempts to seek out the ‘truth’ and to not accept her ‘No’s for an answer result in the deterioration and the ultimate breakup of their marriage. The game is a feminist game particularly because it puts the player in the shoes of the husband having to witness the misogyny and aggressions that happens to his wife on a daily basis. The game captures the intricacies of a relationship strained through this process of migration.

The technique of the branching story allows for experimentation with different strategies offered by the game. It allows for a re-imagining and a re-acting of a story. It involves ‘righting the wrong’; correcting the ‘mistakes’ but also experimenting with the ‘mistakes’ and ‘the wrong choices’ and their affective forces and implications. It is an opportunity to re-write and re-do which we are not afforded in our everyday living. The re-writes provides the opportunity to write a better or a worse story and to reconcile with their affective variations. It is a space of possibilities where the player comes to feel the affective sensations of those better or worse possibilities.

1000 Days of Syria is another SPG that uses the branching story line technique in order to provide a more comprehensive image of the Syrian war. At the beginning of the game the player chooses between three different characters: a young journalist, a mother of two, or a rebel

fighter; and, then attempts to play as these characters to try and overcome challenges and hopefully survive the war, or at least, 1000 days of it. Each character's story in *1000 Days* has multiple endings depending on the player's actions and in many of the endings, as it has been in real life, the characters do not make it to day 1000. *This War of Mine*, developed out of the designer's desires for the player to experience the wretchedness of living in a war-torn place, is another one of such games which includes twelve different characters in groups of three that the player is responsible for keeping alive until the end of the war. There are six different endings for each of game's twelve characters, once again offering an expansive view of life as civilians in war.

These games allow a space for a fuller story through the compilation of all those different branching narratives. Each timeline comes to define not only that version of the game, but something of a bigger force and the story of the game in its entirety. All the different timelines added together, put on top of each other, create a palimpsestic entity were the rewrite of this version only exists in the context of the previous versions. The previous losses, character developments, plot changes, twists, and growths, all come to make up something of the story as a whole; its complexities, its randomness; its chaos and predictability which are at the centre of life itself. The whole becomes more fully into view with each re-write, whether those are themes around violence, belonging, love and loss, or the meaning of life. Each re-write is another addition to what the game is and in this process the game become a living entity that continue to grow and change through each repetition by the player and simultaneously change the player along with it.

Multiplicities within a story create a greater fidelity to the truth. Through variations, different voices are captured, signaling a diversity and multitude of sensations to be felt and

worked through. This space of play and possibilities in multitudes is mitigated through a ‘fail and repeat’ procedure that underlies all videogames. The desire to win a game is about the desire to overcome failure. The frustration that comes out of failure in a videogame is also accompanied by pleasant sensations of efforts for overcoming a challenge (Gee, 2007).

Failure & Repetition

Playing a game is grounded in process of ‘solving something’ (Reid & Downing, 2018). Jesper Juul (2013), in his book *The Art of Failure*, argues that there is a paradox of failure in videogames wherein even though we generally avoid failure in our everyday lives, not only do we experience failure repeatedly in playing videogames, but we also seek out games that challenge us and allow us to fail. In the space of videogames, failing is not considered to have as distressing affects as failing in other aspects of life might have, such as preventing a friend from achieving their goals might end the friendship whereas preventing a friend in the game from achieving their goals is considered part of the process of play (Juul, 2013). As numerous theorists and gamers argue, players generally do not gravitate towards games that they can win in their first round of play (Gee, 2007; Wark, 2007). There must be a balance between a ‘not too easy’ and a ‘not too hard’ game in terms of achieving the goals of the game and in this “failure is integral to the enjoyment of game playing in a way that it is not integral to the enjoyment of learning in general” (Juul, 2013, p. 45).

This process itself makes a very specific space of learning in playing, where although the player might and does in fact get frustrated by ‘losing’ or failing, failing becomes a necessity of the game as the player enjoys the process of overcoming that failure and the challenges that the failure represents. Juul (2013) further posits that the process of failure and repetition in the game

and the intensity at which it happens, allows the player to *feel* the process of escaping failure, overcoming challenges, improving inadequacies and repairing them.

In this sense, failure in games carries with it something positive (Juul, 2013), as every player knows that this failure is temporary since the player constantly seeks to improve upon her previous actions and strategies in order to reach the goals of the game. “Whereas success can make us complacent that we have understood the system we are manipulating, failure gives [us] the opportunity to consider why we failed” (Juul, 2013, p. 59). In order to win, or to beat the game, the player focuses much more on how she can improve her skills and strategies, thus shifting the attention from failure to success. This focus on failure is accompanied by the immense desire to overcome the failure and the challenge.

But failure is not the only reason a player repeats the game. It is true that sometimes the player repeats to improve her highest scores, sometimes she repeats to beat the game, and sometimes she repeats to experience a different branch of the story within the game, or simply she repeats the game because it is a fun play. In videogame play, the player is allowed ‘do-over’ and repeat in order to experiment with different results and transform accordingly; the player is given the opportunity to re-do and in re-doing feel what is often unavailable to feel otherwise. In games, we repeat to correct, to improve, and to repair.

In his earlier work, *Half-Real*, Juul (2005) argued that when games become less abstract they do two things simultaneously: they create rules of the system/the game that the player interacts with *and* they create fictional worlds, stories, and rules of that world that the players must interact with. Through this process the player switches back and forth between the rules of the game, such as having to choose a path for Nour, and the events that are part of the game-world, such as Nour and Majd getting into arguments over money. Juul (2013) argues that this

creates two different types of failure: real versus fictional failure. “Real failure” is when the player cannot reach the end goal of the game and “fictional failure” is “what befalls the character(s) in the fictional game world” (p. 25). The player might fail in the fictional world of the game, through the avatar, while simultaneously being able to ‘win’ or ‘beat’ the game.

I re-do *BMML*, again and again not only to see if I can get Nour to safety – which is the first goal of the game and the one that I come to fail again and again –, but more still in the attempts to work through the failures of the relationship between Majd and Nour. I repeat because the sensation of failure is of that of a failed relationship in the fictional world of the game. I repeat in order to repair a marriage that deteriorates and dissolves in some endings of the game, after 5 years of war and 20 days of journey towards freedom. The need to fix the previous mistake of a character in a game is a common sensation among gamers. Consider the following for *BMML*:

As Majd, I quickly come to understand my own powerlessness. Nour cannot be compelled to do just what I want. She often finds my well-meaning attempts to offer guidance to be useless. Majd is jealous of the men Nour meets on her journey, and finds it difficult to process his own mistrust. He is clever in some ways, and grossly ignorant in others. At one point, Nour scolds him, after he warns her not to trust Africans because “they are thieves.”(Campbell, 2017)

Although this is a great insight to how Majd feels in the game, I assert that it is not only Majd who gets jealous of the men Nour meets; it is both Majd *and* the player. I found myself not only being fully jealous but rather worrying about what type of men Nour meets on her way. I was worried whether she might find someone better which will result to the end of the relationship. I was worried that if one of the men on her path might assault her (which becomes evident the more versions of the game the player engages in). In this sense it is not only Majd that reacts in this way, rather it is both Majd and I (the player). I will come back to the analysis of the entity which is the player *plus* the avatar in the next chapter. But for now I want to

highlight that the connections made between the player and the avatar result in a greater connection and understanding of this non-organic being that is merely codes of a game, captured out of the reality of Syrian refugees. Although these stories are captured out of the material reality of what happens and is happening to refugees, it is because of the connection and the relation that are made between the game and the gamer that Majd *feels* real. The sensations that are evoked through the process of play are sensations of jealousy, worry, misogyny, control and lack of it, love, fear, and grief. And Majd fails his wife again and again.

This particular type of failure written for the characters in a game creates a space to process feelings of jealousy, uncertainty, and desperate attempts to control a situation. It opens up a space to feel the fragility of a human relationship, where a loving husband and wife separate in the attempt to stay alive and the very process to stay alive, kills their marriage. I re-play and re-do this brutal game because I want to ensure that their relationship survives and even if nothing else is achieved in the game other than Majd and Nour staying together, I feel a sense of triumph that I was able to ‘save’ something. I want to ‘correct’ my mistakes, communicate better and more honestly, I want to ‘change’ some of the things I have said in the previous gameplays in order to do better by her.

In the transitional space of play that, as Winnicott would argue, *BMML* creates, the player does not merely play the game out of the curiosity to know more about the game, rather she plays as a way of knowing herself through her reactions in the different scenarios of the game. Winnicott (2010) claimed that the transitional space of play is ultimately the space that creativity and cultural experiences are located. It is important to note that for Winnicott (2010), the transitional space was a highly variable factor, changing between individuals because the

transitional space is influenced by the environment of the child, a theme that I will return to in chapter six.

The transitional space is a space of both discovery and creativity. The player co-creates a story from the actions taken within the game. In the transitional space of videogames, there is not only discovery of the self, but a continual discovery that is supported through the functions of the game. In the transitional space of SPGs, the player discovers parts of herself and her own complexities that she might not have discovered if not for the processes and the repetition of the gameplay.

Through repetition and only through repetition, the player gains a clearer vision of the refugee crisis as each story writes itself on top of the previous version. The deterioration of mental health, the lack of trust, the constant fear and trauma and the crimes that people commit in order to survive are understood on a deeper level because of this repetitive act. The process of seeking survival brings an end to something of life because the road to survival is filled with nightmarish trials of walking for days; seeing children suffocate on the rafts where there are too many people; seeing children collapse on the side of the road; being groped by men; being assaulted by men in the refugee camps; being beaten by the police; being starved in prison; having one's money stolen; being spit on; being refused to be served for food, hotels, or a bus ticket regardless of having money to pay for them; and having one's grasp on reality being tested over and over again through lack of trust with individuals and other people around to the point that the lines between right and wrong are blurred. I do not play to win, I play to repair.

In fact, some games are not supposed to be "won", rather they are supposed to be experienced. Ian Bogost (2010) named this a procedural rhetoric of failure, that the game creates a space whereby denying the player a clear "victory" in fact sheds light on the political reality of

the situation. This failure within a fictional realm creates a greater connection between the player and the avatar because it makes the player feel responsible for the actions that have taken place in the game. “Failure forces us to reconsider what we are doing, to learn. Failure connects us personally to the events in the game; it proves that *we matter*, that the world does not simply continue regardless of our actions” (Juul, 2013, p. 122). The experience of failing in the game is different than witnessing someone else fail in a story (Juul, 2013). The experience of failure in gaming involves witnessing part of one’s self fail in the process of play. Our failures can direct us towards new ways of thinking, strategizing, and understanding moral, social and political issues and the space of videogames allows us to rewrite failure in order to co-create a better story.

Although *BMML* has received many positive reviews and numerous awards nominations, a common critique of this game and other games similar to it, such as *1000 Days*, is that it trivializes the plight of the oppressed, in this case refugees, portraying the path towards freedom as a fun adventure rather than a brutal fight to stay alive. However upon a closer examination of how many hours such reviewers played the game, as it appears on Steam – the gaming platform that offers *BMML* – it becomes evident that the majority of negative reviewers do not engage with the game repeatedly. This lack of engagement with the game is something that many game theorists lament about, that in popular culture many videogame critics do not engage with the games they are critiquing for a meaningful amount of time and thus do not experience the full range of emotions, feelings and affects of the gameplay. In contrast, when we examine the reviews of those players who have spent upward of even three hours in the game, we see overwhelmingly positive reviews about the affects and sensations that are captured and made

visible through repetitive play of the game. This signals the importance of repetition in videogames but particularly in videogames with branching storylines.

In *BMML* the player and Majd (the husband) together and separately have something in common and that is that neither of them is on that treacherous road towards freedom. Although Majd and I make decisions throughout the game and our decisions and actions move the game along, we both act upon the game and also are spectators of the game and within the game. We occupy a space of both control and lack of control since everything that is happening is happening to Nour, and we must watch and witness the pain that she suffers. This story is a two-sided story of Nour's journey and also that of a journey being told through the agonies of Majd, having to wait and sit for the next messages to arrive. The game brilliantly captures the maddening sensations of not being able to comfort a loved one, not being able to do something in real life, not being able to get in touch, not knowing when and if the next messages arrive, and the inability to do anything other than wait and watch/read/listen with horror about what is happening. In fact, Maurin in his game captures the horrors of having to wait in the face of terrifying and often life-shattering uncertainty. In such SPGs we come to connect with something of the pain of others no matter how temporary that simulation maybe.

The creators of such SPGs repeatedly write that their impetus for creating such games is to bring to light something of life, its chaos and complexities. Mitch Swenson, the creator of *1000 Days*, asserted that his intention in creating the game was "neither to entertain the players with, nor benefit from the deaths that have resulted from the instability in Syria" (Swenson, 2014). Rather, it was his hope to proffer a world through gaming where the sensations that are not available to the player, be felt and their impacts understood on and through the body. Florent Maurin wrote that the story of *BMML* is about thousands of people who flee or watch their

relatives flee in the hopes of finding a better life in Europe, “it is about those who achieve that goal. It is about those who don’t. It is about those who die trying. It is about the world around us. Something which we hope will lead you to keep pondering on after it is over” (Byrd, 2019). In his interviews, Maurin repeatedly speaks of the desire and the need to bring to light the stories of the people on the fringes of life and then allow a player to feel something of those issues in ways that no other form of aesthetic creation can achieve. In this sense all those creators speak of the need to capture what has affected them in the artform that they are familiar with, in order to process the intensities that have impacted them, to make *something* of those intensities visible so that others may come to connect and relate to them.

Why do we play, even when it is so hard?

Winnicott (2010) posited that playing is perhaps the only time and space that the child or the adult is free to create, and since in creativity the individual uses “the whole personality” creativity involves the discovery of the self (pp. 71-73). In playing we come to understand ourselves and find ways to examine life and its meaning. This is especially true when the game employs a branching storyline and forces the player to engage with this fundamental question: Now that you have a chance to do it again, what will you choose? What repercussions will inevitably follow that decision and what feelings and sensations will emerge out of those repercussions? For example, would you choose to work in the underground ammunition factory or would you choose to smuggle gas again? (*1000 Days of Syria*); Would you steal the elderly woman’s medication, knowing now that if you don’t your close friend will die which will set your small group of survivors on a path towards depression and suicide? (*This War of Mine*); Do you accept the woman’s visa application to enter your country, even though she has improper documentation, knowing now that if you don’t what awaits her is a life of sexual slavery? (*Papers, Please!*); Do you collaborate with your prison guard to save your brother’s life and

effectively give up the names of your friends? (*1979*); and ultimately even if you change your choices throughout the game can you change the ending? What stories are being told about life itself with all of its complexities if the ending cannot be changed no matter how much you try?

The goal is this: to experience something of that specific story, that journey, that life in a way that it would not be possible otherwise. Videogame playing is a type of play and playing and learning and transformation are co-constitutive (de Castell & Jenson, 2003). Sensations and forces that escape the game and merge with those of the player transform both the bodies of the player and that of the game. These games are a brilliant manifestation of an affective voice and an affective writing that as Melissa Greg (2006) posits: “speak directly – from the heart and the head – in response to something felt” (p.22). They refuse a detached analysis because here felt knowledge production and its potentials are the goal.

The aim of such play is not to “win” the game, but rather to “experience” the game. It is to bear witness and become an actor in the decisions of the game in order to further relate and connect with the wretched sensations of not having much control over the traumatic events and *how* to exercise the very little control that one has. Videogames reveal those parts of us, our own complex personhood and the complexities of others and our relations. The jailer in *1979* who tortures the Reza/the player has been tortured himself in another time in the same space under a different regime; Majd in *BMML* wants to both protect his wife and control her actions, Katia in *This War of Mine* struggles with not wanting steal the medicine of an elderly couple and wanting to save her friend’s life. These games make the affective capacities of a particular time and space more palpable. They make visible to us the complexities of human lives and how we as the players might act when we are faced with such dilemmas.

In the space of play, whether that play is between a child and her wooden locomotives, between two or more children, between actors on the stage, between a painter and her canvas, or between a player and a videogame, we create, we do, we become. Play provides the space where we can sense and work through sensations that have impacted our bodies, discover different parts of ourselves and by extension others. In playing we move and in movement we grow, create and become. In playing, we come to tell stories about ourselves and the environment that that self is in. We tell stories, we revise them, change them, play with various endings of the same stories, and try them on for size and see how each version feels. In playing, which necessarily involves the creation of something, we come to know and understand parts of ourselves that may have otherwise been unavailable. Learning and change happen in tandem with having fun and satisfying the senses. Sensations of enjoyment, fun and excitement, fear and failure are parts of playing. It is important and better still to learn while having “fun” than to not learn at all.

Chapter 4: The Augmented Body: The Player+avatar Assemblage

When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other? – Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*

Recall the last game you played. At any age, any time, any theme. With or without props and scenery, with or without machinery or electronics. What thresholds were crossed? What boundaries were marked out? How was the energy generated by the game disseminated, what were the power distributions at the end of the session? What part(s) of your body— organ, bone, skin, muscle – ached from the repetition of activity at the end of your play session?” – Felicity Colman, *Affective Game Topologies*

My name is Martin Walker, a Capitan in the US military in charge of a three-person squad comprised of Sergeant Lugo and Lieutenant Adams. We were ordered to come to Dubai, assess the situation, look for survivors and if we found any to call for backup.

Colonel John Konrad, with whom I served in Afghanistan, volunteered his soldiers to help evacuate Dubai after an unprecedented sandstorm hits the city. Things got bad, he was ordered to leave, but he defied his orders in order to help civilians. For six months he was not heard from until two weeks ago in a broken radio signal which he said his mission to help civilians failed and far too many people died. Although I have completed my orders, something doesn't feel right, I defy my orders to return and take my squad on a reconnaissance mission in Dubai to find more information on Konrad. After all, he was my hero, we served together in Afghanistan...

...for some time now, we have been following clues into Konrad's whereabouts and have had to kill many enemy soldiers on our path towards the truth...And now we have confiscated a helicopter and are flying over Dubai and attacking enemy helicopters that are following us. Who are these people? I don't know. I want to get to the bottom of this, I want to know what happened to Konrad and I am killing everyone in my path to find him. I point my cabin-door mounted machine-gun and one by one I start destroying the choppers following us. I, as a the player, have become good at this. My skills at handling the machine guns and bringing down enemies have improved greatly, but this is not the only reason that my techniques have improved. In fact, this is not the first time that this particular helicopter turret sequence takes place in the game. The game begins with this very same sequence of attacks. At that point in the game, very similar to now, I am in charge of shooting down the enemy choppers who are following and shooting at my squad. In that sequence, I shoot down helicopters one after another, until one loses control, collides with the helicopter I am in and the screen turns black. The next screen reads: "Two weeks earlier", which becomes the temporal setting for the game as it is now.

I, as the player, know that I have been playing a non-linear game, and the story will come to reveal itself piece by piece, but there is something odd about what is happening now. This is the *exact* sequence of events at the beginning of the game. As

though the game reads my mind, Walker yells out “wait...wait, this isn’t right”, not understanding Walker/me fully, Lugo yells back “well it’s too late now”. Walker/I repeat “nah..nah..I mean we did this already”, Lugo more confused asks “what?” and Walker/I respond with “Uh fuck it, it’s nothing just shake these fucking guys” and we begin shooting down the helicopters one by one. *We have done this before*. Who is this “we”? Walker and his team? Walker and I? The game and I? The American Army? *We have done this before?*



Figure 5 *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012)

This is *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), a brilliant and a formidable game about the ravages of war on the minds of soldiers fighting in it. Although the game begins seemingly like many other blockbuster games about American soldiers fighting in the Middle East, it exposes the havoc of war and its consequences on the souls of the soldiers. The game, only as it slowly comes into view, is a descent into the maddening mind of Capitan Walker, where the lines between reality in the game-world and that of a PTSD-driven soldier blur and the realities leak into one another, changing one’s perception and forcing the player to question what is ‘real’. As the player moves further along the game, bizarre and terrifying images and events begin taking place: graffiti of children with their eyes etched out or of a twisted body of a man shot in the head appearing on

walls only after Walker shoots an enemy soldier in the head; manikins come to life and begin attacking the player (an action that although very normal in a fantastical realm of a game, is completely out of place for this particular context since this is not supposed to be a fantastical or magical game-world). This is what has remained of Dubai, or it is *supposed* to be, and more terrifyingly still hung bodies begin to appear throughout the city only to disappear at times when the player changes Walker's perspective in the game. A space of a game that I had entered to play, as a soldier in a war, is not the space that it appears to be. Walker *and* I are not in Dubai, but in Walker's mind, a guilt-ravaged soldier who became a mindless shooter back when he was alive.

In chapter 3, I posited that Winnicott's formulation of the transitional space and his conceptualization of play provide us with a greater understanding of the middle space in which playing, and by extension videogame play, happens. This third space which resides at the intersection between our material reality, the digital realm, and our inner/psychic reality, is filled with potentialities of experimentation, working through sensations and intensities that might have otherwise remained inaccessible, and fermenting a felt knowledge production.

One of the functions of this middle space of play is the blurring of the boundaries of the self. As Felicity Coleman (2011) argues: this space "turns the body of the game player into a bundle of perceptual possibilities, a site where a range of affective relations can be generated from the singular activities of play" (p. 1). The transitional space of play becomes more visible through a videogame play and with that we see ourselves act, move and do. This process of 'me-seeing-myself-act' and then feeling the implications of those actions allow us momentary transcendence of the self. This space of play repeatedly creates physical knowledge (Coleman, 2011). We continuously change, become, grow, and morph into other beings and things. Space

and time transform themselves along with the player and in relation to the player, who is no longer simply the individual prior to picking up the controller.

In this chapter, my aim is to illustrate that the way in which we arrive in this transitional, middle space of videogame play is through the augmentation of the body which come to makes up the player+avatar assemblage. The entire process of the assemblage of the player+avatar is predicated on the augmentation of the player through the coming together of the player and both the physical apparatus of the game – the platform, the console, the controller, the monitor, etc. – and the virtual contents of the game – the codes and the procedures of the game. This process often results in transcendence of the self as we know it, and with it a great capacity for empathy, compassion, and understanding other bodies and beings. The continuous *becoming* of this player+avatar being makes up another foundational pillar of the space of play and provides enormous potential in forming new relationalities and connections. Socio-political games tap into this affective potential of becoming to allow the gamer to *feel* ethical quandaries and be *moved to act* on them.

This chapter is divided in to several sections, wherein I first explore the concept of the ‘extended self’ and the ways in which this idea has informed the understanding of videogames in the ‘cybernetic fold’. I will then examine the ways in which this ‘extended self’ is verbalized through the use of first-person accounts of videogame play. My argument here is to demonstrate how the very language that gamers use to describe a gameplay points to the blurred boundaries of bodies and the processes of augmentation. In the section following, I use Donna Haraway’s concept of Cyborg as an entry point into understanding the augmented player. I will then draw on the Deleuzian formulation of an assemblage, the body’s opening up, its de- and re-territorialization, and its perpetual becoming. I posit that one of the reasons behind the enormous

success of videogames as a cultural medium, and more specifically the incredible potential of SPGs, lies in the ability of the player to de-territorialize and re-territorialize all the while allowing the player to witness the changes *and* feel. The player becomes un-formed and re-formed and witnesses this re-formation. In the unique space of videogame play, the player comes to view herself outside of herself and sense what only becomes available to sense through augmentation of that self. In my analysis, I will specifically focus on *BMML* and *1000 Days* as an extensive case study of de-territorialization and its potentials.

The extended self

Videogames move us. Our bodies are moved both metaphorically, through the procedures, the strategies and the questions that the game brings to light, and also literally. We yelp, scream, laugh, we contort our bodies, duck, sit up, stand up, hunch down and bend. As I wrote in the previous chapters, numerous game theorists have written about concepts of “liveness”, “immersion”, “flow”, “agency”, and ‘experiences of intense focus and achievement’ in the games (Clavert, 2005; Coleman, 2011; Jenkins, 2005; Tavinor, 2009; Turkle, 2005) in an attempt to theorize and answer such questions as: what happens to the player *and* between the player and the game in the process of gameplay? How do videogames move the body of the player? What happens to the player in that space? How do we as the player lose the sense of time and space while playing? How do we relate to the characters on the screen?

The extended mind theory of David Hume, in which the mind is a combination of the brain and the body and the external environment, has been a central thesis for many contemporary philosophers writing on post-humanist understanding of the self (Owen, 2017). Drawing on works of Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Gilles Deleuze, all of whom were influenced by this philosophy, Susan Buck-Morss (1992) argues there is a “synaesthetic system”

of sense and motor perception which begins and ends in the world and because “the nervous system is not contained within the body’s limits” (pp. 227-8). Just like there exists a ‘discontinuous continuity’ among the neurons in the body, Buck-Morss (1992) posits that there is a similar discontinuous continuity between our senses and the external world which draws out our senses. Our nervous system’s interaction with our environment extends our sense of self beyond the limits of our bodies through the constant and continuous interactions we have with other bodies and beings through our relations. This claim of the ‘extended self’ and ‘the extended consciousness’, has been utilized by game theorists and philosophers such as Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (2009) who argue that videogames provide us with the space to practice extending the self and thus ‘losing’ oneself in time and space.

Felicity Colman (2008) theorizes that the space of videogame play creates “multiple ecologies of being” wherein the space allows for a “reflexive play consciousness to develop, wherein the player can see themselves playing, through becoming aware of their movements, and the limitations of movement within game engine” (p. 7). We, without conscious efforts and without much conscious knowledge of it, at times align our bodies to that of the avatar on the screen. Our actions move the characters forward in the game and the characters of the game move the us in return. The forces and the sensations that are captured by the videogame and their impacts on and with the body of the player *demand* a response and those responses are often corporeal. A cybernetic system, which is a “self-regulating” system and is “set up by a stimulus and response through continuous feedback” (Wiener cited in Owen, 2017, p. 76), is created through the process of gameplay.

Brian Massumi (2002) uses the concept of proprioception to describe the phenomenon of the extended self and the affective capacities of bodies resulting from this process.

Proprioception is “the way the body processes subtle sensory information from the environment to track its position and movement through space” (Anable, 2018, p. 44). Simply put, proprioception is the sensation of knowing where the borders of the body are. Where does one’s body end and the external environment begin? For example, we can often observe this sensation while driving a car. Driving a vehicle extends the sense of self, since cognitively our sense of our body now extends to include the body of the car, we are able to avoid hitting anything with our cars (Owen, 2017).

“The muscles and ligaments register as conditions of movement what the skin internalizes as qualities...[and] translates the exertions and ease of the body’s encounters with objects into a muscular memory of relationality. This is a cumulative memory of skill, habit, posture” (Massumi, 2002, p. 59). It does two things simultaneously, it folds tactility in and draws out the subject’s reaction to the qualities of the object it perceives through all the senses and brings them into the motor response to what is felt (Massumi, 2002). It registers in and on the body as sensations based in the relationship between an environmental stimuli and a reaction that it draws out from that body. Massumi (2002) offers an example of a soccer player on the field and her/his relation to the ball in order to further illustrate the concept of the extended self and becoming an assemblage of part-subject-part-object through play.

Using the example of players on the soccer field, Massumi (2002) challenges the idea that the soccer player is the subject of the game. He posits that in fact it is the ball that is the subject of the play because it is the ball that moves the players on the field (Massumi, 2002). “*The player is the object of the ball.* True, the player kicks the ball. But the ball must be considered in some way an autonomous actor because the global game-effects its displacements produce can be produced by no other game elements” (Massumi, 2002, p. 73). Through their

relationality on the soccer field, the ball becomes part-subject and the player becomes part-object (Massumi, 2002). “The ball does not address the player as a whole. It addresses the player’s eyes, ears, and touch through separate sensory channels” (Massumi, 2002, p. 74). The “kick” from the player, Massumi (2002) argues, is an “ex-pression” of the ball, since it is the ball that draws out the movement of “kicking” from the body of the player:

The players, in the heat of the game, are drawn out of themselves. Any player who is conscious of himself as he kicks, misses. Self-consciousness is a negative condition of the play” and when a player kicks the ball, she doesn’t look at the ball, rather “*she is looking past it*” which involves an “instantaneous calculation of the positions of all the players of the field *in relation to each other* and in relation to the ball and both goals (Massumi, 2002, p. 74)

Drawing from this example, David Owen (2017) argues that videogames tap into the significant potentials of proprioception to extend the body of the gamer to include that of the avatar, thus producing kinesthetic empathy as a result of this connection. Even if we do not see the avatar on the screen, such as in FPS (first-person shooters) or games such as *BMML* or *1000 Days* where one does not see the avatar, the properties of proprioception allow and in fact encourage the player to feel and sense beyond themselves. Through the feedback loop existing between the player in the material world and the avatar in the virtual world, the player gains the ability to identify with the avatar “as in *that is me*” (Owen, 2017, p. 76). This identification of ‘oh that’s me’ allows the player to perform the game but also witness herself performing the game. A sensory understanding, a felt knowledge, is produced through a suture that happens between the player and the avatar.

This mode of formulating the self as an extension of networks and connections that extend beyond the surfaces of our skin allows for a better understanding of the body as a collection of relations. From this position the reason we align our movements with that of the avatar on the screen, thus connecting with their emotional and affective states and responses, is because through the game a synesthetic system is brought to life. We as players are extended beyond what we would normally consider the boundaries of ourselves. We expand, extend, grow, and *become more* through play. The cybernetic connection created out of the feedback loop between the game and the player contributes to shaping and changing the player, including her beliefs and perspectives. Owen (2017) argues that there is a hybrid existence that defines the player. This hybridity is marked by the linkages made between the player and the avatar. Nowhere is this hybridity and co-existence more evident than in the player's narration of the game.

Blurred boundaries and first-person narration

Fumita Ueda's two masterpieces – *Ico and Shadow of the Colossus* – are strikingly beautiful. Their haunting, bleak landscapes instill a desperate sense of solitude... There's a section in the game when Yorda is torn from your grasp and you are sent tumbling out of her reach. For the first time in a few hours of playing, Yorda isn't there. Little Ico is standing on a long water pipe, rain hammering down on the rusted metal, dark sea thrashing below him as far as the eye can see. Never, in any form of entertainment or art, have *I felt so alone* – Tom Hoggins, *The Telegraph*

Videogames are the only cultural medium in which the person engaging with the work, here the player, uses a first person account of not just their experiences *of* the game, but also what happened *in* the game. In no other cultural and aesthetic medium are the connection and the identification with the characters on the screen so great, so intense and immersive, that the audience of that art form narrates what happens in that space and to the characters in first-person accounts. A summary of a book or an explanation of a movie is always done in the third-person

account through retelling what the characters on the page or the screen did. Unlike a movie, a piece of music, a painting or a book, in videogames nothing happens without the player's cooperation *with* and *in* the game. It is the player's actions that move the game forward. "The avatar is meaningless without the player and the player's experience of the game world is achievable only through the avatar" (Owen, 2017, p. 76). It is the player's active participation that co-authors the story and the very movements and the direction of the game. Different cultural and aesthetic creations have the ability to 'move' us and they have done so historically, my argument here is that videogames are the only form of cultural creation in which we speak of the game in first-person narration, or second-person narration as we come to see shortly in *1000 Days* and in numerous reviewers' discussion of games¹⁰. The active participation of the player in the game creates a sense of agency over the direction and movement of the play, and because of that the narration is an account of the game is: "I did"!

Gamers almost always describe the processes of gameplay in such sentences: "I climbed over the wall, spoke to a man and exchanged my backpack for a hand gun"; "I moved the boulder out of the way to help you get to the higher grounds"; "I killed"; "I healed"; and "I

¹⁰ I do not consider any reader of a book, or the audience member who watches a play or listens to a symphony as a passive spectator. In fact, engaging with a film, a painting, or a book requires an active participation of the viewer and the reader. This participation can be so strong that there can be a collective power of spectatorship that happens in the theatre forming a community – for more on this see Jacques Ranciere's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011). Or as Roland Barthes argued, a book is open to such vast interpretations by its readership that effectively the author dies through the process of creating and then releasing the book. Barthes wrote that readers as opposed to the writer give meaning to the texts they read and thus the "author 'dies' in giving birth to the text, which becomes independent of the author in being read" (Barthes qtd in Brown, 2008, p. 10). This 'death' allows the reader to interpret the text without any reference to the author and therefore multiplies its meaning (Brown, 2008). All these point to an active participation of the audience with the aesthetic work before them. The audience's interpretations, their understanding and engagement differ depending on the experiences and the affective capacities that those bodies bring with them to the art. Moreover, videogames are not the only realm where we can experience the opening up of the body. This opening up of the body, as I will explain shortly in this chapter, is a function of becoming. We can witness this blurring of the boundaries between the material and the virtual in other cultural mediums. What is important in my analysis of videogames is that the opening up of the body, its co-constitution with other bodies and forces that come to make up the gamer-avatar assemblage are much more visible and palpable in the space of videogame play where we act and watch ourselves act simultaneously. In this sense, videogames provide us with a space that we can *feel* our continued becoming and react to that transformation.

died”. In fact, “I died” is perhaps the most common first-person utterance of a game, since every game includes techniques that challenge the player’s skills and actions just enough so that the player loses repeatedly before overcoming those challenges and winning the game. Players can often exclaim expressions of getting hurt, such as “ouch”, “ow”, etc, when their avatar gets hit. My recounting of *BMML*, or any other game, has this unique quality where I insert myself in the recounting of the story because I was part of that story. Many other gamers narrate the games they play in this fashion.

Let’s consider these reviews of *BMML*:

“*I* failed in the first play after more than 1 hour of playing ... Nour was arrested and sent *me* a very bad recording, forgive *me* :((*sic*). I will use my butterfly effect ability to correct the mistake. Please wait for *me*, Nour !” (littl3ird [*sic*], 2019, emphasis added).

I learn to trust my wife’s intuition, stepping back when she decides to take an awful risk, or when she puts her trust in unknowable middlemen. This means *I* don’t have the videogamey power to scorch obstacles. But *I* do begin to understand her life, and what it feels like to be tossed on the waves of misfortune (Campbell, 2017, emphasis added).

Some of the things Nour experiences on her journey are incredibly upsetting, and knowing that these are things which happened to real people makes it all the worse. Seriously, unless you have a strong stomach, you might want to get [*sic*] this a miss. *I* don't ever want to hear a woman sobbing "I love you" down the phone to *me* as her ship capsizes ever again (Cowley, 2019, emphasis added).

In these narrations of the game, we can observe the blurring of the boundaries between these players and the avatar, where “I” is used to describe both the corporeal player and also the avatar of Majd during the gameplay. The player is injected into the story of the game. There is a together-ness of the player and the avatar. They are connected, related, each expanding the other, and through that the player feels the sensations that emerge out of the game and the avatar. Feeling those sensations and then moving, through responding to those sensations, connect the player and the avatar creating a relationship between the two.

Owen (2017) argues that one of the reasons for this connectedness is that the player takes a dual role of both being the protagonist of the story while also maintaining a spectatorship of the game. One of the main differences between videogames as a cultural medium and theatre or cinema is that in videogames the player watches herself act through her extended self projected onto the screen. Owen (2017) writes that in videogames the player (audience) is not simply encouraged to empathize with the protagonists but she is encouraged to *be* the protagonist. In videogames the player is cast as an actor within the fictional world of the game and the feelings that come with being the protagonist “in the fiction can leave a very deep impression on the player” (Owen, 2017, p. 27). The player, by being aware that her input will make meaningful decisions in the game, both witnesses and experiences a unique form of agency (Owen, 2017).

To be the protagonist involves a *becoming*. This *becoming* opens up the body; it challenges the existing territories of the body in order to de-form and re-form the body. It brings different bodies, their forces and affective attunements together to create new entities and beings. What I want to argue for the rest of this chapter is that, although the concept of ‘becoming the avatar’ is commonly used to describe the process of videogame play, we do not fully become that avatar. Rather we become an assemblage that includes the player, the avatar, the game, the gaming platform *and* their relations. For example, in *BMML*, as I will demonstrate shortly, I as the player do not become Majd, a husband of a Syrian refugee. I become something new: Sara+Majd. I become an augmented version of myself and for those specific moments in time and space, that entity of Sara+Majd gets to experience sensations and feelings that would only be available to feel through this augmentation and through the relationship the ‘parts’ create with one another and with the ‘whole’. These relations between the parts are compounded and augmented through the multiplicity of stories; these relations are at times strengthened, at times

weakened, at times understood differently all the while creating different modes of connection through the reformation of the player+avatar through repetition.

Augmentation: A cyborg existence

In her famous *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway (1985) argued that a cyborg is a hybrid creature of machine and organism. Owen (2017), drawing on the influential work of Donna Haraway, writes that “the cyborg is an entity that is part human and part machine, some of each but not wholly one or the other” (p. 79). The player+avatar entity is a cyborg existence, comprising not only of the body of the player and the physical and the digital platforms of the game, but also of the relationship between these parts which is created through a continuous feedback loop between the game and the player. Owen (2017) asserts that gamers are hybrid creatures, cyborgs, composed of both corporeal and virtual experiences and [are] greater than the sum of [the] parts” (p. 28). In videogame play, the corporeal remains in the material world, while the thinking/feeling parts of the player are extended into the game world and on the virtual body of the avatar (Owen, 2017). In this sense, “the computer/console/smartphone serves the same purpose as the implant but is a tool external to the body and how the tool changes the player’s view of reality, virtual or otherwise, makes her a cyborg” (Owen, 2017, p. 200).

It is important to pause here to note that if a definition of a cyborg is a coming together of both organic and inorganic matters as Haraway (1991) wrote, then humans have been cyborg beings for tens of thousands of years since we have used various tools to hunt, build, farm, and create art. Hybridity and augmentation do not solely belong to the gamer. However, we come to see ourselves as cyborgs so much more clearly in the context of play and especially in videogames, because of that duality of both being the performer and the audience of that very same performance. Our ‘cyborg-ness’ is much more palpable and the augmentation of ourselves

and the blurred boundaries of our bodies much more visible in videogame play. In this process a new being is created through of all its parts *and their relations*; this is a temporary being that will only exist in that version of the game. Through the interaction between the player and the game, through their relation “the player is no longer simply the subject within the unfolding narrative and the avatar is no longer simply an object to be manipulated within the virtual environment” (Owen, 2017, p. 76). The cybernetic augmentation of the player allows her to do, then to witness and feel the consequence of her actions.

Going back to the example of *BMML*, the player along with the game and the platform that the game is played on come to make up an entity which is made up of these ‘parts’ and their ‘relations’ with each other. These parts of both organic flesh and non-organic bodies coming together and through their co-constitution then transport the player to a different space, where she can play both as Majd and with Majd. Although players and theorists often use phrases such as ‘becoming the avatar’, or ‘playing *as* a character’, this ‘becoming’ is always co-constitutional. The player does not become the avatar as much as they *become* together. This *becoming* belongs to both the player and the avatar in their continual becoming of the player+avatar assemblage.

The player+avatar assemblage

In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze & Guattari (2009) wrote that an assemblage is an entity made up of multiplicities coming together through liaisons and relations between the part. Assemblages are aggregates of elements that are not necessarily unified or stable or self-identical entities, but are functional and also function together (Currier, 2003). They are “the provisional linkages of elements, fragments, flow, of disparate status and substance: ideas, things-human, animate and inanimate – all have the same ontological status” (Grosz, 1994, p. 167). In each assemblage “the particles, intensities, forces and flows of

components meet with and link with the forces and flows of the other components: the resultant distribution of these meetings constitutes the assemblage” (Currier, 2003, p. 325). Assemblages are structured and structuring, they have a logical operation, they are subject to forces of change and “assemblages explain the existence of things in the world” (Buchanan, 2017, p. 463).

Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, Manuel DeLanda (2016) explains that an assemblage have two specific qualities: 1) they are comprised of the action and the processes of fitting together a set of components and 2) the result of this process or action creates an ensemble of parts that fit well together. As various theorists who are influenced by Deleuze argue the translation of this word often misses capturing the full extent and the meaning of the French word: *agencement* (Buchanan, 2017; DeLanda, 2016; Sauvagnargues, 2013). The English word assemblage is often used to refer to the parts coming together to assemble the whole. This only captures the former part of that definition thus missing the part about the processes and the relations between the parts. It is important to note that an assemblage has components which come to match and fit together and create a whole and the whole will come to have properties that its components do not have, creating its own tendencies and capacities (DeLanda, 2016). These parts are not uniform in their nature or origins, but through the process of coming together they actively link up creating new relations between them (DeLanda, 2016). Every body, whether that of a human or an apple or a smartphone, is a collection of connections, “of disparate flows, materials, impulses, intensities and practices which congeal under particular and specific conditions, in complex relations with the flows and intensities of surrounding objects, to produce transitory but functional assemblages” (Currier, 2003, p. 326). An assemblage is not a unified entity rather it is discontinuous, a series of processes and relations. The concept of assemblage is about a combination of both “‘nondiscursive multiplicities’ and ‘non-discursive multiplicities’ –

the combination is not total or exhaustive, one dimension does not map onto the other without remainder, something always escapes. This is because they are dimensions of an active, ongoing process, not a static entity” (Buchanan, 2017, p. 471).

This assemblage, the *agencement*, is real “but not necessarily actual if they are not currently manifested or exercised” (DeLanda, 2016, p. 5). Deleuze (1995) named this entity that is real but not actual the *virtual*. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1995) argued that virtual is not the opposite of real, since it must be defined as part of the real object “as though the object has one part of itself in the virtual into which it is plunged as though into an objective dimension” (p. 208). *The object has one part of itself in the virtual*.

Further elaborating on Deleuze’s conceptualization, Massumi (2002) posits that participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual is affect. “Affect is *the virtual as point of view*...affects are *virtual synesthetic perspectives* anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them” (Massumi, 2002, p. 35). The virtual comes into actualization through the connections and relations that the parts make by coming together to make the whole. Thus, assemblages carry with them tendencies and a particular disposition of being virtual, which is real but not actual. (DeLanda, 2016). This virtual capacity exists when the properties of that assemblage are not being manifested or exercised yet (DeLanda, 2016). All these properties make assemblages unique historical entities as they come together to make something new, and part of the process of assemblages is that each body maintains its autonomy in relation to the whole that it created (DeLanda, 2016).

Deleuze and Guattari (2009) posited that “the Whole” is a product, produced through the summation of all its parts that neither unifies or totalizes. The ‘Whole’ has an effect on the parts because it establishes paths of communication between the parts that did not have that

communication ability without the Whole (p. 43). The Whole co-exists with all its parts and “it is contiguous to them” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009, p. 44). In this sense the whole is a product separate from the parts and also in relation to the parts that create it.

Game theorists have drawn on this Deleuzian concept to argue that the concept of assemblage offers a different point of analysis and entry into videogame theory because it offers a non-anthropocentric ontology wherein the parts and the interrelation between the parts are equally important (Joseph, 2013; Taylor, 2009). The player is a machinic assemblage, part organic part in-organic being (Cremin, 2015).

The parts that come to make ‘the Whole’ of the player+avatar: the game, the platform, the player, and their relations create an assemblage. Through the connection and relation among all the parts, such as the phone and the game, the player is able to enter a middle space of digital play. In a body, where belonging to this body is a defining character of its parts, each part cannot survive independently of its relations to the whole, but in assemblages each part maintains its autonomy so it can become undone from the whole, become part of another assemblage and create new relationality (DeLanda, 2016).

Here take the example of a smartphone and the body of the player in *BMML*. The phone maintains its autonomy and function even when it becomes part of the assemblage that makes the player. However, an assemblage is made through the processes between the phone, the game, and the body of the player *and* the coming together of these parts to create a new relationality. The relations between these parts functions as a conduit for the player+avatar body to enter a different realm. The connection between these parts, creates a co-constitution through the relations of exteriority that allows me the player to *become* something else, which includes Majd.

The core mechanics of the game is the messaging app very similar to that of Whatsapp. In the original release of the game, the game could only be played on a smartphone. These two bodies, the body of the WhatsApp-look-alike design, and the phone, create a very unique space which taps into the already existing relations between WhatsApp and a smartphone and the user. Due to the pervasiveness of messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Lifeline, Viber, Facebook Messenger and others, there already exist a familiarity of what text conversations look like because of the already established patterns of cognition and memory between the individual and her phone. There is a relationship already formed between the user of these applications, the applications themselves and the smartphone. It is a relationship based on communication abilities between real material people and the codes of the game. In *BMML*, this already existing relationship is used as a brilliant method to further blur the boundaries between the material and the virtual. The threshold and lines between the material people that one would communicate with through WhatsApp and the fictional characters of the game who send these messages are further blurred because the messages look very similar to a text message from an actual person. In *BMML* gameplay, I lose myself and forget who I am speaking with. ‘Who is texting me?’, I catch myself pondering: is it a real person or a fictional one and who am I in response to that message?

Through the game my relationship with my device changes. In the process of gameplay not only I become an assemblage and an augmentation of myself, but also the very process that makes me an assemblage changes my relationship with my device during the duration of the game. Playing the game in real time, which again was the original format of the game before it was released on Nintendo Switch, results in real-time messages that could be sent at 3 PM or 3 AM, flashing up the phone, appearing as a new message demanding attention, carrying similar

affective sensations of urgency around a text-message needing to be either read and answered, or silenced to be answered later, which carries its own sensations.

Through repetition of the gameplay and the branching storyline, my relationship and connection with both Majd and Nour is strengthened and the phone itself is affected by my becoming: The more I *become* Sara+Majd, the more my phone is no longer simply ‘my phone’, rather a phone of someone else who is getting text messages at 3 o’clock in the morning. Both me and my phone become different because the relationship between us becomes altered in those moments of the game. The assemblage of the player+avatar exists because of the relations between its parts, and in those relations and relations to the game, there is enormous opportunity for growth, for understanding and compassion. I become a part-fictional body: a part-subject, part-object assemblage that now has access to the forces and sensations that could only be felt through the change in the relations and the processes between the parts that come to make up this assemblage.

The process of assemblage formation depends on what Deleuze named: *de-territorialization*. DeLanda (2016), drawing from Deleuze defines territorialization as a “parameter measuring the degree to which the components of the assemblage have been subjected to a process of homogenization, and the extent to which its defining boundaries have been delineated and made impermeable” (p. 3). In this sense, territorialization is not only about the spatial boundaries of what comes to make the whole assemblage, but also de-territorialization and re-territorialization is the process which refers “to the degree to which an assemblage’s component parts are drawn from a homogenous repertoire” (DeLanda, 2016, p. 22). Daniel Joseph (2013) writes the process of re- and de-territorialization, stabilizes or destabilizes “the identity and homogeneity of the assemblage” (p. 96). In the process which the parameters of the

parts coming together are de- and re-formed, the body is opened up to forces and sensations otherwise unattainable. In a continuous processes of de and re- territorializing lies the body's perpetual becoming, the ability to move across relationships by forming new connections. The player+avatar body de-territorializing and re-forming anew is one of the fundamental reasons as to why gamers describe the gameplay in first-person narrative. If we return to the example of the above, the body that makes up Sara+Majd and the experiences of this body which are narrated in "I" statements, only exist through the interactions that my body, the body of the phone, the game, and others come to interact with each other. In this sense, "I died" becomes an utterance about how the player becomes and notices her becoming. *I died* and *I became* and *continued to become*. This becoming never ceases to stop during a play session and it is palpable especially during videogame play. The assemblage that makes me the *Sara+*, dissolves with that 'death' and a new body re-territorializes as soon as the re-start button is hit. Once the interactions between the parts stop, the player+avatar also ceases to exist. I am both Sara the player, and Majd the husband through the aggregate of all the parts that come to make-up my body in that specific time and space. *I lose myself and forget who I am speaking with*. 'Losing' oneself in play, is the function of the body's territories experiencing re-formation in response to the stimuli; 'losing' oneself in play is the continuous process of *becoming* the player+avatar assemblage.

Interestingly this ability of a videogame to create a space where the player 'loses' herself in the space of play depends on the platform that the game is experienced on. In the case of *BMML*, as different reviewers pointed out, the experience of the gameplay on a smartphone vs. Nintendo Switch is changed drastically when the real-time ability of messaging is taken away on Switch (Cowley, 2019). The Switch version of the game adds a feature to skip time, which allows the player to experience multiple gameplay quickly, but it takes away from the experience

of having to wait for Nour's responses. This means the player no longer has to sit long hours and wait for Nour's response and with that what is eliminated from play is the affective potentials stored in the waiting. In the in-between moments when a text-message is sent and the sender is awaiting a response, lies a potential to think, reflect, and connect. Here is how one reviewer described the difference created through the change in the platform of this game:

The iOS and Android versions update in real-time, as if Nour really was texting you, and this means she can go quiet for lengthy periods of time – which inspires moments of genuine anxiety as you worry whether your most recent advice has cost Nour her life. On the Switch, and we assume the PC, all that happens is that the screen fades out for a second and time automatically forwards, which is all they could really do but is obviously far less immersive. The fact that you're obviously not using a phone, even when you use the Switch vertically in handheld mode, also can't help but impact the sense of verisimilitude. (GameCentral, 2019)

As many reviewers note, both the changes in the platform from Android and iOS to Switch and the ability to opt-out of real-time play, makes the game much shorter and reducing the sense of 'immersion' in the game. The shorten version of the game, allows more opportunity for the player to explore the different branching storyline of the game, thus offering a more expansive view of the story. However, the ability to play in real-time and wait for messages to come in, the excruciating wait-time between the actions as Nour tries to cross dangerous territories across land and sea, make the game in its original format incredibly powerful.

The player+Majd assemblages that are created through each repetition of the game not only change depending on the branch of the story and the game design, but also through the device that the game is experienced on. These bodies come together to form very different and historically unique assemblages and not all are the same and not all can access the same sensations and forces. What is experienced on the phone is inarguably different than what is experienced on Switch because those bodies carry with them their own affective potentials and capacities. The meeting of these bodies, that of a phone or Switch with that of the player, result

in creation of difference spaces with varying forces and sensations that might not be available to sense and feel in other spaces and versions of the game.

Case Study: *1000 Days of Syria*

I hear footsteps in the staircase, and I know they are coming for me. My husband has been missing for months and for weeks now my children and I have endured bombing, shelling, daily violence, and lack of food and electricity. A man is murdered before my sons' eyes on his balcony one level below. My sons are 7 and 10. The footsteps grow closer. They break through the door, point their rifles towards us and my youngest son begins to cry. They yell and ask where my husband, Ali, is?

I am playing a videogame: *1000 Days of Syria* and I have become Sara+mother-of-two who is trying to survive the Syrian uprising in Daraa. I have three options. I can lie to the soldiers and say that they have the wrong person and the wrong place. I could fabricate a story which would delay their investigations, or I can tell them the truth about not having any contact with my husband for months and believe him to be dead. The thoughts of arrest, torture, and rape swirl in my mind and I make a decision. I choose to tell the truth and pick the third option. They lower their weapons; tell me that they knew all along Ali was my husband because they have been monitoring us for months. They tell me I must inform them if Ali returns and if I fail to do so they will kill me and my children. They leave and I, as the player, catch myself letting out an audible sigh of relief.

1000 Days of Syria (2014) is an online text-based historical fiction videogame, created by journalist Mitch Swenson, wherein the player is asked to engage with day-to-day experiences of survival and its meaning in war time. Born out of the wretched reality of war and the need to capture something of that reality through this new-media source in order to draw American citizen's attention to the war (Goldhammer, 2014), Swenson creates a space putting the player in touch and in charge survival in warzone. This videogame is an aesthetic creation which captures and articulates something that cannot be articulated in any other way. The game has no music and no images. Each page of the game is divided into two sections wherein one provides historical news of the day and the other continues the story of the game. In this sense, the game provides a history of the time and stories of the people within the context of the time. The player has the option of starting the game as a civilian mother of two trying to keep her family alive, or

as a journalist based in Lebanon covering the ‘Arab Spring’ in different countries, or a young student who joins the movement to topple Assad’s regime. With each of these avatars, the player is allowed to enter another space of the Syrian war and from a different perspective. In some variations of the game, some of these characters appear in different timelines, like ghosts, and the player is now able to see the other perspective to the story. *1000 Days* is an underrated game about the power of stories, events, bodies, and forces coming together to tell a fuller story of this war, with each perspective augmenting its various aspect. The game uses the branching storyline technique to allow the player to experiment with various assemblages and thus the sensations that those assemblages afford.

Each character is nameless and the player might only learn of their names through other variation of the story. The pronoun of choice in this game is the other way that many players speak about their process of game play: “you”. In every variation of the game, the story is told to ‘you’ and very clearly ‘you’ are in charge of the story. In these stories, ‘your father’ stops recognizing ‘you’ after what ‘you’ have done; ‘you’ must provide for ‘your’ starving children either through smuggling gas or working in an ammunition factory; “*You* try to create a batch of Twitter accounts”; “More and More *you* are beginning to hate the West for reasons *you* don’t understand”; “*You* get into a verbal spat over each other’s motivations behind joining the opposition” (Swenson, 2014, emphasis added). The use of the pronoun ‘you’, as opposed to the name of the character, pulls the player into the space of the game. The story is not narrated in the third-person account, which is often the case in other forms of art, rather the game involves the player by speaking directly to the player and then asking the player to make a decision for ‘her/himself’. The unique ability of the space of play and by extension the space of videogame

play allows for such an immersion of the player even through the very discourse that it uses, pointing to the affective powers of language itself.

I die again and again and again in this game. Once again my non-violent actions do not guarantee safety or even survival. In this game, similar to *This War of Mine* as we will see in the next chapter, I am made and re-made through my different attempts in playing nameless and ghostly characters. I become a further augmented version of myself; I become a multitude through the ability to play different characters within the same story. Although after every version of the game, that particular Sara+character dissipates and a new being is re-formed, something of that Sara+character remains, not only in my memory of my gameplay but also as a ghost who might show up once I become a different Sara+character. Different versions of this assemblage interact with one another in different versions of the game.

For example, in one version of the game I play as a freelance war journalist trying to get to Aleppo. In my attempt to get there I am often faced with different routes to take, different people to consider asking help from, and simply deciding to either stay put or move to the front lines. In one of these branching moments I must chose a path between Turkey and the Syrian National Council providing my transport to Aleppo or through Lebanon wherein a vintner, possibly related to the Lebanese Hezbollah, guarantees my safe passage. I, as the player, cannot trust the Syrian National Council and as much as I am afraid of the Hezbollah, I think the latter might be safer...

... I am promised that I will be met with peaceful activists however, the people I meet with to transport me are all heavily armed. I have an option to just keep calm and say nothing and possibly be arrested or to raise my concern that I wanted to be involved with peaceful activists. I choose the latter option, my voice begins to rise and I start to agitate Tarek, my vintner, and his fellow companions. Tarek calmly explains to us that he started as a peaceful protestor but that brought him nothing but dead bodies. I calm down and they take me to the place that was promised. However, that outpouring of anger results in Tarek never trusting me again and in one of my attempts to get to a journalist-

turned-rebel for a story, I am arrested, imprisoned, and brutally and constantly tortured for the information I do not have. On day 951 since the uprising, in my cell I remember what I am told: “People in the field have always told you not to risk your life for a story. Perhaps you were reckless this time, but then again you *did* get the cover story. It was something you've been fighting your own war with for some time... The single lightbulb slowly swinging from the dank cellar ceiling dissolves out of sight, leaving one last breath in your body before everything ultimately goes white...and in a room not far from you, Mujahideen terrorists play with new electronics, purchased with the money you earned for trying to tell their story” (Swenson, 2014). I die in prison on December 3, 2013.

The assemblage of Sara+the-journalist dissipates after this death and once again this repeated death signifies the sinister and brutal forces of war and the often inglorious ways in which people die in wars. My body re- and de-territorializes and I enter another version of the game, this time as Sara+the student protestor. This nameless rebel youth, is a 17-year old student who joins the protests in the University of Aleppo after being emboldened and encouraged by what he has seen in protests across Tunisia and Egypt. He and I navigate this revolutionary time through our savviness with social media, distributing images and videos on YouTube, Liveleaks, and other platforms to spread the news...

...My father, a religious and pro-Assad man, finds out about my activism and is so overcome by what he considers a deep betrayal that he throws me out of the house. I have no money but I am able to get in touch with a friend who helps me and puts me in contact with other men who are fighting for freedom. The group which I join ultimately formulates into Al Nusra¹¹ and when this appears on my computer screen, I as the player, that part of me who knows about Al Nusra, closes her eyes in dismay and shock over what is about to become of me+this character. On May 28, 2012, Day 439 since the uprising, the Assad regime kills over 100 people, 49 of them children, which becomes the last straw for me. I ramp up my efforts against the regime, get promoted to a Captain rank, and in one of my runs to deliver weapons I meet two journalists whom I am supposed to provide a ride to but they rub me the wrong way. The journalists, Jeremy and “his ghostly friend”, question us and criticize our activism. Even before moving my cursor over the “his ghostly friend” – wherein the game explains that this might be a nameless friend that I might have known from a ‘different life’ – I, as the player, know I have met part of myself that died in the previous version of the game.

¹¹ Al Nusra Front was a rebel-led jihadist organization, calling themselves the Syrian Mujahideen, formed in 2012 in the attempt to overthrow Bashar Al Assad’s government. The group became a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria in 2013 and sought to establish an Islamic state in the country.

This nameless student, who is fighting for his country, who is filled with hope, pain, and rage, is Tarek. Tarek, who betrayed me in the previous version of the game when I was Sara+the journalist, is now part of my assemblage in this version of the game. In this assemblage, through these relations, I see him differently because I *feel* his pain. Tarek is now a part of me and I feel his pain around his separation from his family; I feel his sadness at seeing his city crumble into dust; I feel his grief at losing his mother and brothers, and his hopelessness at a cause which started with student protests and ended up with many dead. I see from a different position and this vista provides a complementary view to the previous ones.

Colman (2011) argues that the play space can lend itself to “intensive sensory and perceptual experiences” (p. 2). “The sense of ‘space’ in the game is created and recreated at every instant, through the fitting together of the assembled components of the game-system. The game and player be-come together as a play-machine, inseparable as mobile parts implementing movement” (Coleman, 2008, p. 8). In assemblages the whole does not totalize the parts that come to make up that whole. There is a type of irreducibility that is produced by relations of exteriority (DeLanda, 2016). In addition, in assemblages the properties of the whole unit depends on the interactions between all its parts (DeLanda, 2016). The important word here is *interaction* between the parts. The properties of the whole are seen as products that emerge out of the interactions between the parts. These properties are dependent on these interactions and once these interactions cease to exist so do the properties of the whole.

After exiting the game, putting down the phone, turning off the game console, the assemblage disintegrates and what is left is the felt-knowledge produced through the processes of the game. These bodies come together to allow the player to enter this middle realm of play and experience and experiment with those above sensations and in turn act upon them and with them. Once the game ends, once these bodies: the player+avatar+game+platform disperse, what remains are the impact of forces and sensations of those bodies on the body of the player while she was that particular being in that particular time and space of the game.

DeLanda (2016) asserts that it is important to remember that “assemblages have a fully contingent historical identity, and each of them is therefore an individual entity” (p. 19). Since this unit that makes up the gamer-avatar body is changed through the relations of the parts that make up that body, each time the player restarts the game a new gamer-avatar comes into existence and with it different affects and effects. No two game plays are ever the same, because of the differences on the screen, the environmental changes, and the different in the emotional and the affective state of the player and especially because “the final ingredient needed to render the images and the events they represent on screen is the player’s participation” (Owen, 2017, p. 184). “A game system requires a body-player to activate its site. This play-place requires another body to engage in relations that will produce different effects, in turn affecting both bodies” (Coleman, 2011, p. 3). The player’s participation in that moment brings with it, its own range of affective attunements and responses to the game. Since every restart of the game is unique so is the player’s relationship to that version of the game and so is the player+avatar assemblage that is formed with every version of the game.

In *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Miguel Sicart (2009) argues that there is ultimately no ethics if the player is not given a choice in play. Choices in videogames give us multiplicity. Through multiplicity we can discover ethical quandaries and feel their effect on us. In SPGs, the branching storyline permits the existence of multiplicities not only because of a re-formation of the player+avatar body with every restart, but also because the new player+avatar assemblage will continue to become, and change through the procedures and the options written for the game. As Dianne Currier (2003) argues “if the elements of an assemblage are intensive multiplicities that intersect with other multiplicities, then each intersection will clearly produce other multiplicities that differ in nature from any of those preceding. As such, each element

becomes something other with each new connection and within each assemblage” (p. 331). The repetition that is a part of every game produces multiplicity which intersects with the branching storyline technique to produce further aggregates expanding the player’s horizons.

Drawing on social network theory, DeLanda (2016) makes the claim that the connections and links between the nodes on the network is considered more important than the nodes themselves. In this theory where a node stands for a person, and when we examine the emergent properties of a network the links, the connections, the relations and their absence or presence are considered more important. Therefore, the second important property of assemblage is that, they “are always composed of heterogeneous components” (DeLanda, 2016, p. 20), which means each body exists separately from the whole but through their relations they come to make that whole. My game console, the game, the phone, and my body all exist separately and together through their relations they come to make me the gamer who can enter a digital realm and become someone or something else.

Although assemblages emerge from the interactions between their parts, once the whole is created, the assemblage acts as both a source of limitation or a conduit of opportunities for its components (DeLanda, 2016). The gamer who is allowed to enter the game through the summation of all its parts, has the opportunity to play, learn, grow, be challenged and feel forces and sensations that are captured and released through the game. But she is also limited through what she cannot do in the game if the game does not allow that.

Becoming

Assemblages are about possibilities and impossibilities that come together (Buchanan, 2017). They emerge out of a milieu, the environment, and they also create it. They achieve a mutual constitution with the parts that make up the whole. They form through the process of de- and re-territorialization of the body. For Deleuze and Guattari (2016) the body is always in the

process of becoming, opening up, and de and re-forming. In the process of becoming a form of de-territorialization takes place which involves a movement of bodies and a change of the nodes on the grid of subjectivity. As Helen Thornham (2011) claims in *Ethnographies of the Videogame*:

Once the body is no longer lived but ‘disassembled and reassembled’ [through technology], the concept of an embodied subjectivity becomes impossible to maintain.

Yet this is precisely what the gamer– as cyborg needs to imagine– an embodied and lived subjectivity, but one that can be (to a certain extent) if not disassembled and reassembled, then at least lived through technology. (p.113)

In movement of the body and the parts that come to makeup the player’s body, a sense of flow, a feeling of immersion, and connection with the game is created. This is how the gamer identifies with the characters on the screen. The body of the player becomes a ‘zone of indiscernibility’, as Deleuze called it, where the lines between those on the screen and that of the player, blur, the boundaries de- and re-territorialize to become the player+avatar assemblage (Grosz, 2008). The formation of this assemblage then permits the player to step into the middle space of play. In this space, the assemblage, the player+avatar body, can sense things previously unavailable. Intensities and forces that were invisible to the player make themselves known. And simultaneously through sensations and the impact of those sensations on and *with* the player+avatar assemblage, the body of the player is changed. “Something happens through sensation and the subject becomes in sensation” (Grosz, 2008, p. 21). This becoming, this “subject-in-process” (Grosz, 2008, p. 79), manifests in the always changing body that is altered no matter how subtly by the forces and sensations that affect it. Videogames carry an enormous

potential in producing a felt knowledge because through this particular space of play we are able to observe and feel the process of becoming a lot of more visibly and palpably.

This *becoming* does not mean the player becomes a Syrian refugee, while playing *BMML* or *1000 Days*. But the player does become something else because the boundaries of her body are opened up to include parts and aggregates that will enable her to feel something of a crisis that has plagued Syria for more than a decade. It is crucial for me to underscore this argument, because an understanding of ‘becoming’ that simply substitutes one body for another: the player *as* Majd and not *with* Majd, does not take into account the affective capacities and the forces that each body brings with itself. Each of those bodies that come to make up the whole of that specific player+avatar carries affective capacities that shape the experience of gameplay. Affect, as the body’s capacity to act and be acted on and thus influenced by the historical forces that shape those bodies is an argument that I will unpack further in the upcoming chapters.

Speaking about the body in the context of movement and flux, as opposed to only through fixed social locations, encountered and impacted by forces, engenders greater potential for increased connections. This mode of thinking about the body allows us to tap into the potentials of what it means to become the player assemblage. What connections and new relations are made possible through these disparate parts coming together? The developers and the designers of games such as *BMML* understand such becoming and tap into its potential to allow the player to momentarily feel the intensities that were otherwise hidden to them. “The reactive behaviour learned in the game world affects corporeal knowledge, resulting in a migration of the virtual media experience to the physicality of vernacular dimensions” (Colman, 2011, p. 9).

A space of play at times has to be imagined to become real, and in this sense, Coleman (2011) proposes that we can look at space “as an affective ecology that is determined by and determines its consuming subjects (p. 2). This place can be any space, whether digital or material, but what they all have in common is that they engage the “becoming playing, that is, the player who transforms, as the game does, as the play progresses and shifts course” (Coleman, 2011, p. 2). Thus, both the game and the player engage in a co-becoming, a co-dependent existence, and a co-constitutive being: an assemblage.

Videogames, particularly SPGs, are aesthetic creations that challenge the boundaries of the body of the player and those of the characters on the screen; they blur the lines that separate the body from its surrounding. Identification with characters on the screen takes place because the body is opened up, and the avatar becomes the extension of the player’s body. The player’s body extends beyond the surfaces of the skin to occupy and then control and co-constitute a story with the character(s) on the screen. The player *becomes* an entity that includes the avatar in this process. This subsequently allows the player to experience the impact of these ephemeral and corporeal forces, which ultimately form and *reform* the subject. All these take place because the player becomes a thinking-feeling assemblage.

Chapter 5: Capture of Sensation: Socio-political Games as an Art of Empathy

Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen.
— Leonardo da Vinci

We possess art lest we perish of the truth. – Friedrich Nietzsche

This War of Mine

The screen moves from bombed and destroyed buildings to soldiers in full battle gear and tanks firing in a rubble-filled street. Debris explodes everywhere. Bullets fly by, one hits a soldier in the neck and he falls on the ground as the blood spurts; other soldiers continue to fire towards the direction that the screen moves. It then scrolls in to a cross section of one of those crumbling buildings, where a woman cradles the head of a bleeding man as a child looks on. As the lights flicker in the room and on the screen, the words read: “In war, not everyone is a soldier”.

This War of Mine (2014) is a procedurally generated strategy-survival game, wherein the player is tasked with the control of a group of civilians in a warzone who are trying to survive until an unknown ceasefire date. In *This War of Mine (This War)*, the player has the option of choosing from twelve different groups, with different people and stories, which results in many different formulations, branches and endings of the game. The game invites the player to enter a zone that the player might have entered before as a soldier, in a different game such as *The Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012), but this time to enter *as* and *with* civilians. In *This War*, characters are often sick, wounded, tired, hungry and sad. They must scavenge for food, medicine and supplies during the night, keep guard against looting and raids, build household goods and weapons during the day, rest, eat, and exchange goods. The player is in charge of a group of characters, which is not uncommon in games, thus making the player+avatar assemblage consists

of more than just one avatar body that comes to join this amalgamation to move the story along. As is the function of an assemblage, different characters come in to join the party and others depart.

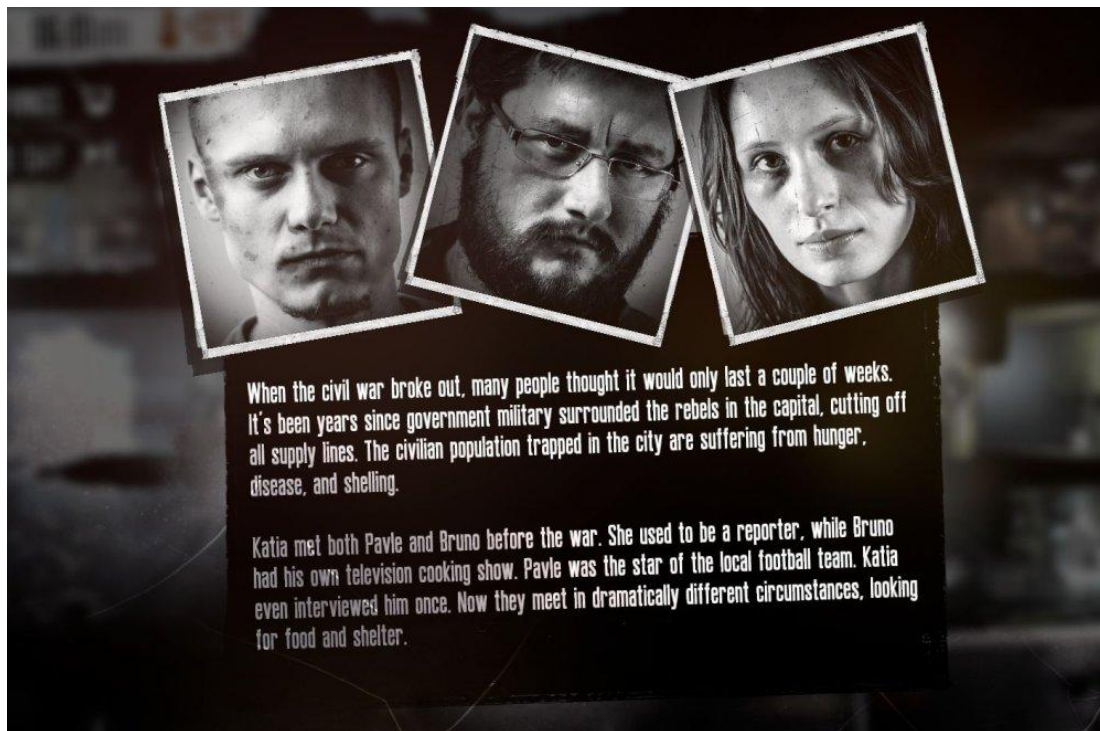


Figure 6 *This War of Mine* (2014) - One branch of the story

In my first gameplay of *This War*, I am in charge of three civilians: Katia, Pavle and Bruno whom after being separated from or losing family members and loved ones have banded together to survive, as shown in Figure 6. I am each of them and all of them combined. We are separate entities but we make a unity: a collective of survivors. I become the player+avatar(s) assemblage of these bodies and their affective forces and abilities coming together to make up this experience:

It is Day 2 of the game; the screen opens to a burning building, piles of rubbles on the street and a graffiti that reads “Fuck the war”. Pavle is ill and in need of food and medication. Katia is slightly wounded, tired, and hungry. Bruno is tired and hungry. On the second day of the game, I decide Bruno is in the best shape for a night of search and set him out to search for food and medication. On our search we slowly creep into a

supermarket looking for food. We find some canned food and vegetables but must still look for medications. There are gun shots but Bruno ignores them and continues to fill the bag with some other supplies when we hear an argument behind a closed door. It is a woman and a man arguing. The woman is looking for food and the man has some and is willing to give them to her for a price. What he is asking for she is not willing to give. They argue and in a moment he draws his gun at her.

I, as the player, know he is about to rape and/or kill her. Bruno crouches down behind the door and I have only a few moments to decide for him and us, I think about the collective and become that collective, thinking about all the people in the game: My bag is full of much-needed food for me and my friends and if I leave now I might have time to get back to them safely, however the probability of this man hurting the woman is high. I don't have any weapons and if I step forward in an attempt to intervene I might get shot. I quickly think of a possible solution that I might be able to offer some of my food in exchange for both our safety, not knowing that the game strategically will not give me that option. These thoughts swirl in my mind and I make a decision to not leave the woman alone. I step forward and confront the man; he quickly draws his gun and shoots Bruno. The woman is able to escape, Bruno dies on the floor of the supermarket, and I sit there stunned looking at my monitor. How did I lose a person, a part of my player+avatar(s) assemblage, a part of my team, *a part of myself*, so quickly?

This creative interactive platform of play, which captures and displays *something* of the wretchedness of human condition and reality in a war zone, is art. It is an invitation to experience and experiment with the sensations and forces of survival: what will you do to survive and *what will your survival cost you?* In this chapter, I draw heavily from Deleuze's aesthetic theory, in order to posit that videogames and more specifically socio-political games are aesthetic creations that capture sensations and make visible that which the player could not see otherwise, through the process of play. This Deleuzian conceptualization of art and assemblage allows us a mode of analyzing the incredible potentialities of socio-political games not only through their ability to make visible for us what would have remained invisible and unknown otherwise, but also by allowing us to feel those invisible forces by playing with them, feeling them, merging with them, allowing them to overtake us during the gameplay and leave us when the game ends. As we saw in the previous chapter, the formation of the player+avatar assemblage and the ability to see ourselves play, create greater connections to the characters in the game and a more palpable felt knowledge through the sensations that impact the characters and the player during the gameplay.

In this chapter, I will further build on this formulation of connection, relationality of bodies and forces, by arguing that one of the reasons for empathic understanding is having the ability to feel a sensation, a force, or a vibration that is only available through this particular aesthetic medium. Through engaging with the forces that are captured through art, we come to experience something of reality that would have otherwise not been possible. I will first begin by providing a brief overview of how videogames are considered a form of art by gamers and game theorists. In the following sections, I unpack Deleuze's conceptualization of art and trace his understanding of force through the works of Spinoza and Nietzsche. Through Francis Bacon's paintings, I explain Deleuze's aesthetic theory. I have chosen to unpack Deleuze's theories through his understanding of Bacon's paintings, because I believe an affective explanation of painting as an example of art provides the foundation from which it is easier to discuss the affective forces of videogames.

I then return to my affective analysis of *This War*, to demonstrate how this game through capturing forces of survival, of loss and of grief, creates greater connections and understanding of those sensations. In addition, I use two other case studies: *Papers Please* (2013), and *Neverending Nightmares* (2014), to further demonstrate the capture of affects of poverty, depression, and survival. In the final two sections of this chapter, I will assert that the relationship between the artist and her artwork is that of an assemblage created through the forces and their relations that come together to actualize into the artwork. By way of conclusion, I will discuss immersion in a game in relation to the fidelity of the game to the context in which it is played in and will examine the different affective powers that fidelity and lack of it carry.

Videogames as art

Gamers and game theorists have talked and written extensively about games as a form of art and the problems with not recognizing games as art by the broader cultural community. For many gamers, the aesthetic value and capacity of videogames are twofold: one that videogames do what other established categories of art forms do, which is to move and affect the audience and the reader, and simultaneously videogames transcend established categories of art because they are unique in their medium (Juul, 2013). Henry Jenkins (2005), a game theorist who has long championed videogames as art and an educational tool, argues that “games represent a new lively art one as appropriate for the digital age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible” (p. 177). Other theorists such as Grant Tavinor (2009) in *The Art of Videogames*, Andrew Clarke and Grethe Mitchell’s *Videogames and Art* (2006), and more recently, and John Sharpe (2015) in *Works of Games: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, have attempted to answer questions such as what is a game? What is art? And what are their intersections. One of the fundamental arguments in the debate about videogames as a new form of art, layered with audio-visual-somatic experiences, is that videogames give us something unprecedented in art: “the representation of the player, their agency, and their aesthetic experience” (Tavinor, 2009, p. 3).

Around mid-2000 ‘artgames’ emerged as a category within the broader field of indie games, with the release of games such as *Passage* (2007), *The Marriage* (2007), *Braid* (2008), and *Flower* (2009). With exhibitions such as *The Art of Video Games* (2012) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrating over 40 years of gaming, and articles such as “Why Videogames Are Works of Art?” (2010) and “Are videogames art: a debate that shouldn’t be” (2012) in popular cultural magazines and news sources such as *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian*

respectively, there has been more room for debate and celebration of videogames as an artform. However in the debate of whether or not videogames can be considered a legitimate form of art, I agree with Felan Parker (2013) who pointedly argues that the question should not be whether or not videogames as a cultural product are art, “but rather *how has this cultural product been repositioned materially, institutionally, and intellectually and thus redefined as legitimate art?*” (p. 45).

My purpose in the rest of the chapter is not to add to the already existing extensive literature that position videogames among legitimate arts. I began from this position. Never have I engaged with a game and not thought that I was engaging with art, and I am not alone in my feelings. As we will see later on in this chapter, the conceptualization of art that I use, allows us to at least partially answer Parker’s question of how have videogames been positioned intellectually to not be considered legitimate art. My goal here is to present an aesthetic theory that positions art as the capture of sensation which then allows us, as game theorists and players to ponder the affective powers of videogames and to harness those in socio-political games.

Deleuze, sensation, and art

Deleuze was heavily influenced by Spinoza and Nietzsche, wrote and lectured extensively on them, “and developed his own philosophical system by paying them homage at every turn” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 407). In both Spinoza and Nietzsche, he found a way of moving beyond the Cartesian dualism and the Kantian separation and the transcendence of judgment over sense (Smith, 2003; Sauvagnargues, 2013). As I wrote in chapter two, for Spinoza, the body was not defined in terms of organs and functions but rather as a complex set of relations of movement and its ability to affect and be affected. For him,

Each individual is composed of infinite, extensive parts that belong to it within *one* particular relationship. The uniqueness of this relationship establishes an individuality with corporeal complexity, a state of forces, and “movement and rest” as Spinoza says, or “speed and slownesses,” since rest is not the absence of movement but slowness relative to a particular speed. (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 42)

Following Spinoza then the kinetic relationship that makes up the body, whether an organic or an inorganic body, also expresses power. Nietzsche, who was heavily influenced by Spinoza, wrote extensively about forces and their relations (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 38). He posited that “art begins upon a vibrant encounter with the forces of life” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 406). For Nietzsche “everything is made up by a dynamic combination of forces...because of a multiplicity of fluctuating forces that constitute and traverse us, we come to possess a multiplicity of confluent and contradictory perspectives” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 407). This principle of force relations runs throughout all of Deleuze’s work (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 38): “If everything refers to force relations, a composite of actions and reactions, speeds and slownesses, then the state of forces and the differential relations of forces in presence can be evaluated” (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 38). And the concept *force* is a plural one because there is no force without the *relation of forces*, their interaction and their ultimate expansion or elimination (Sauvagnargues, 2013). Deleuze theorized that the “faculty of Ideas is not identified with reason”, rather for Deleuze the faculty of Ideas and reasons are posited *within* sensibility and are defined “not by their transcendence to Nature but rather in terms of their immanence to experience itself...and reveal the *forces* and intensities that lie behind sensations, and which draw us into nonhuman or inhuman *becomings* (Smith, 2003, p. xxii). Force as an underlying condition of sensation and movement is an important concept in Deleuzian understanding of art.

This is the process which makes assemblages historically unique entities, not only in the bodies that come to make up a ‘Whole’ but through the relations and forces of those relations as well.

In the aesthetic stream that makes up the work of Spinoza, Nietzsche and Deleuze, there is an understanding that there is no set recipe for artists or the art work, rather art emerges out of an “invitation to map the underlying affects and singular expressions that emerge from immanent interactions of a relational field” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 403). Art begins with the encounter of forces of life. Drawing on Nietzsche, Deleuze claims that “what is framed in a painting does not begin within the limits of the frame” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 407). What is actualized in any form of art, including videogames, comes from elsewhere.

For Deleuze (2003) it is the capture of the chaotic forces of our surrounding that gives rise to art. “Artistic production...begins with extracting a bloc of sensations from elusive forces and intensive transitions that constitute and continuously impinge on the actual world” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 408). The artist is able to harness such sensations out of their environment and actualize them in their aesthetic format. As we will see in the later part of this chapter, art, such as the socio-political games that are the case studies of this chapter, is the actualization of the chaotic forces of our environment that give rise to a felt sensation for the artist. He/she/they, in return, captures that sensation and makes it visible through art.

Deleuze (2003) asserted sensation is not ‘sensational’, rather sensation is the direct transmission of forces that de- and re-territorialize bodies, forming and deforming them; sensation is neither cerebral or rational, it is relational born out of the impact of forces on and through bodies. Sensations are shared between bodies and not reducible to each body (Grosz, 1999, 2008). Sensations are not explained through movements and movements do not explain the level of sensations (Deleuze, 2003). Rather movement is explained “by the elasticity of the

sensation” and what remains of movement is the intensity of sensation (Deleuze, 2003, p. 36). “For a sensation to exist, a force must be exerted on a body...But if force is the condition of sensation, it is nonetheless not the force that is sensed, since the sensation ‘gives’ something completely different from the forces that condition it” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 48). Ann Sauvagnargues (2013) argues that for Deleuze, “sensation, as the relation of forces, produces an “image”, a percept, and an affect” (p. 142). As Brian Massumi (2015) writes “sensation is the registering of affect ... [and] affect is simply a body’s movement looked at from a point of view of its potential – its capacity to come to be, or better, to come to do” (p.17). This makes affect synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter* (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

These forces affect and move the body; they open up the body to the possibilities of what these forces and sensations can do and form. They are “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1) that move us, suspend us, shock us, stop us ‘dead on our track’. The body becomes the “zone of indiscernibility” wherein the forces of sensations make themselves known (Deleuze, 2003, p. 20). Something happens through the sensation and the subject *becomes* through sensations that impact its body (Deleuze, 2003).

Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system, vital movement, “instinct”, “temperament”...), and one face turned toward the object (the “fact”, the place, the event). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation, one through the together, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body that, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. (Deleuze, 2003, p. 31)

In this approach, through interaction with the sensation the body is changed and so is the sensation that originally impacted that body. The body both receives and gives sensation. There is an interplay of forces impacting the body and escaping the body, making the body both the subject and the object of sensation.

From this conceptualization of force, sensation, and affect, art captures sensations through the extraction of qualities of chaotic forces of the nature, which includes one's environment. Deleuze formulated a theory of aesthetic, where the function of art is to capture forces and sensations rather than invent or produce them (Grosz, 2008; Sauvagnargues, 2013). This capture of forces is the reason why art is not merely reducible to language. Deleuze's aesthetic theory puts forward an idea of art "as a vital machine and assemblage of signs that is irreducible to language" (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 18). As Brian Massumi (2015) argues every linguistic act is in fact an expression of affect. For Deleuze art is not a matter of signification rather a matter of *function* (Sauvagnargues, 2013), which involves experimentation.

In order to demonstrate this, Deleuze in *The Logic of Sensation: Francis Bacon*, turned to the works of the 20th century painter Francis Bacon. He argued that art is not meant to reproduce our material reality or invent forms, rather it is meant to capture/visibilize something of reality that would have otherwise remained invisible (Deleuze, 2003). Painting is not imitative or illustrative; it does not reproduce forms of objects, but captures forces: sensation is painted (Sauvagnargues, 2013). Both painting and music deal with sensation regardless of their differing methods (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 142).

In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces... The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible

forces that are not themselves visible. Likewise, music attempts to render sonorous forces that are not themselves sonorous.... (Deleuze, 2003, p.48)

The function of art is to harvest such vibrations, attunements, and actualize it into an aesthetic creation such as music or painting so we can hear or see in that in that particular piece. As such, art becomes the manifestation of forces that could not otherwise be heard, seen, felt, or experienced any other way.

Deleuze (2003) asserts that through Bacon's painting we come to understand the body as the source of movement (p.15). The *Figure at a Washbasin* (1976), Figure 7 on the next page, is a perfect depiction of Bacon's approximation of abjection. In this painting, the figure¹² is crouched over the washbasin, grabbing the faucet. There seems to be an intense effort and a force that is exerted on the body in order to escape out and "down the blackness of the drain" (Deleuze, 2003, p.15). What Bacon captures, according to Deleuze, is that the body is not simply waiting for something from the material structure. The body is waiting for the forces inside itself; it is inside the body that something is happening (Deleuze, 2003, p.15). It is both affected and affective. "The body exerts itself in a very precise manner, or waits to escape from itself in a very precise manner" (p.15). The body tries to escape from itself through one of its organs through spasms (Deleuze, 2003, p.15) and in this sense Bacon's paintings bring forth the violence of sensations and reveal forces that "climb through the flesh to make spasm[s] visible (Smith, 2003, p. xxix). What we come to see in Bacon's paintings, Deleuze claims, is the effects

¹² It is important to note that figure for Deleuze is the method that Bacon used to "to disclose the forces, expectations, and thrusts of the body. In several places, Deleuze insists that it is not a question of transforming forms, but of deforming bodies. Bacon . . . manages to capture the body's forces and deformations. . . This is because sensation is shown to be a "master of deformations, an agent for deforming the body" (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 143). The concept of the Figure is not a human person, a head or a body that is put into a painting, but it involves an invisible, dynamic play with forces of isolation, deformation, and dissipation that affect the relations between these three pictorial elements (Sauvagnargues, 2013).

that movement has on a still body and some of its effects are violent, such as “the violence of a hiccup, of a need to vomit, but also of a hysterical, involuntary smile” (p. xxix).



Figure 7 Francis Bacon "Figure at a Washbasin" (1976)



Figure 8 Francis Bacon "Study after Velasquez's Portraits of Pope Innocent X (1953)

Deleuze argues that the entire series of spasms in Bacon's work (including scenes of love, of vomiting – such as in Figure 7 – and excreting) are the illumination of the “bodily forces

that attempt to escape the body through one of its organs and return to the field” (Deleuze, 2003, p.16). The violence of Bacon’s painting interests Deleuze, a violence that does not belong to representation. Instead, it expresses a taste for the sensation, the spectacle of tortured bodies (Sauvagnargues, 2013). What Bacon captures in his spasm series are the violence of sensations that open up the body in order to get released from it. According to Deleuze, what we see in Bacon’s paintings are the deformation and reformation of bodies in relation to the forces that affect and move them.

Bacon’s painting: *Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), as shown in Figure 8, is another example of the capture of the invisible and insensible forces releasing themselves through a scream (Deleuze, 2003). The scream un-conceals the intensities that lie beyond pain and feelings that affect the body and the forces of isolation, deformation, and dissipation that make known forces of life screaming at death (Deleuze, 2003).

When the visual sensation confronts the invisible force that conditions it, it releases a force that is capable of vanquishing the invisible force, or even befriending it. Life screams at death but death is no longer this all-too-invisible thing that makes us faint; it is this invisible force that life detects, flushes out, and makes visible through the scream. (Deleuze, 2003, p. 52).

The artist feels something of the virtual death forces and captures and actualizes those in a painting, in a book, in a film, or a videogame, so that the audience of that work will also not only see, hear, or feel that force, but also *engage* with it. This *engagement* with sensations captured, as I will come back to shortly, is what videogames do very affectively. For Deleuze (2002), in Bacon’s study of *Pope Innocent X* we see the expression of the phrase “to scream at – not to scream before or about, but to scream at death – which suggests this coupling of forces, the

perceptible force of the scream and the imperceptible force that makes one scream” (p. 52). The disclosure of the affect of the scream is an attempt to shed light on ‘what causes someone to scream’ and as Gokhan Kodlak (2018) claims “the result is a becoming-shriek of the mouth, a mouth that attempts to be a universe of its own, but which succumbs to becoming a black hole” (p. 413).

Let us go back to the example of *This War of Mine* from the beginning of this chapter. This game is an affectively and emotionally charged game, and as Ian Bogost (2005) writes, these types of play are not “the stuff of leisure”. Pawel Miechowski, the writer of *This War*, in an interview explained that his attempt was not to fabricate or provide false impressions of war, rather to underline the material and the psychological reality of survivors (Muriel, 2016). He explained that playing this game is difficult because war is difficult (Muriel, 2016) and that difficulty is captured in so many different ways, through many different options and actions within the game. Such games are meant to be experienced as opposed to won, and *This War of Mine* is one brutal experience. The experience opens up the body. The player becomes the extension of the characters on the screen. Both the player and the character(s) are ripped from the safety of the everyday. Each wave of incessant tragedy and win-less conundrum assaults the player, riding the edge of how deeply art can reach out without being rejected and obliterated by a few keystrokes, closing the program.

This is a survival game. Survival games often carry a force of angst as the player constantly tries to out-manuever death. The desire and the fight for survival impose a sense of dread as the player navigates the game and this sense of dread is heightened by every imaginable and un-imaginable threat to one’s existence. The player+avatar[s] assemblage often struggles for food, shelter, heat, and medicine, and I as the leader in charge of this group must pay attention to

all these bodies that come to make up this collectivity, because as we will see injury to a 'part' affects the 'whole'.

One of the features of this game, like many other socio-political games of its kind, such as *1000 Days*, *1979* and *BMM*, is a permadeath process which allows the player to experience loss during the gameplay. Permadeath, short for permanent death, means that characters do not have an unlimited or limited number of lives and once a character dies, they can no longer be revived for the duration of that gameplay. The player may always restart the whole game from the beginning after a death of a character, but that would mean a new gameplay and thus a new story of the game. Permadeath games create a specific space where the sensations of death and survival through the game are much more immediate and incessant. The player+avatar assemblage constantly changes and these changes are much more palpable in a strategy-survival game, wherein the 'Whole' that made up the player+avatars at the beginning of the game, is often not the same as the one that finishes the game.

Non-violent actions are almost always a swift way to ensure one's death. The ethical struggle of not wanting to take others' belongings, the shame of leaving survivors behind, feelings of hopelessness as characters die or kill themselves are unrelenting throughout the game. Starvation, injuries, and violent raids are not the only way a character dies. Grief and depression become a major factor which conditions death in the game through suicide. Suicide comes with its own affective intensities, urging the 'Whole' of the player+avatars assemblage to pay attention to the part/s' emotional and mental well-being. Attending to the characters' mental health is an important function of the game as it affects their ability to walk, run, work, and fight. As their mental health declines, their abilities to function do so as well. A simple climb of the stairs to get food becomes a drawn out task that might take half an hour as opposed to five

minutes. The game allows the player a space to explore the wretched and unbearable reality of the human condition in a war zone, and gives glimpses of its psychological and traumatic impacts. The game makes visible the affective forces of trauma as characters' mental health deteriorates throughout the game and this deterioration questions the very meaning of survival:

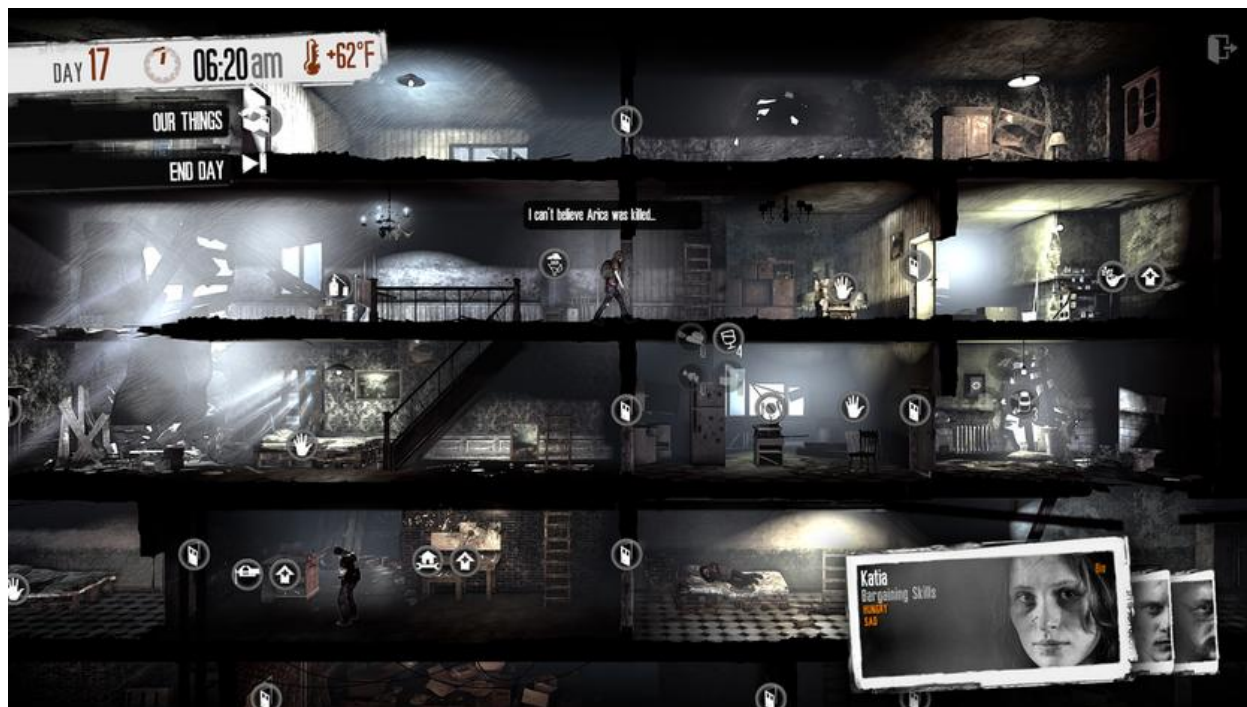


Figure 9 *This War of Mine* (2014) - an example of the gameplay

It is day 17 and there is no sign of a ceasefire. There have been numerous violent raids during the nights which have left the survivors severely wounded, tired and in desperate need of medication and food. It has been days since they have had proper food and they are constantly on the edge of starvation. Everyone's mental state has deteriorated: everyone is depressed and it is a desperately depressing gameplay. Depression results in slow movements of each character which impedes their work. For example, critical tools do not get fixed on time because no one can move fast. Igor, who joined the group of survivors a few days ago, is severely wounded and has been bleeding for days. Katia is exhausted and starving. I put Pavle in charge of scavenging and after several times on futile searches, on night 20, we finally find some food and supplies and head back to the shelter. Upon our return we find the shelter raided and the rest of the group violently attacked. Igor has died due to severe bleeding and Katia is fatally wounded and lies on the floor by her bed. The severity of her condition has disabled the ability to move her character. I try to move her and I can't. Pavle has come back with food, but has become so devastated by last night's events that he has fallen into a severe state of grief and is unable to move from the floor. I nudge him with my mouse and think: "you must get up!"

This is a significant and a tragically poetic design of the game, wherein emotional traumas have disabled the movement function of the characters. When grief impedes physical movement, manifested through the slow movement and refusal to move of each character, it magnifies something of life and death forces by demanding the player to slowly witness and engage with them. Slowness is part of the process of engaging with affects of depression and anxiety. There is enough food, medicine and shelter for Pavle at least, but neither Katia nor Pavle are able to access them. Grief and emotional injuries have severe consequences. The game brilliantly captures the various ways that civilians die in a war zone and one is by suicide.

A stranger comes to the door, pleading to be let in for shelter. I, as the player, know this person could be a friendly civilian and her addition to the group can offer some relief to the other two characters and increase their survival chance. Yet again, neither of my characters are able to move. The fatally injured Katia lies on the floor bleeding and the slightly injured, exhausted, very hungry, and broken Pavle sits on the floor and cries for his friends, himself, and everything he has done to survive. I cannot do anything for any of my group members other than to sit and watch them moan and cry out of pain. I think they are both going to die tonight because of their severe injuries both physically and mentally, and if they die, we all die, myself included as the game will end.

It is incredibly painful to watch these fictional characters' deaths and I have a strong urge to fast-forward the day, as that has always been an option in the game. I have an urge to get to the 'end' sooner, to *fast-forward* death and with it the process of witnessing it. The immense sadness and the grief of the game that disables movement within the game, has inevitably gripped me. My friends cannot move in the game and by extension I am shocked and paralyzed by the intensity of these forces that I sit and painstakingly look at my monitor and witness *our* slow deaths.

What is captured in this game is the forces of life and death in a war zone that give rise to the sensations of dread, anxiety, loss and grief. These sensations can move or stun the bodies that come in contact with them. Sensations and attunements of grief are often so heavy that they slow

movement within and outside the body. This is true in the game as is in our material reality, as we know for example some of the symptoms of grief are the leaden heaviness that slows walking, and the slowing down of one's metabolism, aversion to food, and severe fatigue and exhaustion (Didion, 2007).

This War, particularly highlights our interdependent and interconnectedness and relations with one another. The characters' survival is dependent on one another, like parts of a body wherein the dis-ease of one part will inevitably affect the rest of the parts. The game sheds light on the meaning of life and living, rather than mere biological stability, here the desire for survival is overshadowed by the refusal to collude with a state of 'non-living'. Characters will kill themselves because suicide marks how the desire for survival goes far and beyond basic necessities of survival: shelter, food, and medicine. The game makes known that a fundamental need of survival includes being with others, a sense of community, and connections and relations with other bodies and beings around us. In another interview with Pawel Miechowski, when asked why he chose a group of people rather than a single character for the game, he said that in his research for the game those who had survived wars would repeatedly tell him that one must be in a small group because people cannot make it as one (Warr, 2014). The relation between these characters, their emotional and mental connections, their co-dependency and therefore their co-constitution comes into relief.

This work of art makes the affects of relationality and interconnection of bodies and things and our interdependence on one another visible because it has been able to successfully capture the intensities of life and death. My body is made to feel the death forces affecting the characters in the games. And in that lies the potential to increase player's empathy with these fictional characters, but empathy is a secondary reaction to and of the game. It is true that it is

through the combination of becoming the player+avatar assemblage and feeling the affective relations of these parts, we are able to connect and feel empathy for a part of ourselves in those short moments in the game, when the “I” always consists of the me and my avatar(s).

However, the function of the game is to make known *something* of a sensorial truth about living in a war zone and let the player feel, experiment and play with those intensities. There is a type of play here, not only in the space of gameplay, but a play, an experimentation, *with* death. As I elaborated on in chapter three, death and failure are a fundamental function of a videogame which challenges the player to grow, strengthen skills and overcome challenges and the ways in which the very utterance of failing in a game often comes in a form of ‘I died’. Socio-political games such as *This War* allow a space to experiment with the forces of death and grief because rather than trying to reproduce a warzone, they try to capture the raw sensations of war and bring those into view. The ability to play with something that feels like death, to be able to witness and feel a loss of a person whom the player was invested in, creates a safer space of experimentation with one of the most fundamental parts of our humanity, which is our mortality. It is through the forces and vibrations of our mortality that we come to have empathy for others.

A sample examination of the reviews of the game, based on independent online reviewers and the Steam user community, offers a glimpse at the similarity of affective impacts of the game on other players. Sensations of loss, grief, and shame impress upon the player urging to be seen and leaving their traces after the game:

If as a player you do not get upset by stealing or murdering for the sake of your group of survivors, then your survivors will. They get sad and depressed, even suicidal, from committing atrocities. Morale is an important part of the game, and the horrific actions you commit to in the name of surviving are as relevant as the ones that are inflicted upon you. Maybe even more so. Because war is horrible and this glimpse of what living in a warzone is like, just so. It is atrocious. It is insecure. It comes with the realization that while this game has plenty abstractions, these stories are real. There are people who have lived through this. Who are trying to live through it in the world today. Who probably

will be trying to live through it in the future. Who only want to survive. Just one more day. Maybe tomorrow will be better. I have to stop writing now. Marko [one of the characters within the game] is sick, but he's the only one who is uninjured after last night when bandits tried to raid *our* shelter again. *We* have some rat meat left over so *I'd* best cook him a meal. Maybe he'll finally find some medicine tonight. Hopefully the trader will come by today, *we* have a few bottles of moonshine ready. If not, *I* might drink it. All of it. Who am I kidding. Tomorrow won't be better. Things will only get worse. (Dorander, 2015, emphasis added)

I went into an apartment complex to loot some stuff, not knowing yet what that meant. It was my first play-through, and I thought "stealing" stuff was maybe like it was in *Fallout* or *Skyrim*¹³. If someone sees me do it, they get hostile, and I kill them. Shouldn't be a big deal. I was skulking around when I was spotted by a guy who yelled at me to get out. He had a gun, so I thought he was a bad guy. I blew him away with my shotgun. I started to look at his corpse when voices started shouting upstairs. I quickly hid and waited for the ambush, but what came around the corner weren't more armed guards. No, it was much worse. It was his parents. They were wailing about their lost son and how they couldn't survive without him. I couldn't speak to them. I wanted so badly to tell them that they could come back to our place, that I had killed him accidentally, something, anything, I walked out without taking what little they had left, in fact leaving my shotgun and rounds in their refrigerator to help them, hoping that maybe I didn't doom them entirely, but what was the point of survival for them anymore? Why would they want to survive in a world without their son who laid his life on the line for their safety?

I never went back there. I was probably as affected as Marko was. He was depressed. I had to atone. I ran to the City Hospital to donate as much of our medical supplies as we could spare. I risked my life to free prisoners held by armed thugs. Night after night, in my attempt to atone, I tried to do as much good as I possibly could manage, if only to mitigate the incredible horror I had performed. We all survived, and I never went back to their apartment. I couldn't face them again. I don't know if they made it or not.

Man, I am a terrible person. (The Brave Little Roaster, 2014)

Once again, I quote these above two reviews in their entirety because they translate the affective experiences of the game well. The first-person narrative of the game wanders in and out of the space of the game signifying a specific space of play where forces and bodies coagulate temporary to experience sensations. This form of writing demonstrates how the feelings within

¹³ *Fallout* series and *The Elder Scrolls* series which *Skyrim* is a part of are both open-world RPG games, one taking place in a post-apocalyptic world and the other in a fictional Tolkienesque universe respectively. In these games there are many missions, options and often ways of designing one's avatar before and throughout the game. The player is often the hero of the story in such games, and there is a clear demarcation made between the 'bad guys' and the 'good guys' because the player cannot kill any 'good guys'. That option is not allowed in the game, thus creating a story that whoever the player is allowed to kill must be a 'bad guy' and thus deserving of death for the sake of the mission and the task at hand. Here the player is explaining that based on this process of a clear demarcation between good and evil in some games, the player assumed that whoever could be killed was the 'enemy' and the game surprised and shocked them.

the game and from the characters spill over into the player making them sense those feelings. In the first review we can observe how the very space of writing the review of the game and playing the game blend and merge onto one another, as the reviewer begins to write *to* one of the characters in the game to wait for the player to return and help them. It is precisely this *blending*, the merging of boundaries that is created through the formation of the player+avatar assemblage, that carries this enormous potential for creating new relations and connection. In the second review of the game, we can observe how the sensations of guilt and shame over the player's action within the game actually led to a series of actions that the player considered morally and ethically right during their gameplay and therefore to a different play altogether.

Feeling sensations of vulnerability, pain, and particularly shame, though brought about through the interaction between the player and the game within the game, does not simply vanish when the game stops. Those sensations dissipate to be sure, after the break-up or the re-territorializing the body, however the felt knowledge that is gained as a result of those sensations remains with the player. More specifically, through the sensation that gave rise to that felt knowledge, the player is changed. *The subject becomes in sensation.*

Videogames capture varying degrees of death-sensations through failure. Some, including but not limited to socio-political games, capture the forces of death so intimately that sensations of grief and loss are felt with a powerful immediacy. Videogames provide a space of *becoming with sensation through playing*. Through feeling *something* about and of death, a shared connection that we have with one another as human beings is made visible. The visibility of this shared connection and its felt knowledge creates enormous potentials not only in increasing one's empathy and deeper understanding of oppression, but also in creating new relationality with those inside and outside the game. As Ann Sauvagnargues writes art is a

transformation and the translation of our powers to affect and be affected (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 35).

The socio-political games that are the subject of this dissertation all visibilize the fragility and the preciousness of life, our dependence on others, and affects of loss. In games such as *This War*, once a character dies, the player and the rest of the characters will have to deal with the death of that particular character. The player must face, deal, experiment with a sensation of loss. While different games offer a different amount of experimentation with death, socio-political games in particular aim to put the player in a space where forces of life and death are much more palpable, in order to safely *feel* them. The point of such games is to reveal a force demanding, needing to be felt, much more than to be talked of or listened to. These games lay bare some part of the self; something about humanity, what it means to be human, and what it means to be denied one's humanity is revealed through such games. The subject touched by such amorphous forces is changed forever, no matter how minutely.

Case Study: *Papers Please*

I am a poor labourer in a post revolutionary nation of Arstotzka. One day I receive a letter from the government, congratulating me on my name being drawn for a highly coveted governmental position. Working with the government means more stability, more power, and more money, which brings me out of my abject poverty. I am a border control and an immigration officer. My wages are dependent on the accuracy and the efficiency of my work. I must follow the immigration policies to the letter and my ability to do so will decide whether my family has money for food, medicine, heat and rent. Any deviation from the procedures for personal or ethical reasons will jeopardize my wages and subsequently risks my family's well-being.

I have been at my job for more than a week with what seems to be a stream of continual rejection of those without proper documentation. I have made some mistakes in the days before, the cost of rent has gone up, I haven't had enough money for heat and food and now my son is sick and I desperately need medication for him. I need to meet today's quota in order to be able to afford medication. As these thoughts percolate in the back of my mind, a young woman approaches the desk, with what seems to be proper documentation. I put the acceptance stamp on her passport, and she hands me a handwritten note in which she is asking for my help. The note explains how she is escaping a horrendous situation of being sold for sex and the man responsible for those

transactions is behind her in the line. She pleads in her letter to not allow the man entry as he is dangerous and she is afraid for her life. She leaves and the man in question approaches the desk. He has all the proper documentation. I look very closely for any irregularities and there are none. Allowing this man entry could amount to serious harm and possibly result in the woman's death. Rejecting him with his proper documentation will jeopardize my position with the ministry of immigration. I will not be able to meet my quota for the day, will not make my estimated wages and will not be able to afford the medication for my son for at least another day. What should I do? How do I balance the needs of my family with my moral and ethical duties towards this woman? How do I utilize my power in ways that does not result in risking my job and my family's well-being? Is that even possible? How is defying a totalitarian state in conditions of poverty a possibility?



Figure 10 *Papers Please* (2013) - an example of gameplay

Papers, Please (2013), is an indie-puzzle game, created by Lucas Pope, wherein the player assumes the role of an impoverished customs' agent under a dictatorial regime. The game is procedurally designed in a way that the player, in order to earn her wages for the day, must as quickly as possible assess the validity of documents of those wishing to enter Arstotzka. There is often not enough money for the basic necessities of this worker, therefore the worker might have to resort to bribery, illegal detentions, or working for 'the resistant group' or the 'enemy' to

supplement funds. Every day, there will be at least one individual who is fleeing violence whom must be rejected based on improper document. In fact some will tell the me/the player that the rejection stamp on their passport was a death sentence for them as they will be killed when they go back. The game forces the player to constantly evaluate and choose between following the immigration policies and thus caring for her family, or helping and perhaps even saving someone's life at the border at the expense of breaking the rules, getting fined, and possibly not having access to heat or enough money for food. Proponents of procedural rhetoric – which is a process through which a powerful message is conveyed through rule-based representations and interactions – would submit that this game fosters critical thinking (Allen, 2014; Bogost, 2007) because through the procedures of the game the player must negotiate between the stress of balancing the duties of a bureaucratic administrator, and one's survival, and the need to act in accordance with one's ethics.

It is true that the procedures of this game and the rule-based interactions are used to analyze situations, events, create a greater in-depth understanding of the complexities and thus foster critical thinking around power and lack of power. What I want to argue in this section is that the game does something more than that. It fosters learning, but the learning comes through as the result of interacting with those captured sensations of crossing the border, being denied entry, being detained, being scared, and being the officer who can play an arbiter of someone's fate. Sensations, forces, vibrations, affects, feelings, attunement, and movements are what I wish to center this conversation around. The critical thinking is a secondary function of such games, the first is the capture and visibilization of sensations that could not be felt otherwise.

Papers Please was created by the game developer Lucas Pope and it was born from his travel experiences of crossing borders, especially in Southeast Asia (Webster, 2013; Lahti, 2013). He

explains that one of his goals was to unpack what people thought about the interactions that happened between them and the border control officer. “It’s really easy to be pissed [at the person behind the counter]. Hopefully they can understand that he’s not a bad guy; he’s just doing his job” (Mullis, 2013). In fact that is precisely what many of the players who engaged with the game repeatedly wrote: “it made me realize how hard it is to work at the border” (Lahti, 2013); “the next time I go through an immigration checkpoint of any country, I’ll look at the immigration officer differently since they might have a sick son at home” (Mullis, 2013); and

I only needed a few hours to reach an out-of-body experience where I watched myself fall heartlessly into the gameplay, into celebrating my correct dismissals and ignoring the slowly building, strangely gripping story of Eastern European repression. In fact, the keen, interactive treatment of repressive regimes, combined with smoothly ramping play, makes this a fine point of entry into the serious games genre for someone who might otherwise scoff. Some of the most truly jarring moments in *Papers Please* come when the game's denizens condemn you—you, the virtual border agent, and you, the actual human—as a scumbag. In one play-through, I received a plaque from a military official thanking me for my service. A denied applicant looked at it on his way out, and he didn't mince words with his brief exit: “You are like this plaque. Cheap shit.” (Makhkovech, 2013)

All these gamers point to their experience of sensing the wretchedness of poverty that afflicts and pushes people into jobs that will force them to make decisions against their own moral judgment. The last reviewer keenly points out how quickly the player can become a roboticized version of themselves, where the only thing that matters is abiding by the immigration and border crossing rules of the state regardless of the heart-breaking stories that immigrants crossing the borders might tell the player. The game is a more intimate look at the affects of poverty, hunger and survival. Through capture of sensation, art expands and intensifies life itself. Since we often experience the ‘inexperientable’ through play, Pope created a magnificent space of play which emerged out of the affective forces of his experiences, and translated those sensations in *Papers Please*.

Unfortunately, videogames share a predicament with other art forms in that although they are generally agreed to be important and give us access to something profound, they are among activities that do not necessarily produce visible or tangible changes in the player and any change is very hard to prove (Juul, 2013). As we saw in chapter three, Winnicott's conceptualization of space of play is as a space of cultural formation that is never 'wasteful'; Winnicott positions both play and aesthetics as a necessary process of human growth and becoming.

Further elaborating on Deleuze's work, Elizabeth Grosz (2008), in *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, posits that art is that which addresses problems and provocations. Art, from a Deleuzian perspective is an unleashing of intensities and forces that could not be released or captured in any other way. According to Grosz, all arts have something in common, they are all composed of blocks materiality becoming-sensation. Art is what intensifies, produces sensations, and uses them to intensify bodies" (Grosz, 2008). She asks whether aesthetic work exists to the extent of being sensed and thus is always dependent on the audience to sense them, but for her that is not the case: "Sensation is that which is transmitted from the force of an event to the nervous system of a living being and from the actions of this being back onto the world itself" (Grosz, 2008, p.71). Grosz (2008) writes:

Art is not frivolous... it is the most vital and direct form of impact on and through the body, the generation and vibratory waves, rhythms, that traverse the body and make of the body a link with forces it cannot otherwise perceive and act upon...it is culture's most direct mode of enhancement or intensification of bodies, culture's mode for the elaboration of sensations...While there is no universal art, no art form, no music or painting, that appeals everywhere in the same way, it is also true that there is no culture

without its own arts, without its own forms of bodily enhancement and intensification.

(p.23)

Aesthetic creations are meant to make something of life visible that might have remained unknown otherwise. “Art aims to represent what is unrepresentable, to conjure up in words, paint, stone, steel, and melody, invisible and soundless forces, what is incapable of being represented otherwise or what, if represented otherwise, would bring into existence a different kind of sensation” (Grosz, 2008, p. 81). These unleashed forces bring sensations into being and transform the body (Grosz, 2008). Art is a space in which risks and innovations are undertaken without any pre-emptive concepts in mind, rather *for their own sake* (Grosz, 2008). It allows for the incommensurability of subject and object to be celebrated, opened up and elaborated (Grosz, 2008).

Videogames such as *Papers Please*, *This War*, *BMML*, or *Neverending Nightmares* (as I will demonstrate shortly) do not impose a particular thought. Although these games address socio-political issues, they do not analyze, criticize, or attempt to offer an explanation. They capture and bring to light forces of those events, spaces, and time in order to create a space where the intensities captured, open up the bodies of the players and this opening up allows for new becoming and formation of new relationalities, and potentialities of the futures to come. This potentiality manifests from a plane of sensory experiences that “engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things” (Stewart, 2008, p. 21), no matter how they unfold. Art is not oppositional to politics, or an apolitical understanding of life, but rather it is politics via other means (Grosz, 2008). It is the space of an emergent political which does not concretize or contain politics, it does not settle on the *actual*, rather it is the actualization of virtual and affective forces that have impacted the artist. As we will see in the following case

study, other games can strip a lot of narrative out of the game in order to lay bare only the sensations and forces of impact.

Case study: *Neverending Nightmares*

I have died and have woken up again in my own house or some variation of my house. I can no longer distinguish between what is my reality and what is my nightmare. The house is decaying further with each of my deaths. The deterioration of my soul is tied to the deterioration of the house. I begin walking again, opening doors and furtively traversing the hallways of whatever this place is, searching for answers. I cannot run, due to what appears to be asthma or shortness of breath. This walk is imposed on me and there seems to be no escape from it. I can feel its force and oppression. I search for clues, look for any item that might offer some insight to what is happening. There is nothing.... I am haunted by images, corpses, ghosts, zombies and strangely large infants, which seem to hint towards something. I am exhausted...My search seems to be futile.... I open a door and I find myself on the edge of darkness. There is nowhere to go. I can either go back through the door from which I just emerged or I can sway on the edge of the darkness. There seems to be no other options at this point or if there are I am too tired to search for them. I start swaying on the edge of the abyss and after few short seconds I fall through this abyss, realizing I have just suicided....I wake up. This time on a hospital bed, with a person whom I now realize is my wife, crying on my bedside and pleading with me to stay with her regardless of the loss we have faced.



Figure 11 *Neverending Nightmares* (2014) - an example of gameplay

Neverending Nightmares (2014) is a branching-narrative videogame that opens up a world where the invisible forces of mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder and their horrors are made visible and felt through the game play. The art direction of this game powerfully discloses the affects of horror in this game. The setting of the game resembles a simplified Edward Gorey illustration, wherein the drawings are done mostly in black and white and the minimal colours in the game signify interactivity with an item in the game. Colours represent hints, sticking out and pointing towards something. The player navigates the game with an avatar of a man named Thomas, who appears to be stuck in perpetual nightmares as he attempts to understand his reality and the meanings behind these nightmares. In *Neverending Nightmare*, the player does not know for what purpose Thomas' character is stuck in this world, walking through the hallways of his disintegrating house, a psychiatric facility and a graveyard. There is no backstory, and barely any dialogues or words. Although it is a common practice in videogame storytelling that the major plot twists reveal themselves in critical juncture of the game or at the end of the game, in this game the player cannot know a definitive message of the game. The game is stripped bare to its most essential component: the affective sensations and vibration of depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder. And perhaps because there is no 'message' or rather the 'message' comes in the form of sensations and forces needing to be acknowledged and felt through the body, each branch of the story opens into another augmentation of the previous version. Each version of the nightmare starts to blend in with the others, blurring both time and space and through this seemingly monotonous repetition of slow-walking the corridors heavy sensations on loneliness, sadness, confusion, darkness and depression come to reveal themselves.

The avatar of the game is capable of few movements and actions. My movements are severely restricted by his shortness of breath. Any attempt to run quickly through the game in order to find meaning or run from monsters, tires out Thomas only to further slow down the process. This impediment not only drives the player to stay with these sensations and vibrations of the game but it also un-conceals the gripping heaviness of depression. The darkness, the inability to move quickly, the inability to breathe, the anxiety provoking setting and the frustrating, monotonous movements bring the indiscernible forces of depression into relief. Recall that the principle of force relation in the Spinoza-Deleuzian trajectory is a composite of action and reaction, of speed of these forces and their slowness that impact one another, one might be taken over and swallow the other force (Sauvagnargues, 2013). Once again, in this game, in a similar manner as that of *This War*, the affects of depression are captured so brilliantly through heavy-ness and slow movement. What is captured is how the intensities of what we call Depression interrupt the free movement and flow of the body.

The vicious cycle within the game provokes a sensation of inability to escape a particular state, especially that of a depressed state of health. Matt Gilgenbach, the creator of this game explains that this game was an educational project aimed at raising awareness on issues around mental health, loss and trauma. On his Kickstarter video Gilgenbach (2013) points out how the creation of his first game *Retro/Grade*, its release in 2008 and its eventual financial 'failure,' lead to a relapse of a major clinical depression that left him in a tremendously dark place. He explains that some of the images within the game, the loneliness of the character, and some of his actions are just what Gilgenbach himself felt in his darkest hours of battling depression (Hilliard, 2013).

In her book: *Depression a public feeling* Ann Cvetkovich (2012) posits that depression is an affective registering of socio-political issues that often keep people silent and numb.

Cvetkovich (2012) writes:

Depression is another manifestation of forms of biopower that produce life and death not only by targeting populations for overt destruction, whether through incarceration, war, or poverty, but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless. It is another form of the “slow death” that Berlant attributes to the seemingly epidemic spread of obesity, but one... a visible form of violence that takes the form of minds and lives gradually shrinking into despair and hopeless. (p. 13)

What Gilgenbach achieves through his game, is to make visible the forces of loss that plagued him and affected his body. His videogame is an attempt to not only make those visible, sonorous and somatic, but also palpable thus creating a felt knowledge of not what depression feels like – since we cannot ever truly know how something feels for someone else – but rather about what some of these forces that emerge out of loss and impact us feel like when we engage with them. How do they move us and take movement away and what possibilities do engaging with them open up? Games such as *Neverending Nightmares*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, and *Please Knock on My Door* (2017), are all games that capture forces of depression, anxiety, and psychosis and allow the player to engage with them for the purpose of feeling such sensations and gaining a greater understanding of those who suffer from such mental health issues. As I will explain shortly and in more depth in the next chapter, artistic production is not only the capture of forces and intensities affecting the body of the artists but also an experimentation, a play, a process of working through, for the artist herself who has first hand felt the sensations that the environmental forces gave rise to.

Aesthetic creation and its artist

Deleuze never met with Bacon while he was writing *The Logic of Sensation* and he relied solely on secondary literature, and yet when Bacon read the book himself, he was so taken by the accuracy of Deleuze's description and conceptualization that he said: "'It's as if this guy were watching over my shoulder while I was painting!'" (Kodalak, 2018, p. 409). When Bacon was asked how he begins his painting process, he explained that it does not begin in front of the canvass rather "during elongated daydream" and that "in the way I work, I don't in fact know very often, what the paint will do, and it does many things, which are very much, than I could make it do" (Sylvester cited in Kodalak, 2018, p. 410).

Similar to Bacon, the creator of these socio-political games often explain the impetus for the creation of the games emerged out of their interactions with their environment, not in front of their 'canvas'. Pawel Miechowski (*This War*) was affected after reading an article, *One Year in Hell*, about the siege of Sarajevo (Warr, 2014); Florent Maurin (*Bury Me, My Love*) was affected after reading an article about the tale of two Syrian refugees; Pope Lucas (*Papers Please*) was affected by his travel experience crossing borders in South and East Asia (Webster, 2013); and Mitch Swenson (*1000 Days of Syria*), who was a journalist in Syria was affected not only by what he saw of the Syrian war but also by its underreporting in the United States (Goldhammer, 2014).

Every artist here after being changed through the impact of forces, worked to capture something of those forces of impact and channel them into these games. They extracted from the chaotic forces of their environment the sensations that impacted their bodies and forced them to move and do. They created something that could be played with, shaped and be shaped by the varying forces that the players bring with themselves. Thus, creating an infinite unique creation

of assemblages and their experiences through play. In fact, even for Francis Bacon, as a painter, the *play* of forces between his paintings and his audience and their possibilities was so significant that his “avowed preference” was to have his paintings be covered with glass so the viewer could see herself in the glass against the backdrop of his painting (Alley as cited in Winnicott, 2010, p. 157). This playful feedback loop of seeing oneself on the glass against the painting would change how the painting is perceived by the viewer; by putting the audience of a painting *into* the painting as much as possible, Bacon attempted to highlight the possibilities of connections made between the art, the artist, and the audience, as the audience sees herself in the painting.

Just as I explained in the previous chapter about the assemblage of the player+avatar and how in that formulation the player is a part-subject, part-object entity, Gokhan Kodalak (2018) argues that an artist is not an actor that is only a subject, “but rather an expanded assemblage, an intertwined composition of agentive bodies and forces with different intensities in different moments on different scales” (p. 411). Every artist assemblage has its own unique mode of transmutation which results in the distinctive art work (Kodalak, 2018,). Drawing from Deleuze, Kodalak (2018) argues that the artist is not “the sole author of an artistic assemblages if controlling the whole process from a central command centre” (p. 410). “Certain forces, regardless of their beauty or ugliness, but in relation to their intensity and radiance, come forth as stimulations” (Kodalak, 2018, p. 410). A play of these sensations with those of the body of the artists create a new sensation needing to escape in order to interact with those of its environment, other bodies and beings such as the player. Thus, resulting in the feedback loop between the virtual and the actual that Massumi writes about. The creation of art then is both the capture of

sensations in order to make them invisible in that particular artform and an attempt to work through what has impacted that person, that artist.

Games and fidelity of context

When videogames are able to capture something of a particular reality of a war-zone, the wretchedness of famine, or the environmental degradation and its impact on life, not only they are able to make something of that reality visible, which most aesthetic creations seek to do, but also to create a space where the audience of the artwork, the player, gets to play, to do, to act, to insert herself in the story and to watch the story unfold with her actions influencing the outcome of the story. Through connections and linkages between the player and the avatars, the player safely experiments with forces that would otherwise be unavailable to her in order to reckon and wrestle with the intensities that emerge out of the actions taken within the game.

Some game theorists argue that fidelity of the game world to the context that player is coming from is significant in creating an immersive experience of the game and they argue that the reason why such sensation maybe felt by some players is dependent on the player's positionality, environment and life experiences. For example, Louise Sauv   et al. (2010) define fidelity in simulation learning as "the degree of similarity between the training situation and the operational situation which is simulated" (p. 9). If the simulation is able to reproduce, or rather capture, the sensations of situations and ethical dilemmas as faithfully as possible, they are able to create a space where the players or the learners practice, experience and experiment with their actions and are more likely to be able to transfer their learnings to the material reality (Sauv   et al., 2010). Others, such as Alexander Galloway (2004), argue that in order for realism to take place in a game, there needs to be a "congruency" between the social reality depicted in the game-world and the socio-political reality experienced by the gamer in her material reality (p.

10). Galloway draws on two games, *Special Force* (2003) and *America's Army* (2002), and compares their levels of realism. *America's Army* is a military game which aims to model the experiences of being in the American military, whereas *Special Force* is a first person shooter that places the player as a member of a military group in Southern Lebanon fighting against Israeli occupation (Galloway, 2004). Although Galloway (2004) critiques both games as employing similar methods and engaging in similar operations for opposing forces, he ultimately asserts that a "typical American youth playing *Special Force* is most likely not experiencing realism, where as realism is indeed possible for a young Palestinian gamer playing *Special Force* in the occupied territories" (p.11). He concludes that "fidelity of context" is a major component in realism of the game which will then allow for experiencing the full effects of the sensations of the game (Galloway, 2004, p. 11).

Galloway and others offer an important insight into how fidelity to a context or an event creates a particular form of immersion, however by this logic, if the story of the game is outside of the context of the player's reality, it would not truly immerse the player and we know that is not true. Not only do players constantly play games, including socio-political games, of events which exist outside of the gamer's material reality, but there also exists a vast genre of gaming, where the game-world is purely a magical or a fantastical realm resembling very little of the reality of the player. *Journey* (2012) is one of such games. *Journey* creates such a brilliant and beautiful realm for a hooded traveler and their path through stages of life, change, growth, loss and connection. *Journey* does not give the player any direction of play, but the play is guided by the sensations captured through the game, and these sensations guide the play, beckoning the player forward. When we think of art as the capture of forces and making them visible, sonorous, and somatic, then the fidelity of context is not required for immersion and therefore for creating

connections. From this perspective I argue that what is needed is a ‘fidelity towards capturing *the sensations* of the context’ or the event.

Yet, ‘fidelity to context’ does come with its own affective powers and attunements. The affects of fidelity, which is an already existing relationship between the player, the game and its content, changes the space of play. As I will demonstrate in depth in the following chapter, it is important to analyze the space that this preexisting connection creates, what it challenges, and what it does differently for the player because of the existing linkages, bonds, histories and stories of the context that have shaped the player. In this sense the central question animating the next chapter is: what type of play is created through such fidelity to the context of the game-world and what affective vibrations come to make themselves known through that?

Chapter 6: Games and Ghosts: *1979 Revolution*



Figure 12 *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (2016)

That life is complicated may seem a banal expression of the obvious but it is nonetheless a profound theoretical statement...there are at least two dimensions to such a theoretical statement...The first is that power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply. Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine. It can be obvious, it can reach you by the baton of the police, it can speak the language of your thoughts and desires. It can feel like remote control, it can exhilarate like liberation, it can travel through time, and it can drown you in the present. It is dense and superficial, it can cause bodily injury, and it can harm you without seeming ever to touch you. It is systematic and it is particularistic and its often both at the same time...[and] Complex personhood is the second dimension of the theoretical statement that life is complicated. Complex personhood means that all people remember and forget, are beset by contradictions, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others...Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward... Complex personhood means that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not. – Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

I begin this chapter with an epigraph from Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), as this text serves not only as a fundamental signpost throughout this chapter, but also it was a lighthouse that guided my learning and growth throughout my graduate years towards my interest in feeling, understanding, and theorizing that which is invisible yet holds so much power over us. Gordon's analysis became my first introduction to a theoretical and a methodological conceptualization that brought together

seemingly contradictory and complex theories including psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, and aesthetic theories to examine and understand invisibilities, their sensations, how and for what purpose they impact us, their potentials, and the importance of not dismissing them as passing thoughts and feelings. The invisible, as Gordon (1997) argues, has its own language; it speaks through the impact of sensations through the body, wanting to be witnessed and reckoned with.

I followed trails of invisibilities through how other theorists such as D. W. Winnicott, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Brian Massumi, Sara Ahmed, and other theorists interested in the potential of invisible *things*, had conceptualized them. I played games – both board games and videogames – and experienced such invisibilities and for the first time the mode of conceptualizing the affective capacities of bodies, gave vocabulary and analysis to the sensations that had impacted my body and millions of other gamers through our engagements with games. I particularly gravitated towards the Deleuzian affect trajectory, as I have explained in chapter two, which places affect as a per-historical, pre-personal force. In these words and explanations, I found a place where existence in an in-between space was explained as that which was filled with potentials and possibilities, a space *not fully internal and not fully external* – as Winnicott posited – where one can experience, feel, and play with sensations; a space that is not just that of cognition's but of a thinking-feeling-sensing subject that comes to connect and re-connect with other bodies and create new relationalities carrying immense potentials. What I found in the Spinoza-Deleuzian trajectory of affect was a methodology, a way of thinking, feeling, and talking about the world that moved me beyond what I considered to be the limiting boundaries of positionality.

As I wrote in chapter one, when I started this research I did not position myself firmly in

any theoretical camp because this research was and has been primarily an exercise in creating an assemblage of theories that come together to make something of play more visible. Although I did not position myself in any one theory, I strongly gravitated towards the pre-discursive, pre-historical, and pre-personal definitions of affect. This gravitation was partially fuelled by my disappointment with post-structuralism that situates subjectivity firmly in the centre of analysis of systems of power, thus taking away the moving dimension of the body (Massumi, 2002). To add to that, my own experiences of art, specifically videogames and board games often suggested affective *things* that could not be explained through post-structuralism, feminism, and sometimes even psychoanalysis. That is how I began this project, not fully in a theoretical camp but with a particular conceptualization that if affect by nature is pre-historical, among other things, this will explain the non-verbal, pre-discursive sensations that videogames elicit affecting a wide range of players in similar ways.

But then I played a game that was too personal and too historical to be able to be understood solely in this conceptualization of affect. The force of this game was so powerful that it stunned me, *locking me on a position* and taking away *the moving dimension of my body*.

I played a game and it changed me, again, and *moved* my theoretical framework.

I played a videogame and became an assemblage once again and entered a space of play. But this time the assemblage was overpowered through a series of previously made connections that it would bring me face to face with my parents and relatives from another time and space in the late 1970s revolutionary Iran.

I step into the story and become part-Reza Shirazi, the protagonist of the videogame: *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (2016). Reza, is a student who has come back to Tehran from his studies in Germany and finds himself pulled towards the magnetic pull of the revolution which

drew many students studying abroad, including both my parents, back to Iran to engage in what was ultimately going to be known as the 1979 Iranian revolution...

... I start taking photos of protests, start listening to tapes of Khomeini, as they were being smuggled back into Iran while he was in exile in France; begin to attend public lectures and demonstrations on freedom of speech, class oppression, Western imperialism and Shah's responsibility and collusion with imperialist powers. I am often forced to balance between familial ties and changing beliefs, between who to trust, which stories to believe, how to stand up for justice without resorting to violence and how to balance the desire for survival even if it means through collaboration with the enemy with the desire to not betray one's beliefs and comrades.

In my first gameplay I try to resist my torturer's violence and refuse to corroborate and answer his questions and this action gets me killed in the first few minutes of the game. My death surprises me and I will shortly return to the theme of repetitive deaths in this game. I play as Reza and with Reza, but here in this game, Reza might as well be one of my parents. The game creates a space of play that functions more as a portal both transporting and transfixing me to a different time and place. I play this game and I become *haunted* or rather more accurately, I became aware of my haunting, and in my haunting I recognize the affective capacity of my body which was forged during revolutionary times and are therefore invariably marked by the history of my body.

This chapter is primarily about 1979 and the vibrations, sensations, and contradictions that it made visible for me. It is deeply personal and political. It is a working through. It is about holding complexities together while they rub against each other with a force of friction and the potential of that friction. This chapter is about affect theory, its short-comings as well as its strength, and about the art that made such shortcomings and strengths visible. This chapter is a meditation on the *personalness* of affective forces and intensities and in this way it is a break away from the Deleuzian trajectory of affect. As we will see, in this chapter some of those analysis of pre-discursive and pre-personalness of affect, stretch, expand and at times break

down and those parts of affect that are invariably tied to the capacities of bodies and their histories come to make themselves known.

The chapter is divided into the following sections: I will first explain the affective capacities of *1979*, contextualize my relations to the game and the ways in which this relationality changed my engagement with the game. In the next section I argue that fidelity to the context of the game can carry an excess of sensation which alter the space of play. I will then unpack how the connections between some players and some games make those games a more obvious playground of haunting and working through. Here I draw heavily on the works of Avery Gordon's on haunting and use her aesthetic reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to demonstrate the capture of ghostly matter in art. I will use *1979* and *The Cat and the Coup* to demonstrate haunting in games. This section will then set up my argument about how affect is hinged on the body's affective capacities which are invariably shaped and formed through the history of that body. In this section, I will unpack the critiques of affect theory and will highlight that despite these shortcomings, affect theory provides a different mode of understanding the 'sensing body'. I will use the music of *1979* and *This War* to demonstrate how affective sensations that make up these songs are both pre-personal and personal, born of the history of that region yet connecting with the human in the other. I will end this chapter with the case study of another revolutionary game: *Tonight We Riot*, as a testament of how not every revolutionary game will induce the same affective response between every player and the game.

Revolutionary Affects



Figure 13 1979 Revolution: Black Friday (2016), an example of the branching storyline

1979 Revolution (1979), the game, begins with Reza trying to develop a photograph when he is arrested and sent to the notorious political prison Evin. The game takes a non-linear temporality where the story travels back and forth in time as the infamous Evin warden of the time, Assadollah Lajevardi, interrogates and tortures Reza, as shown in Figure 13. During these interrogations, memories are called upon like ghosts needing to be exorcised, so that they may confirm or deny the allegations against Reza. We time travel and meet the people Reza met, learning their stories and understanding that some of these people are wanted by the Islamic Republic forces.

The game is a buildup to the day of *Black Friday*, as I navigate the revolutionary forces between various leftist sects and their varying ideologies, reckon with the age-old question around the morality of use of violence as a means to an end, becomes aware of class differential, and struggle with the fact that my older brother is a SAVAK¹⁴ officer, working to maintain the establishment and thus part of the force opposing the revolution. “Black Friday”, later named the National Student Day in Iran, was a pivotal day in the course of the Iranian revolution where any

¹⁴ SAVAK, short for the Organization of National Intelligence and Security of the Nation, was the secret police and the intelligence services during the Shah’s regime which received significant support and training from the American CIA.

hopes of reconciliation between the Shah's government and the people were annihilated (Ansari, 2012). On September 8, 1978, after months of unrest and protests the military opened fire on the protesters, killing over 100 people and injuring more than 400 people (Ansari, 2012). The images of that day reveal scenes of carnage, where smoke and fire spread, filling the streets with the blood of the people, majority of whom were university students.



Figure 14 1979: *Revolution: Black Friday* (2017) - an example of gameplay

It is on this day that Babak, Reza's close friend, dies after being shot. As *me* and *my* other friend, Bibi, carry Babak's injured body to a side street and examine the wound, as blood spills out of his body and amidst his realization that he is dying, the game exposes the poetically tragic narrative of death in a revolution where although people want to fight for their freedom, rarely do they want to die for it. Similar to *This War of Mine* or *Neverending Nightmares*, the game challenges our perception of survival, life and death as it lays bare the reality of the human instinct of wanting to survive. As Babak realizes he is dying, first he expresses in fear how he does not want to die and as the realization that he will die becomes more apparent he encourages me to leave him and save myself before the Savak officers can get to us. I am forced to contend

with the decision of leaving my friend's dying body on the street and saving my own life or staying with him and possibly getting arrested. This moral dilemma plays out in a short time where with his dying breath, Babak utters these last words, a request and a demand: "Go! Go and tell the world what happened here today". I flee the scene, taking Babak's wallet with me to return to his mother.

Go and tell the world what happened here today! These words – which no doubt were uttered by many who have resisted against despotism, in the hopes of a better world and have died in that fight – call out a need for reckoning, a witnessing and perhaps a reconciliation. The game brings back to life those words and asks the player not only to engage with revolutionary sensations, feelings, and vibrations but to also bear witness to something that happened more than forty years ago, and to see those people as people who fought, died; some succeeded and some failed in wanting to achieve their freedom. *Go and tell the world what happened here today* haunts me.

Realism and one's proximity to the game

I concluded the previous chapter by explaining that some game theorists argue that the best attempt at immersion of the player in the game – for the purposes of pleasure and learning – is congruency between the context in which the player lives in and the one that is being created in the game (Galloway, 2004). However, I posited that fidelity to context is not a requirement for learning, growth and empathy. Here I want to elaborate on that point by demonstrating how an access of fidelity to a particular context or an event, because of the pre-existing connections of the player and the event, formulates a different type of space of play and therefore an altogether a different type of play.

My story of the Iranian revolution is filled with tales of my parents, aunts and uncles who

were revolutionaries. Both my parents in their late-20s left their studies abroad to return to Iran in order to be able to better contribute to the biggest uprising of their lives. Years later, they would relay stories of smuggling walkie-talkies, distributing flyers secretly, using their bodies as shields to protect others, hiding a lithograph machine in the furnace while the secret police were investigating houses next door, and fleeing their house in the middle of the night, twice. Years later, they would tell me stories of family members' arrests and imprisonments. They would tell me that they created me out of fear and love so that in case one of them was imprisoned they could, in me, safeguard something of the other.

My parents, like many others of their time, considered the revolution a 'failed one', a 'hijacked one', where the revolutionary forces ultimately metastasized into something wholly different than the one envisaged by my parents and those around them. Not only they considered the revolution a 'failed one', many children of their generation, who would call themselves the lost or the 'the burnt generation' (*Nasle Sokhteh*) would come to blame their parents for their revolts and their contributions towards a more severe dictatorship. The oppressive and the autocratic fist of the Islamic republic eroded women's rights in both the private and public spheres (for more see Amin, 2002; Poulson, 2005; Derayeh, 2006). My parents, like many other Iranian diasporas, ultimately decided to leave Iran mainly because of the oppression of women and for their daughters.

The revolution changed my parents' course of life and the severity of its forces changed my parents. The pain, the loss, and the changes were so brutal and so severe that my dad for many years would melancholically sing the revolutionary songs of his youth. I have grown up with the ghosts of the 1979 revolution, 'the last revolution of the 20th century'. I am very familiar with the stories of this game. They are not mine alone, but of generations of people who fought,

and continue to fight, valiantly for their freedom and whose rights were, and continue to be, at times slowly and at times swiftly taken away. A story of a revolution is a collective story, because a revolutionary event is a meeting of bodies and forces that affect one another and are affected by each other. My father often described the affect of revolution as a ‘thunderous stream’ impacting every aspect of the society and moving everyone along with it, and sometimes drowning people in its force. I, like my parents, have always considered the 1979 revolution a failed attempt at democracy, as something that had to be done and yet a movement that toppled one despot only to replace him with a more brutal one.

The affects of grief due to my proximity to the story, the extent of the game’s “congruency” with my life, brings such an affective fidelity and intensity that it paralyzes me. I play *1979*, and I cannot move. I am too slow in clicking the correct buttons and my lack of movement leads to numerous deaths during my first few attempts at playing the game. I find myself not being able to move my fingers fast enough on the keyboard to dodge punches, to jump over barricades, or to overcome simple obstacle courses. These are not due to the complexity of the movements or dexterous actions required by the game. In fact, on the technical level, this is an incredibly easy game. Time is the biggest factor of failure because every action is time-based. Time-based actions mean there is only a few second to decide on the course of action among the options presented. If the player fails to make a decision in those short seconds, the game makes a random decision on their behalf, moving the game forward without much input from the player, thus punishing the player. This mode of game strategy forces the player to make decisions in split-seconds, as one usually makes in such situations in real life, and thus deal with the sensations of possibly having made the wrong decision that will alter the course of the story.

I am arrested, stuck, stuck *in* something or *with* something I cannot fully name. The affective intensities of these sensations hold me back. They arrest my movement and movement, as I have stressed repeatedly throughout this dissertation, is a necessity in playing and within a game. Games have the ability to move the body of the player as the bodies of the player and those on the screen begin to merge and occupy a co-constitutionality, making the player+avatar assemblage. The games that possess the ability of persuasion, have the ability to immerse the player in the game, and this happens through the capacity of the game creating a space where the player becomes an assemblage of themselves and others *and* witnesses themselves as such¹⁵. The body is opened up, the boundaries of where the player ends and the avatar begins are blurred, and the player forms and reforms through the relations of these bodies. This continual becoming is also witnessed by the player because the action-reaction processes of the game and thus the gamer are reflected back to her through the screen. The player is both moved by the actions within the game and moves the game along. The player is both affected by the game and affects the game.

The affects of grief in *1979* are *of* a similar sensation as to those of death and survival that come to manifest themselves after hours of playing *This War*, or *1000 Days*, or *BMML*, which are on some level more emotionally and affectively intense. In fact, many reviewers of these games often write about the similarities of such games in putting the player in a space of ethical quandary and forcing the player to experience the consequences of those quandaries.

However, in these games the sensations that result in the arrest of the body, such as a shock that stuns the player or the overwhelming power of grief and sadness that emerges as a consequence of an action, often arrive after numerous actions within the game, after hours of

¹⁵ Even in First-person shooter games, where the player often does not see the body of their avatar other than the arms that hold the weapons, there is a sensation of the body of the player expanding and extending to that on the screen, thus creating the player+avatar assemblage where the player witnesses themselves doing actions in the game.

gameplay. Most games, in order to strengthen the player+avatar connection and therefore create a truly immersive experience for the player, create a space of play that is not too overwhelming enough in order to keep the player in the game. They must strike a fine balance between not being too hard that the player gets discouraged from playing the game and too easy that they do not create any challenges for the player. Therefore, in many of these survival games the affects of shock and grief often slowly reveal themselves after hours of game play and the compounding actions within the game. In those games, affects of survival, loss and grief become more and more visible through the feedback loop of reaction that is created out of each of those actions. Sensations of loss and grief are the direct result of the actions in the game. The player must first act before a reaction emerges from the game.

In addition, my distance from the stories that make up games such as *This War, 1000 Days*, *BMML* or *Tonight we Riot* (2020) create the necessary space of immersion, where I am able to ‘lose’ myself in the game. In these games, similar to most of my gameplays and like most game players, I want to “win”, to beat the game, to work through my mistakes, confront my own prejudices, ethics and morality as I navigate the realities and complexities of the lives of others.

In *1979* gameplay, however, without any actions I am suddenly grief-stricken. I am *struck*. I die because I am not fast enough. I die repeatedly and quickly because I find myself *watching* the game unfold before me, rather than *playing*. My repeated deaths catch me off guard. I am not new to survival games, these actions and what I must do to survive in these games are not new to me, but there is something else that is new. Something of the same sensations as other games appears within the first minutes of the game and seemingly out of nowhere. That sensation merges with the affective vibrations of my own body and illuminates something. I am arrested by *it* and my repetitive deaths in this game come to signify that *thing*. It

is not only the affective intensities of the game that have slowed my movements, rather it is their interaction with my own affective capacities that have arrested my body on the chair. Being arrested in time and space heeds a call for reckoning.

My proximity to the story of *1979* does not allow me a full ‘immersion’ in the story. I do become an assemblage but I am always aware of parts that are making this assemblage as opposed to their relations and new connections, and in this sense I never forget myself. I cannot forget ‘the part’, in order to become ‘the Whole’. The boundaries of myself, outside of this game, are so strongly reinforced through my story that I can never transcend myself. In fact, *1979* is one of the few games that I have ever played that I was never able to be fully immersed in the game because the broader story of the game overpowered play. The realism of this game was too close, too powerful, and too imposing.

The realism of games, when they align very closely to the lives of those who have experienced those realities, carries a different level of intensity precisely because of the interaction the game makes with the body of the player. This game was personal before it began. I had a preexisting relationship with this game before its inception both through the forces of history that has made me into who I am today, and my relationship to the game prior to my actual gameplay. These relationalities change the gameplay for me. *I become haunted* and the affects of haunting demand something completely different, they are of different intensities for those who become haunted. Being arrested in time and space is one of the conditions of haunting and being haunted is both personal and historical.

Ghosts of social injustice: A detour through the ghosts of slavery

Avery Gordon (1997) traces epistemological roots of haunting through both psychoanalysis and Marxism and posits that haunting is a language where we attempt to

understand an intersection between a force and a meaning “because haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (Gordon, 1997, p. Xvi). Gordon (1997) argues that haunting is a distinctive *state*, an animated one, in which a

repressed matter or an unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly and sometime more obliquely...these are singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, *when the over-and-done with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view.* (p. Xvi, emphasis added)

I lose the game of *1979* because I have lost my bearings as a gamer. Something about my past, that is not really past, powerfully presents itself. The already existing pathways between me and this event are fired up through the story and I am taken for a ride and on this ride I have little control.

Drawing from Freud’s essay *The “Uncanny”*, Avery Gordon (1997) posits a post-colonial theory of affect wherein the haunting forces of one’s socio-historical reality, although invisible are very powerful. These invisible forces demand recognition and justice (Gordon, 1997; Georgis, 2013). In that essay, Freud (1919) called the experiences of ‘feeling something there’ as ‘qualities of feelings’ (p. 217). For Freud (1919) the uncanny experiences are the return of a repressed matter in repeated actions. However, Gordon (1997) points out that even Freud admitted that these experiences are not just from repressed infantile complexes and in fact most uncanny feelings do not emerge from these complexes (p. 52)¹⁶. However, Freud believed that

¹⁶ In her book, Gordon (1997) credits psychoanalysis as the only human science that has taken affects of haunting seriously. Although Marx and Engels attempted to address it through their analysis of alienation of labour, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s two page afterthought of what haunting is appeared in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Gordon, 1997, p. 19), psychoanalysis was the only discipline both addressing haunting and being haunted itself,

fiction, and more broadly speaking art, provides “more opportunities for creating uncanny feelings than are possible in real life” (Aardse, 2014, p. 5). Similar to what Raymond Williams would come to call a “structure of feeling”¹⁷, Gordon (1997) argues that uncanny experiences are haunting experiences where one can feel a presence, a force, a sensation that has an “electric empiricity but is...barely visible” (Gordon, 1997, p. 50). Gordon (1997) posits that haunting is about what appears to not be there but in fact is present. Being haunted is when something catches you off-guard and does not let go, it comes in forms of traces, or even traces of trances, where awake is left behind by a force that has disturbed the seemingly calm surfaces of the water.

Haunting according to Gordon (1997) is a state not of cognitive doubt or even of the unknown, rather it is a state marked by repetition of either a repressed matter or something that has been not addressed¹⁸. Gordon (1997) uses the term ghosts to describe signs, evidence, sensations and forces of power that attempt to tell us something:

The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or

since as much as Freud tried to address haunting, he fell short of it through his own writings and what he himself was haunted by.

¹⁷ Gordon (1997) referenced Raymond Williams conceptualization ‘structure of feeling’ as “perhaps the most appropriate description of how hauntings are transmitted and received” (p. 18).

¹⁸ Although I draw heavily from Avery Gordon’s analysis, she situates haunting as a repressed matter or an unresolved historical trauma. Although through the lexicon of psychoanalysis and its theoretical framework such sensations, would be termed as a repressed matter, I hesitate to use this term for this specific analysis because the force that impacted me has never been repressed, rather its awareness has often occupied an immense mental and emotional space. This is the part that I want to address: I do not use the term repression because I do not believe that such sensations are just that which have not been worked through and assimilated into consciousness, as repression often means in psychoanalysis. Rather it is a recalling, a re-awakening of a sensation of grief and grief itself can be haunting force of ghostly matter; the force of a sensation that stops you on your track, you are overcome and unable to move, transported through time and space as they stretch, expand or shrink. I do not use the term repression because I want to talk about the sensations that such forces evoke and more importantly how this is the testament to the analysis that the body moves, feels, thinks and remembers and it often does all these things simultaneously. This is the testament to the analysis that remembering does not only take place in our amygdalae, in the brain only, rather the rest of the body will remember the impact of forces (for more see the incredible works of Gabor Mate’s *When The Body Says No* (2003) or Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014)).

the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. (p. 8)

It makes itself visible out of the need to be witnessed and reckoned with. In order to demonstrate this conceptualization I turn to an aesthetic analysis of haunting. Just as I drew on the paintings of Francis Bacon through Deleuze in the previous chapters, in this section I dedicate a considerable time to Avery Gordon's explanation of ghostly matters through her reading of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. My reasoning behind this is that this analysis can help us understand other affective sensations, such as that of haunting better and therefore shed light on the historical force that comes to make up the ghostly matter. Moreover, aesthetic creations are often drawn from in order to write about videogames because the long-standing history of aesthetic theory and philosophy which provide modes of analysis of different artwork, thus setting the example for a better understanding of videogames through such comparative analysis.

In *Beloved*, set against the back drop of Black Reconstruction in 1873 and inspired by the life of Margaret Garner, Toni Morrison tells a story of a ghost: the child of a slave woman named Sethe, who escapes the plantation with her children (Gordon, 1997). Sadly under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, she is captured to be returned to her master's house. Faced with this situation she attempts to kill all her children rather than, seeing them condemned to the same life as her and taken back in to slavery. She succeeds in killing one of her daughters who will be known as Beloved. Gordon (1997) argues that in the book, Morrison sets up a space, an aesthetic space through literature, where through a fictional account we come to reckon not only with the ghost and who she haunts but also how she, herself, is also haunted (p. 139). The book is a story of haunting and reckoning wherein two things happen simultaneously, the slave mother kills her

slave child and with it slavery itself (Gordon, 1997, p. 141).

In an interview, Toni Morrison explained that “to confront the past is to understand it as a living thing, this relationship between ourselves and our histories and racial histories can get distant but if you make it into a person then it is inescapable” (Morrison interviewed in ManufacturingIntellect, 2019). To understand the past as a living being with such power and forces of sensation is to better understand ourselves and our histories, particularly when the histories become so distant that they might become fossilized and not carry the *moving, breathing, affective* dimension of a story. Toni Morrison through her fiction posited that invisible things are not necessarily non-existent (Gordon, 1997). Slavery is long over but there is a “lingering inheritance of U.S. racial slavery” (Toni Morrison qtd in Avery Gordon, 1997, p. 27). And “endings that are not over is what haunting is about” (Gordon, 1997, p. 139).

Ghostly affects

1979 is a reminder of something that has ended but is powerfully present. The revolution ended in 1979 but the lingering violence of revolutionary Iran, and the violent ways in which the current regime took and maintained power have never left. The game is a reminder of the threat of the violence of the state as the game itself is banned in Iran; it was branded as a piece of propaganda (Muncy, 2016). There are anonymous contributors to the game who chose not to use their real names out of the fear of persecution for themselves or for family members left in Iran. These anonymous ghosts who participated in creating this game are among thousands of nameless ghosts that the Islamic Republic has silenced over the past four decades. *Ghostly beings* are part of this creation and the ghosts communicate loudly.

It only takes brief research on the internet to learn Iran’s current ideology and practices on freedom of expression, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, religious minorities’ rights. This is in

fact one of the functions of the game: to provide an informational account of history and culture in order to create a fuller context of what was happening at the time and who those people were. In addition to its interactive drama adventure game *1979*, similar to *1000 Days*, is a ‘news-game’ (Bogost et al., 2010) that does two things simultaneously: it asks the player who is not familiar with the story of the Iranian revolution to both learn *and* experience something of the story of the 1979 revolution. The game, like others of its kind throughout this dissertation, urges the player to reckon with questions on how much will you stand against despotism? And where will that limit take you?

As the opening credits roll, this game juxtaposes real pictures of the time to the computer-graphic ones of the game, a technique that continues throughout the game as the achievements are unlocked and the story unfolds. This mechanism provides informational details on events, locations, customs and practices, and a historical account of the day. Similar to *1000 Days of Syria*, the game is a blend of the fictional story weaved together with historical contextualization of events, practices and the realities of the day. The juxtaposition of the fictional account to those of what was happening at the time through actual pictures or text creates a greater sense of realism. The real images are an attempt to add a greater sense of gravity and an educational component to the game, reminding the player that although this is a game, this was also a reality that changed the course of history for millions of people. This is a story of real people who chose to fight, were imprisoned and killed and continue to be, people who fought for workers’ rights, resisted corruption of the police forces and the extravagance of the Royal family of Iran, who fought for freedom of speech, and whose actions resulted in a revolution that dethroned the Shah and replaced him with another brutal force of religious oligarchy. Many players precisely point out what they learned about the 1979 Iranian revolution

through the game and their empathic responses, as this player puts it: “this game managed to flesh out my understanding of the experience and made my heart ache for the people involved” (Carpenter & Fuller, 2019).

Such informational points of reference throughout the game tell a specific story from a particular point of view and through that they create a very context-specific space of play which can curtail freedom of imagination by focusing and stressing a particular story belonging to a particular time and space. Historical images within *1979* or narrative of the time in *1000 Days* create a specific space of play within the boundaries of that particular story. Of course, one of the points of these games are precisely to put the player in a particular time and space and ask them to experience something of that specific life for those who had to live that. In comparison, games such as *This War of Mine*, although very much inspired by the Bosnian war and the siege of Sarajevo, provide a greater space of imagination by not referencing any context-specific information. The informational components of such games do these two things together in terms of the space of the play they create: they create a greater space of learning about that particular historical event by allowing a simulation of that event and they simultaneously curtail the imagination of the player to the boundaries of that specific event. I do not argue that either of these techniques is superior to the other. I merely point out that these socio-political games employ different techniques of play, with their own strengths and weaknesses and they ultimately create a different space of play for different purposes and with that different affective forces and vibrations. Such games become navigating historical events through the people of that time and understanding and reckoning with the complexities of the people and the event, and their relations and the forces at play.

“Thing that aren’t over when we think they are over, is what haunting is about” (Gordon,

1997, p. 139). The game signifies endings that have not ended. The game carries with it the revolutionary fervor that seemingly ended 40 years ago and something of that revolution still lives on in the people's attempts big and small to battle for freedom of speech, and expression and the fear of persecution over their activism which has never ceased. Depending on the player+avatar assemblage that is created, depending on who plays the game, the game is a reminder of separation. The game is a reminder of why my family left; it is a reminder of the dictatorship that arrests, imprisons and kills journalists, researchers, academics and human rights lawyers such as Homa Kazemi, Nazanin Neghari-Radcliff, Kylie Moore-Gilbert, Nasrin Sotoudeh and many more.

Being haunted is a state marked by repetition of forces and powers that form themselves into *something* needing to be acknowledged and reckoned with. The affects of haunting are decidedly historical or "transgenerational haunting" as Dina Georgis (2013) writes, and haunting is a state that requires a reckoning. "Reckoning is about knowing what kind of effort is required to change ourselves and the conditions that make us who we are, that set limits of what is acceptable and unacceptable, on what is possible and impossible" (Gordon, 1997, p. 202).

Kent Aardse (2014), further drawing on Freud's uncanny, posits that in fiction and by extension in videogames we encounter the uncanny because we encounter something that is familiar but has been rendered fictional and thus the distance created between what is fictional and real can foster and remind us of uncanny experiences. For Aardse (2014) the uncanny is a part of any type and site of play, "as a way to disrupt the boundaries or rules of the game" (p. 5). Something gets disrupted in that site of play that makes invisibilities more visible or palpable. *Go and tell the world what happened here today* is a ghostly call both haunting and haunted. For Gordon (1997) ghosts have two particular features: they cannot be simply tracked back to an

individual loss or trauma because we must consider how history is filled with ghosts and ghostly matters and how these ghosts have their own desire to be acknowledged. *1979*, the game, is a bringing-to-life of history which then can be played with and experimented with.

Experiences of haunting alter our experience of being in time (Gordon, 1997), in the sense that time and space are warped, stretched and a sense of past, present and future all bleed into one another. The time stretches and slows down before me and other stories that are not within the game, but the game calls forth, takes centre stage. I become possessed by forces bigger than me, forces that slow me down to make me pay attention to something else, to my own story that is important to be worked through. For example, as the game approaches the monumental moment of Black Friday, I time travel to a place where my parents' memories and stories of that era live. Time slows down. I, as the player, am aware of the history and the high possibility that a character or two are about to die in the game no matter what actions I choose, and in anticipation of that before my actions are taken, I am filled with immense grief as the game re-enacts the story of the military officers issuing their final warning to the crowd of students and workers before firing on them. I anticipate the force that is about to impact me, I brace for that heart-wrenching sensation. There is an anticipatory knowledge of what is about to unfold and that anticipation itself is a state that is pregnant with sensations and vibrations specific to the histories of events, the experiences that have made that body, *and their relations*.

I anticipate because I have a prior existing relationship with the game. In addition to my family history, my interaction with this game started before its release. This game was a Kickstarter project that I supported. The project was unable to raise the amount of money it needed and was not funded. It took several years to raise the required funds and start production. I followed its journey and its development closely with much excitement about a game in

mainstream gaming culture that would tell a story that is part of my story and my life. It was released in 2016 when I promptly bought it, installed it and with much anticipation loaded the game only to sit in front of the screen unable to move, let alone play. My interaction with this game started before its release *and* my interaction with this story started long before the game ever existed. Of course, I am not alone in this experience. Many gamers follow the release of their favourite games with excitement, many of us have had the same feelings of anticipation for an upcoming book, film, or an exhibit. This anticipation is common, what I want to highlight is the vibration and the affective intensity that anticipation brings with itself, partially because the anticipation of something signifies a relationship with that thing, even if the relationship exists only in one's imagination. Affects of anticipation change the body, they can excite or suppress, elate or disappoint, shock or delight. They carry their own intensities. The meeting of the body that is pregnant with anticipation for the art it is about to engage with results in different intensities of affect.

I and another player – who might have bought this game after reading a positive review of it – do not come to the game in the same way with the same affective intensities. There are other affective forces at play as a result of previous relations between different parts that came to make that whole of the player+avatar assemblage. Consider the following review for a player who identified as part-Iranian:

Half my family hails from Iran and experienced the revolution first hand, so my personal attachment to the events represented in *1979 Revolution* is strong. I felt *chills* watching the opening credits, which juxtaposes live-action footage from the revolution against innocent home movies and in-game footage. In an opening chapter, I even recognized the bank where my grandfather used to work in Tehran – to see that kind of representation, no matter how mundane, in a medium where my culture and the Middle East at large are usually portrayed as desert war zones, was *touching*. (Rad, 2018, emphasis added)

She felt *chills* watching the opening credits. She saw the bank that her grandfather worked in and something *touched* her. I reviewed dozens of reviews of the game from various

gaming sites, such as *Kotaku*, *IGN*, *Games For Change*, and *Steam* reviewers and none had the same affective reaction as the above reviewer. These affective sensations happen because of the preexisting relationship she has had with the history of the game, the history that changed things for her family. While for some players this game is meant as an educational experience where one thinks, acts and feels about what happened at the time in Iran, for some others who are more familiar with the complexities of the time and have lived something of it, it results in an education altogether different. This knowledge is arrived at by occupying/becoming an assemblage of one's self and one's relations, perhaps one's parents, one's people who did their best at creating a better future for themselves and their children regardless of the result of that attempt. For some players, this game then is: a space of reckoning with and working out the past that is present in the painful reality of the majority of Iranian people living under the Islamic republic and many of those in Diaspora.

As Ann Sauvagnargues (2013) writes for Spinoza:

each individual is composed of infinite, extensive parts that belong to it within *one* particular relationship. The uniqueness of this relationship establishes an individuality with corporeal complexity, a state of forces, and “movement and rest” as Spinoza says, or “speed and slownesses,” since rest is not the absence of movement but slowness relative to a particular speed. (p. 42)

There is a corporeal complexity, made out of the parts that make the whole *and* the relations between those parts. This complexity manifests itself through the relations of the part and the intensity of the forces by which they affect one another, the whole, and their environment in a feedback loop. The level of intensity is explained through movement and rest of the parts and the whole. The player's proximity to the story of the videogame, particularly a socio-political game,

alters the space of play because of the previous connections and relations between the event and the player. These previous relationalities create an assemblage that is marked by different affective attunements and capacities. In this sense, *affect and affective capacities must carry historical forces*. Let me provide another example, this one much shorter, where a ‘documentary puzzle game’ brought about similar affects of haunting.

Case Study: *The Cat and the Coup*

Yes, my sin – my greater sin – and even my greatest sin is that I nationalized Iran’s oil industry and discarded the system of political and economic exploitation by the world’s greatest empire... This at the cost to myself, my family; at the risk of losing my life, my honor and my property... With God’s blessing and the will of the people, I fought this savage and dreadful system of international espionage and colonialism... I am well aware that my fate must serve as an example throughout the Middle East in breaking the chains of slavery and servitude to colonial interests. – Mohammad Mossadegh, the 35th Prime Minister of Iran at his trial for ‘treason’ on Dec. 1953

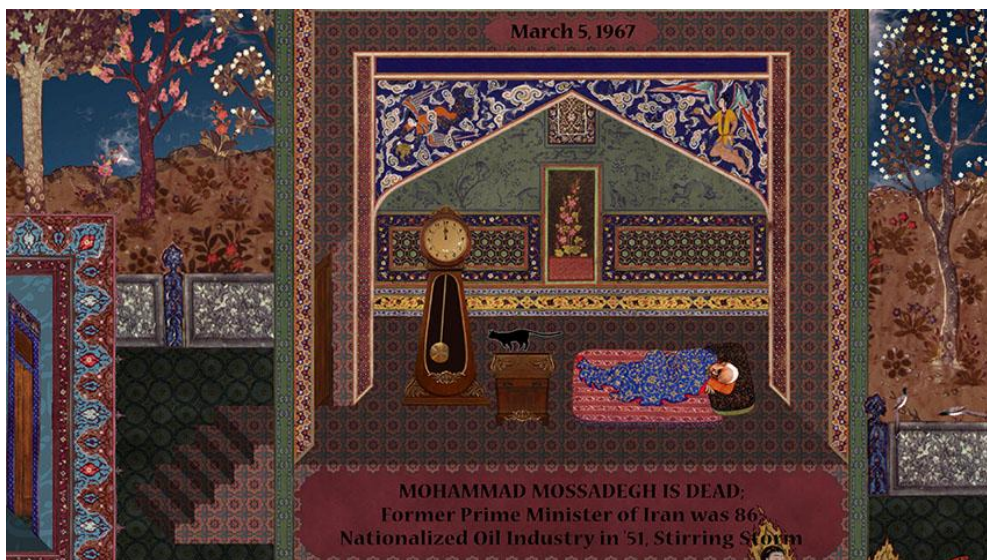


Figure 15 *The Cat and the Coup* (2011)

The Cat and the Coup (2011) is a documentary puzzle game created by Peter Brinson and Kurosh ValaNejad from University of Southern California. In this game I play as a cat, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh’s cat to be exact and my job is to move objects around, stumble through time and get a brief glimpse of the Oil Nationalization Period in Iran (1951-1953) by following

Dr. Mossadegh. The game is beautifully drawn. “Layers of stationary and animated scenery and figures are illuminated with attractive arabesque patterns” (Howe, 2015). The melancholic piano of Erik Satie adds to this alluring space of play and signals the coming of something that is in the past, yet its affective forces will occupy the present. I ‘play’ as a cat. The word ‘play’ is a stretch of a word since this would not qualify as a game in a traditional sense of the word ‘game’. There is minimal character interactions and little to do in the game and as many reviewers point out, the game is more an aesthetic and a learning experience than a ‘game’ (Howe, 2015; Sanches, 2017).

It is a playful digital aesthetic experience, with a surreal quality of *Alice in Wonderland* wherein I fall backward through time, and as I fall snippets of the story appear, connecting events of those years which culminated to a British-American backed coup d’état in 1953, that overthrew Mossadegh as the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, to his prosecution on charges of treason, and ultimately his death after years of house arrest (Rahnema, 2015). There is no story within the game world that the player can influence, rather the story *is* this game. In an interview Brinson explained that as Americans they created the game out of the need and the desire to shed light on the history of American imperialism for American citizens through its first ‘successful’ coup (Games for Change, 2010). Brinson stated that through this game they wanted the players to understand that the fight for democracy is a type of fighting in a war (Games for Change, 2010).

The game is an educational travel through a particular historical time with specific actors, their histories and their relations at play. We travel from the present day Mossadegh napping (presumably towards the end of his life when he was under house arrest) backwards to his fights against British and US imperialism, his conversations and negotiations with Churchill and Truman, the people’s love for him when he spoke passionately on nationalizing oil, and his

election. We time travel through different events of the Oil Nationalization Period (1951-1953), which saw intense activism around nationalizing oil (Rahnema, 2015). Once there, the oil spills out of the ground carrying Mossadegh's body upward through every level of memory, covering each important historical moment, stopping at his death. The oil drowns him and elevates him in the eyes of the people who fought and continue to fight colonial and imperial powers.

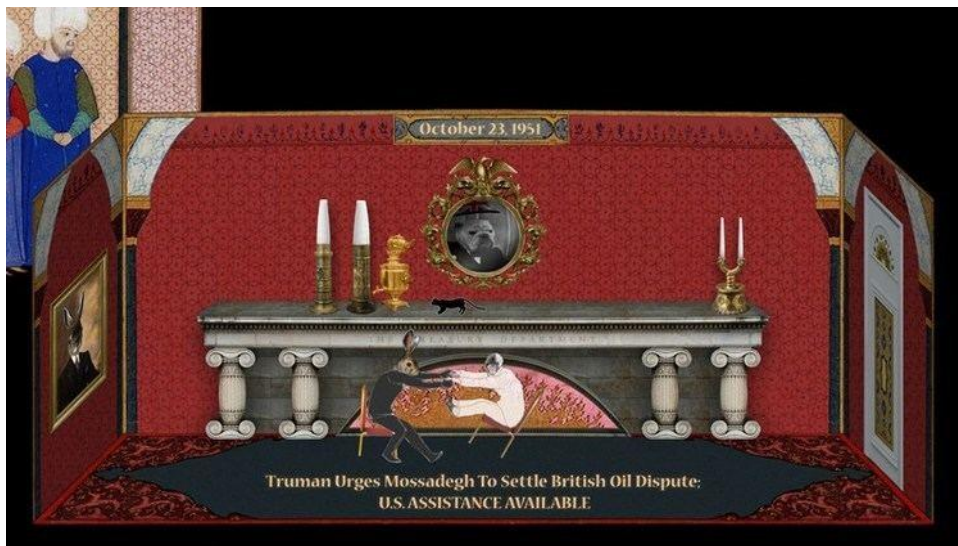


Figure 16 *The Cat and the Coup* (2011), an example of gameplay where the imperialist forces appear in animal forms

The game is unabashedly pro-Mossadegh, condemning imperialist forces of Britain and the US through a surreal rendering of their bodies. For example, Mossadegh's figure, as shown as an example in the above figure, is the only human figure in the game, as every other actor of this story from the Shah to Truman and Churchill are all depicted with animal heads. The game's function is guide the player through a story: a story of a man who did a heroic thing for the Iranian people by nationalizing oil and is beloved by those who fought against imperialism in Iran for centuries. Similar to those aspects of *1979* and *1000 Days*, the game attempts to teach a part of the American history marked by gross injustice to overthrow elected governments throughout the world in order to ensure the maintenance of their imperial and colonial power in

that region. *The Cat and the Coup* brings to light a figure and an event which haunt American history and must be reckoned with. The game is an attempt at this reckoning.

Although the game play is minimal, playing the cat of someone who has been considered a national hero by my family was affectively charged. Once again without doing much action in the game, I am overcome by heavy sensations. Other than wanting to solve the puzzles, move the story, beat the game, I wanted to play *with* Dr. Mossadeagh. I, as his cat wanted to be around him, rub his leg, play with his writing materials, I wanted to help him in his meetings against the Americans, I wanted to *be* with him. My affective responses to the game were no doubt influenced by my pre-existing knowledge of the events of the 1953 coup, how the Anglo-Iranian Oil company was contributing roughly 170,000,000 pounds to the British economy in 1950 alone (Rahname, 2015), the theft of national resources, how those events would set in motion another uprising decades later that would change my parents' lives, and above all my love for a man who gave up so much because he had a dream of liberation. The game is a love letter and I play it as such. I am a Sara+cat assemblage and I watch Mossadegh's movement through events and my heart aches for him. My affective experience does not simply emerge from the beauty of this game but also by the affective attunement of my own body, and the pre-existing relations I have to the foes and the heroes of this story. This pre-existing relationality affects my gameplay because it changes the space of play that is created.

My claim here is that the player's proximity to the story of the game is neither necessarily good or bad for immersion, rather the closer the player's proximity to a story, or the greater the fidelity of the player to an event, the more it affects the space of play that is created. A space of play is a negotiation, a feedback loop of action and reaction that is marked by the affective capacities of those bodies that come to engage with the game. In this sense, affects of the body

are shaped by the history of that body. Videogames, like other aesthetic creations, bring forward invisibilities, sensations, vibrations so we may see, feel, and experience them and perhaps in that experience understand something of the sensation that the artists themselves felt. These invisibilities will be felt with different intensities on different bodies depending on the history of those bodies.

Working through intensities

Navid Khonsari, the creator of *1979*, said in an interview that the point of the game was to put the player in a situation where they must decide between life and death and to experience the feelings and sensations that emerge from the process of that decision. The process, rather than the ending, is what the developer wants the gamer to experience. The process of the game, the messy middle where all the difficult decisions are made, is where potential for change lie. In the process of the game we come to experience the twin stories of the game interwoven together: the revolution has ended but something of the revolution still lives on. It lives on in the dictatorship and the violence of the state, but also in the revolutionary fervor and the resistance of the people no matter how small. It lives on in the day-to-day actions of the people, in their continual resistances and their bloody suppressions. The fight for freedom continues in the very manifestation of this game to tell a story of resistance and struggle, but also of humanity, and human beings trying to study, love, hold on to power, preserve status quo, betray someone, and survive. These only reveal themselves in the *process* of playing.

In chapter three I explained that repeating through failure is a function of a videogame which provides a space of working through challenges, difficulties and overcoming them. Also in that chapter, through Winnicott, I explained how the process of play itself is a process of working through and working out life experiences and sensations that have impacted us.

Aesthetic creation are not simply the work of the in-between space where the internal and the external reality meet up, as Winnicott would argue, rather art also has the ability to transport the viewer or the audience to that very in-between space (Georgis, 2013). In art we encounter bodies that are highly capable of making visible complexities of relationality (Georgis, 2013). In this sense, videogames makes visible this in-between space and transports the player to that in-between space of play and with it all the sensations that space affords.

In this section, I want to talk about another form of working through as a result of affects of haunting. If haunting is a result of an unaddressed social injustice, then it is a result of a historical injury that is passed down through stories and generations, and thus working through it provides a place to reckon and mourn that injury.

The socio-political videogame such as *1979*, *BMML*, and *1000 Days* attempt to transport the player into that in-between space of play where forces of life can be experienced and worked out. In this unique space of play often complexities of individuals and their relations with each other and their environment make themselves more visible. For example, in *1979*, we come face to face with Lajevardi, the warden of Evin who was nicknamed as ‘the butcher of Evin’ for his cruel and brutal torture methods (Anderson & Van Matta, 1990). As he tortures Reza, he briefly tells his own story of how he was imprisoned during Shah’s regime, in the very same prison in which now he is the warden of. He explains to Reza how he was tortured for his beliefs, pauses and then turns to Reza and explains now his job to weed out those who are not on the right path and not supporting the regime. Within the first few minutes of the game, we come face to face with both the butcher and the activist. We see the man who was imprisoned and tortured for his beliefs under a different regime, only to become a brutal murderer and perpetuate that violence under another regime which now supports his beliefs. In such short moments, complexities of

both power and personhood, as Avery Gordon termed, reveal themselves. It is a reminder that “*even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not*” (Gordon, 1997, p. 3, emphasis added). In 1979 we see a man who both hunts people and is haunted.

This particular space of play and working through allows certain players to be able to look at their past, to acknowledge it, to address it, and to work through it. Freud (2006) in his essay “Remembering, Repeating and Working-through” claimed that in the process of working-through

something is ‘remembered’ that can never have been ‘forgotten’, since it was never at any point noticed, never conscious” and in this sense “the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather *acts it out*. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it. (pp. 393-394)

Simply put we repeatedly act out what we resist remembering (Georgis, 2013). Although, for Freud the concepts of the uncanny and the process of remembering by repeatedly working through something have to do with repressed matters returning, as Avery Gordon (1997) suggests, even Freud was not sure if such actions are the result of infantile repressed matters. In this sense the process of working through is not exclusively about working through repressed matters, rather it is the process of working out historical, collective and personal injuries. Play provides the fertile ground in which life experiences can be understood with their varying complexities. Dina Georgis (2016) writes that art for both the artist and the audience provides the opportunity “for integrating human experience of loss and its constituent conflicts” (p. 78). “In art we encounter aesthetic objects more capable of expressing the complexities of relationality,

dimensions of not so obvious aspects of human reality...[where] conflicting affects are tolerated and even repaired” (Georgis, 2013, p. 77). Socio-political videogames provide a space of working through, or mourning, particularly for those players who have been impacted by the same forces that created the game. This particular form of working through requires a reckoning through which the player creates new relationalities and connections with their histories.

1979 is a game about ghosts and it is haunted by erasure of figures that are not there but powerfully present. *1979* is a good story; it is a complicated story made more complicated by the short duration of the game; it is Reza’s story. The protagonist is a man and the majority of the characters that Reza interacts with it are men, and in fact all the crucial interactions that inform the direction of the game happen with other men. Other than the leader of the student movement, who is a woman named Bibi, who will introduce Reza to their cause, and seems to later become close with Reza, there are no other women in the game.

The absence of meaningful interactions with women in the game results in yet another erasure of women’s participation in the 1979 revolution. The game is a story and it encourages the player to engage with that story and co-create something of that time. Perhaps because of reasons due to lack of funds, lack of access to more developers, and the time constraints on the duration of the game, there was no space to write any interactions with a woman; perhaps the developers of the game drew from their personal experiences which mainly included or are *remembered* as those with other men. Whatever the reason, the result is a story that like many other stories of the revolution, relegates the activism of women to the sidelines. No meaningful interactions happen with women, making the revolutionary actions and the processes of the game only with men, thus erasing women.

In his book, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, Thomas King (2003) writes

“stories that we tell make us who we are (p. x). Stories are how we make sense of our experiences and give them meaning (Georgis, 2013). The story of this game creates not only a male-centered story, but also a male-dominated story. I play the game and look for my mother and cannot find her. Where are the thousands of women, who created and distributed pamphlets, organized meetings and marches, smuggled books and equipments as they were less likely to be searched, used their bodies as protection for the men marching the streets? If, as King (2003) tells us “the truth about story is that that’s all we are” (p. 2), how do we tell a story that does not erase the activism of half of the population?

“The intricate web of connections that characterize any event or problem *is the story*” (Gordon, 1997, p. 20). The connections, relations, forces and sensations of the bodies that come together to interact *is the story* and if some of the connections are erased, that too becomes the story. Ghosts, as Gordon (1997) remind us, are a symptom of what is missing, a loss, or a path not taken. We must attend to the living traces and the memories of the lost and the disappeared (Radway, 1997, ix). And these memories must be honored, reckoned with, dealt with because they provide a different sort of knowledge: a sensuous knowledge. There is an indispensable need to “reckon with haunting as a prerequisite for sensuous knowledge and to ponder the paradox of providing a hospitable memory for ghosts *out of concern for justice* (Gordon, 1997, p. 60).

Complexities of affect theory

As I wrote in the previous chapters, for Deleuze (2001), meeting of bodies or ideas result in a combination of these bodies through their relations, wherein an assemblage is made through these parts coming together to make a ‘whole’. This force or forces of encounter are what Deleuze would call Affect (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). As I have explained the Deleuzian conceptualization of affect is a per-historical and pre-personal force. Affect from this position

exists outside of subjectivity (Anable, 2018). And here lies one of the biggest critiques of this branch of affect theory.

I wrote in chapter two that one of the critiques leveled against affect theory is that the theoretical framework underestimates how subjectivity, positionality, and systems of power come to shape the experiences of individuals, thus making systems of powers manipulating and producing affective vibrations of themselves (Grossberg, 2010; Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011). Affect theory is at times dismissed for its intangibility and abstractness. Critics of affect theory argue that “affective rewriting flattens out poststructuralist inquiry by ignoring the counter-hegemonic contribution of postcolonial and feminist theory” by positioning affect theory as the only answer to problems in cultural theory (Hemmings, 2005, p.1). The argument being that since we are individuals shaped by late-capitalist, colonial and patriarchal systems of power any affective capacities of our bodies are shaped and informed by those systems of powers. And my arguments in both my case studies in *1979* and *The Cat and the Coup* offer further evidence to the claim that any affective capacities would be shaped by the history of bodies. From this position claiming that sensations are a universal force, existing among bodies and their surroundings, tends to erase everyday oppressive and micro-violent practices that make up the lives of marginalized individuals.

Much research has been dedicated to the impact of trauma on the body. Through epigenetic research, a process by which genes are switched on or off, we now know that traumatic experiences can alter the DNA thus changing the body’s genetic receptors, which can be passed on up to four generations of decedents¹⁹ (Khazan, 2018; Wolynn, 2016). This process

¹⁹ For example, through various studies we now know that individuals who have experienced racial discrimination have a type of epigenetic change called methylation on specific genes affecting schizophrenia, bipolar and asthma much more than those who have not experienced racial prejudice; and that children of the Holocaust survivors have evidence of methylation on a region of genes associated with stress and anxiety (Khazan, 2018).

is witnessed in both animals and humans, and if we view the body as a system and a network of connections, then the stress on the body can change the machinery by changing the epigenetic markers (Khazan, 2018). This means the very forces of one's environment change the genetic makeup of individuals, altering the body on a molecular level. Winnicott (2010) argued that the individual is the summation of their experience. In this sense each person depending on what they have been exposed to, can sense different forces and vibrations differently and some are able to materialize those forces so the rest of us can see them or experience them.

The body has the capacity to affect and be affected. One of the main arguments of Brian Massumi around affect is that a singular focus on language and representation can create discursive subjects rather than sensing subjects (Anable, 2018). One of the limitations of post-structuralism, Massumi (2002) argues, lies in how positionalities of subjects lock them on a permanent grid of identity, where movement or occupying different positions in different times is subtracted from the picture. Massumi (2002) claims that in the post-structuralist framework movement no longer defines the body, rather the body is defined only through social locations such as race, gender, class, etc. where these categories supersede the moving experiences of the body. Bodies are calcified on this grid of positionality.

I have always been weary of positionality since I have observed it containing assumptions about that position and on the extreme I have seen how presumed allegiance to one's positionality can result in conflicts in activist and academic circles. Within this framework every movement is only understood through those social lenses. This mode of thinking, the one that only privileges positionality, forecloses on potentials of movement (Massumi, 2002). The potentiality of affect lies in conceptualization of the body in terms of movement and flux. Transition and movement allows us to be present to the moment, to the unfolding as it does

without projection of goals, hopes and desired outcomes (Zournazi, 2003). Engaging with affect has the potential to significantly alter our understanding regarding the powerful impacts of videogames and their pedagogical potentials. This does not mean affective potentials cannot be co-opted and manipulated for purposes of profit and power (for more see Massumi, 2005) as seen in the affective and emotional exploitation of the player in blockbuster games. It also does not mean that the affects of the body are not shaped by the historical forces that have contact with that body and even the generations before, nor does it mean that affect can only exist within representation and subjectivity. Let me demonstrate this further through the music of these games.

Affect & music

Deleuze (2003) called sensation a ‘master of deformation’ and claimed that music was one of the greatest of aesthetic creations that open up the body and de- and re-form. *In A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (2016) claimed:

Music seems to have a much stronger deterritorializing force, at once more intense and much more collective, and the voice seems to have much greater power of deterritorialization...Perhaps this trait explains the collective fascination exerted by music, and even the potentiality of the ‘fascist’ danger...: music (drums, trumpets) draws people and armies into a race that can go all the way to the abyss (much more than banners and flags, which hare paintings). (p. 302)

They asserted that the affective powers of music can bring about transcendental affective vibrations that have historically “led troops into countless wars and has stirred numerous past and present patriotic, as well as resistant, hearts” (Grosz, 2008, p.51). Music is among the most

ephemeral forms of art because “it is hard to name what happens in a musical experience” (Georgis, 2013, p. 151).

Although I have argued in the previous chapter that aesthetic creations, including music, are the actualization of forces that could not have otherwise been seen, heard, or felt, these very same forces are impacted by the histories and the people of the places that give birth to the different variations of those affective intensities and to the music. Most videogames begin with a music that is meant to augment the sensations of the game. Both *1979* and *This War* begin with a song carrying faint words.

This War begins with a melancholic sounding song, with a sense of longing, a sense of pain perhaps of loss, and a sense of hope as the song picks up and a chorus joins in, a longing, a pain a fight for survival, because the song picks up, and a chorus joins in, there is hope. I do not understand the words, but I am moved by the music and understand something of its affective vibrations on a visceral level. The song known as High Clockmaster is a Polish song released in 1972 by the musician Tadeusz Wozniak (Oleksiak, 2015). The song became an instant hit and still holds a top rank among other popular national Polish songs (Oleksiak, 2015) and is emotionally affective as it seems to resonate with people who cannot understand the lyrics:

*And when he comes in my direction
The high Clockmaster walking steady
I'll give my life to his protection
To face a future bright and ready
The days are running through my body
With ground and air fading away
I'll take a long last look for always
To go I don't know where to darkness*

The song is melancholically beautiful; it is touching and moving yet its impact on me as a player are far different, its intensity much lower, its vibrations not impacting me as forcefully as the

music at the beginning of 1979 does.

1979 begins with a song and a chat and the musicality of both possess me. I am taken not only on a nostalgic and melancholic musical ride but also on a haunting one. As I hear the chats of “Death to Shah” I hear voices of my family members. The chat has a movement and a musicality that is born out of the socio-historical and the material reality of those protest. These intensities that make themselves sonorous through the chants of “Death to Shah” belong to a particular time, space, and history and are invariably personal. I sit listening to the same famous revolutionary song my dad used to sing:

*Kiss me, kiss me
For one last time
Our spring has passed
The bygones are bygones
I am in search of destiny
In the midst of storm, among boatmen
One must move forward, at the risk of life
In the dark of the night I meet with my beloved
To light up the mountains with fire*

*Pretty girl
I am your guest tonight
I will stay with you
So you press your lips against mine*

*Kiss me, Kiss me, my pretty flower
For one last time
May God be with you
For I go toward my destiny*

This is a famous revolutionary song sung by Hasan Gholnaraghi. There is a story about this song, a ghostly story. Gholnaraghi only sang one song in his life and it was this one. He sang it right after the British-CIA backed coup that removed Prime Minister Mossadegh from power and brought back the Shah in 1953 (Eipper, 2015). It was also rumored that Mohammad Ali Mobasheri a leader of the Tudeh (communist) party wrote this song the night before his

execution when for the last night he saw his daughter in 1954, which was later discredited, in fact many attempted to claim that this song was written by the leaders who were executed during the Shah's regime (Eipper, 2015; Radio Now, 2007). However, several years later, Gholnaraghi said in an interview that the song was written by a professor of literature who admired Mossadegh but many did not believe him, perhaps this was an attempt to keep the identity of the poet a secret during those times. The poem was written by a young activist: Heidar Ali Reghabi, who admired Mossadegh immensely and was politically active during the years of Oil Nationalization Period (Radio Now, 2007). He was imprisoned for his activism after the fall of Mossadegh, and upon his release he decided to leave Iran out of fear for his life. The story goes that he wrote this poem on the eve of his departure from Iran and from his beloved whom he would never see again (Radio Now, 2007). Who was the *pretty girl* he wrote this song for? What became of her? She became a ghost, like many other women, whose losses, sacrifices, and activism were erased and whose ghostly figures still haunt the landscape of Iranian national history. Through the decades the song became known as Golnaraghi's one and only song.

The affective sensations of this song are intense, strong, and carry enormous historical forces of decades of oppression and those who were forced to leave their country out of fear for their safety. It was a song, sung during my grandfather's years; one that many young men and women came to sing during the late 1970s protests and activism to topple Shah's regime; and a song I sang during my teen years as we were getting ready to leave Iran. The affects of this song have a haunting quality for me that the song from *This War* does not.

Both songs are affective and this affective bloc of sensations is what Deleuzian affect theorists point to as the force that is harvested from one's milieu and made sonorous and its affectivity is beyond language. We witness this often that music even without us understanding

the lyrics can move our bodies. During the siege of Sarajevo Vedran Smailovic, a well-known cellist of the city, after seeing 22 of his fellow humans being hit by a mortar while waiting to buy bread, returned to the site of the explosion the next day to play Albinoni's Adagio in G minor (Crumm, 2013). He continued to play for 22 days on the same site and although the site was surrounded by snipers and he could have been shot any time, no one shot him. The music created a space of healing and he was named as the "Cellist of Sarajevo" and continued to play his cello for two years in various parts of the city among the ruins (Crumm, 2013).

Our bodies tend to move with rhythm and rhythmic vibrations move our bodies.

Understanding the lyrics is not a necessity in feeling the sensations the music has made sonorous. In *Papers Please*, the opening music does not contain any lyrics yet it captures the sensations of dread, anxiety, repetition, militarism, regimentation, brutality and seduction. And simultaneously the intensity of affective vibration can increase or decrease depending on that affective capacities of bodies that understanding the tunes, the tones, the vibration and the rhythm that the spoken utterances of the music bring forth. Ultimately the music, including the musical instruments²⁰ and the sounds that are made sonorous that comes out of a specific region or a group or a space will bear the affective resonances of that space and that time.

What is important and can be useful in holding the complexities of affect together, is the affective relationship between the listener and the music. Dina Georgis (2013) writes that the Arabic word *tarab* perhaps best explains the experience of being moved by music without being able to fully verbalize it.

Tarab is the act of both feeling and responding to a musical moment. It is a mutual

²⁰ Such as santoor/santur as the musical instrument spanning across India, Iran, Turkey; the quena and its relation to the music of the Andes, music does capture affective sensations, and although music from varying regions can have powerful affective powers on folks from different regions of the world, it is nonetheless influenced through the affective resonances within that region, and the people and bodies of that region, their histories and complexities.

exchange between performer and listener. Derived from the word *mutrib*, the performer, who has *ruh* (soul or feeling), has the ability to create *jaww* (environment or ambiance) that plays on the audience's affect. (Georgis, 2013, p. 150)

There is an exchange that takes place here and the experience of *tarab* addresses that exchange. There is a relationship and a connection renewed every time through the relations that come to create that *jaww*, making the affective sensations both pre-historical and historical.

Through my detailed analysis of these games I have attempted to demonstrate that although we cannot define a body simply out of the pre-existing categories of subjectivity, those very categories which carry their own affective forms of power have already impacted that body in question. Thus the body who has come in contact with those institutional powers is changed and is continually changing through that relation. The full capacities of bodies are not limited to the boundaries of subjectivity and identity, but they do not simply exist outside of them either, since as Spinoza argued a body does not reside in a void. "A particular body exists by forming a relation of relations, which must be understood materially as a fluctuating totality of material particulates that belong to it within a particular relationship" (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p. 42). Deleuze read this way would mean that individual bodies are different because of their material compositions and the intensive mode of power that those bodies bring with themselves.

Case Study: *Tonight We Riot*

The world is in the throes of global capitalism...workers everywhere toil daily for a pittance. Many work multiple jobs just to make ends meet. But no matter how hard they work, it'll never be enough to be free. For those who do not own the means of production will never know real freedom. People peacefully protested but were met with violence. Those who own for a living rule those who work for a living. But all of that is about to change...(*Tonight We Riot*, 2020)

Tonight We Riot, developed by Pixel Pusher Union 512, is a game about overthrowing capitalism and returning the means of production to the people. I, as the player, throw Molotov

cocktails breaking formation/killing riot police, organizing fellow workers to join the cause and march forward until every oppressive overlord is overthrown. It is both an exciting and a cathartic game.

The game is not about a non-violent resistance as the above introduction states. In fact if the player chooses not to do anything the riot police enter the buildings and beat the people including the player's avatar to death, or they simply do the same on the street. None-violent resistance leads to death in the game (which is not unlike many other socio-political games capturing such forces from our material reality, including the ones mentioned in this research such as *1979* and *This War of Mine, 1000 Days of Syria*). Simultaneously the game does not reward the player for randomly killing any riot police or destroying cars. What is often rewarded is the solidarity among the protestors which will enhance actions, weapons and rewards based on the number of protestors that survive by the end of each level. Ted Anderson, the developer and the art steward for the game, said in an interview that they wanted to set up a realistic context for the game: "Yes, the cops will definitely escalate the situation; there's [sic] studies to back this up. They will beat the shit out of the protestors and damn right they will kill them (Walker, 2020).

This game, similar to *1979*, is about the space of play with revolutionary forces and sensations. Although *Tonight We Riot* is a more abstract game and not entrenched in a specific story and a specific time, it still makes visible the intensities of revolutionary forces that often result into violent de- and re-territorialization of bodies, thoughts, ideas, spaces, and governments. However, the game's affective powers, merged with my own affective capacities, do not result in anything near the affects of haunting in *1979*. This is not simply due to the more abstractness of the game or the lack of a personal story, *1000 Days* can also be argued as an

abstract game lacking music and images. I maintain that not all revolutionary games when merged with the bodies of the player will come to have the same intensities as merging with other bodies. These bodies coming together make a unique assemblage who plays in the space of the game and each time the game restarts another unique assemblage emerges. The affective capacities of these assemblages are influenced by these various bodies coming together, thus making the history of those bodies invariably influential in augmentation or reduction of affective intensities.

Forces, vibrations, and intensities can all be sensed differently in different bodies. The body is not simply waiting for something from the material structure. The sensation and affective attunements do not flow unilaterally from the game to the player and by the very definition provided here affect is also the movement of sensations escaping the body of the player. In this sense, the subject location of the gamer, personal experiences and narratives that have come to make up this person impact their understanding of the game, level and intensity of engagement with the game. Thus the level of intensity felt by the player and affective responses to the game is influenced by the social location of the gamer. Yet speaking about the body in the context of movement and flux, through sensations and affect, as opposed to only through fixed social locations, encountered and impacted by forces, engenders greater potential for increased connections. This is not to say that identities and lived experiences of those bodies should be overlooked and discarded, or to posit that one's lived experiences based on oppressive or privileged practices would not simultaneously impact the actions we choose in the games or outside of them. Conceptualization of the body in terms of movement, positions the body already in relation to other bodies and beings; movement contains change, becoming, forming and reforming and these always happen in relation to other beings. Movement expands the human

body and re-formulates it through the interactions with other bodies that come to augment that human body. Videogames, particularly socio-political videogames, create a space of place where complexities of sensations make themselves known and move the player. They bring to light what was invisible, yet real and what was unknown yet powerful. In socio-political games invisibilities are captured and made visible *out of concern for justice*.

Chapter 7: Trajectories of potentials, a conclusion

The essence of art, on which both the artwork and the artist depend, is truth's setting-itself-into-work. From out of the poeticizing essence of truth it happens that an open place is thrown open, a place in which everything is other than it was. – Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of The Work of Art*

The primary function of affect is urgency...to make one care by feeling. – Sylvan Tomkins, *Exploring Affect*

I played a videogame and it changed me.

I played and I became. I changed shape and size, morphed into images and characters, traveled in time and space, confronted some sensations and feelings, and chased other ones. I learned, grew, experimented, laughed, cried, and jumped with joy. I contorted my body, yelped, screamed, and sweated. I became different not only through the game but also through the actions I took within the game. I played a videogame and through my avatar, I occupied a space neither fully in the material world nor completely in the virtual one, an in-between space where the game and I became one. In this place, I felt the virtual and the material forces meet, converge, and create a co-constitutionality between me and my avatar. Within every videogame I played, I became different. I felt things otherwise unavailable to me. I moved along with my characters.

I played a game and I 'died'.

I died and began again. I died and I became. I played a videogame and I defeated the game and was defeated by it and had to work through the defeats. I failed and repeated. I repeated and improved. I repeated and the repetition re-wrote the story. I tried different endings to the stories and when I arrived at an ending I did not like, I restarted the videogame in order to erase it while knowing full well that what had transpired between me and the game would never

be fully erased. In playing and doing I re-wrote better or worse stories just to feel the sensations they would evoke in me and to see whether those sensations could further move or stun me. I played and I moved. I played and was moved. I played a videogame and came to feel the moving dimension of sensations as they moved from the body of the avatar to my body in a feedback loop mediated by my game console. I played and wrote and replayed and re-wrote and my playing and writing changed me.

Throughout this dissertation I have asserted that videogames, particularly socio-political games, are a significant cultural medium with potential for growth, experimentation, and forming new connections. I have traced the affective capacities of SPGs, such as *1000 Days of Syria*, *Bury Me, My Love*, *This War of Mine*, *Papers Please*, and *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*. I curated these games as my case studies not only because such brilliant and powerful games are underrated within the mainstream gaming community and the broader field of cultural studies, but also because these games create a space of play and experimentation from the affective intensities of life where instability and chaos are a constant threat to one's existence. This dissertation showcased a series of socio-political games which through their processes of play open up the player and expose her to sensations and intensities that might have otherwise remained invisible. These games are created mainly for players who have been fed the propagandas of colonial and imperial legacies of war, capitalism, extraction of resources, consumption, and greed, in order to feel something of the life of those who fall outside of this capitalist, neoliberal propaganda. In these games, such intensities are captured from the material realities of war, revolution and immigration that have affected millions of people. Simultaneously, my engagement with these games stemmed out of my desire to conceptualize the space of play affectively.

Affect, as I have demonstrated throughout this research, provides a new way of thinking and understanding bodies and their relations, their co-dependency and co-constitutive impacts. By tracing affect theory in its different variations, I have explained how affect as a methodological tool offers a greater understanding of the potentialities of videogames. Videogames are the perfect illustration of this co-constitutive relation of bodies in action. The player becomes an augmentation of herself through her avatar and the machines used to play the game. Through playing, she acts, watches herself act, and engages with the consequences of her actions in the game. She consumes the game and is simultaneously consumed by the game, each becoming part of the other. An affective understanding of this process sheds light not only on the success of videogames, but also on how socio-political games create a space of affective, corporeal understanding of oppressive forces of power and their relations.

The assemblage of theories, games, platforms, and my own extended selves, all come together and shifted my understanding of affect itself. The affective capacities of videogames, in particular the SPGs that were the subject of this dissertation, shifted the very theoretical argument and analysis that was meant to explain those videogames. My own engagement with the games did to me what I set out to argue: videogames have the potential to change people's understanding of themselves, others, systems of power, and complexities and multiplicities of life. This project was an attempt at interdisciplinary augmentation of both videogame and affect theories.

Affective intensities of socio-political games

As I argued in chapter three, The player occupies an in-between space, not fully in the external or the internal world, as Winnicott argued in the case of a child during play, neither existing fully in a digital or a material space. Winnicott (2010) claimed that playing was a

fundamental aspect of development in both children and adults. He asserted that because playing take place in an in-between space, indexed between the internal and the external realities, cultural and artistic creations emerge out of this in-between space of play and it is highly varied among individuals (Winnicott, 2010). As Dina Georgis (2016) argues, art “is made in this in-between space of speaking and not speaking” (p. 5); a space which we process the sensations and intensities that often escape language and are often pre-discursive.

Game developers such as Khonsari (1979), Swenson (*1000 Days*), Pope (*Papers Please*), and Maurin (*BMML*), like many other gamers themselves realized this affective potential of videogames and channeled that into creating SPGs that would bring sensations and intensities of other fellow human beings’ reality into relief. Tapping into this affective potential and capturing it, as much as it is possible since affect is never fully captured (Massumi, 2002), they created games that allow the player space of reflection on the consequences of their actions. Many videogames do this already, however these games create a space of experimentation that mirrors something of the wretchedness of living in a warzone, the uncertainty of crossing borders and seeking refuge in other countries, the pain of separation, and the consequences of standing up for one’s political beliefs. SPGs bring *something* of other people’s immediate reality to life.

As I have explained in chapter five the function of art, from its Deleuzian perspective, is to make the invisible visible. One of the functions of aesthetic work is not to simply reproduce and reinvent the material reality, rather to capture the sensations and intensities of that reality in order to make what would have remained invisible, visible. Through the capture of affective forces, aesthetic creations, such as videogames, have the potential of producing powerful felt-knowledge. The most powerful way in which videogames become a felt-knowledge producing machines is because the player, in the process of play and accessing the space of play, becomes

an assemblage. Videogames make an assemblage of the player in a space where the player can observe herself acting and reacting to the events of the game. This part-organic-part-non-organic entity exists through the connections and the processes that are made between the parts that come to make up the whole of the assemblage. In this sense, the player becomes part of the game, part-herself-part-her character(s) on the screen.

As I demonstrated in chapter four, assemblages are multiplicities that come together through the relations and processes of their parts (DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 2009). The assemblage is a powerful concept because it “begins with the idea that bodies are composed of the relations of motion and rest between their particles as well as through the affects (affecting and being affected) produced through relations with other bodies” (Parikka, 2010). An assemblage, as a concept, has the capacity to shift our understanding of the body as a self-contained entity towards a being composed of parts and their relations that come to arrange and re-arrange the whole. Through assemblages the human body is not elevated above every other body and being, rather it exists in relation and through the relations of other bodies that come to change it. In videogame theory, this concept helps us to better understand our relations to the avatar, to the game world, to the physical components of the platform, and the ways in which the connections and relations made through the parts allow the player to access a very unique space of play and experimentation. Videogame players experience the affective capacities of becoming this assemblage. Those artists who create SPGs such as *BMML* or *This War*, tap into the potentials of this new entity to bring a more nuanced understanding of war, revolution, and immigration, through the connections that the parts: the player and the avatar and the machine, make with one another.

An assemblage is more like a sandbox videogame, a procedurally built world in a state of flux. Imagine zooming through space and time through the different parts, the different scales, shooting some things to move, signaling at others. You are the game itself...some of the things you interact with make you stable; others, seemingly solid, shift and mutate as they are touched. (Joseph, 2013, p. 102)

As I demonstrated in chapters three, four, and five, one of the ways in which we can observe the impact of assemblage and the space of play on the player, is the use of “I” or “you” statements in the narration of the game. This is not only evident through single player games, such as *1979* or *Papers Please* –wherein the player is also very clearly a human being – but also in multiplayer games wherein the players interactions with each other – as both human or otherwise – point to the extent of their immersion within the game world. As T.L. Taylor (2009) writes of his own experience playing Blizzard’s massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *World of the Warcraft*, the player-produced modifications were created to assist players by reminding of them of who needs to be where and by using commands that included the pronoun “you” to speak directly to the player. In *World of the Warcraft*, at some point in the game, a player can turn into a bomb which will detonate injuring them and everyone around them. Once this happens, the player who has turned into a bomb needs to separate themselves from the rest of the group for minimal damage. Taylor (2009) demonstrates the blurring of the boundaries between the player and the avatar by explaining how the moderator assists which were created to remind the player of this process would directly shout at the player “You are the bomb!” (p. 335). *You are the bomb*, is a prompt and a reminder to move away from the rest of the group and the very language of the prompt pulls the player into the space of play and turns them into an assemblage that is part-human-part-bomb for the short duration of play. As Aubrey Anable

(2018) claims a “sensing body is a body that is made perceptible only through its relations to other bodies, other things, and other possible worlds” (p. 9). This sensing body, aware of its relations and attachments, becomes a site of visceral knowledge.

The player *becoming* the player+avatar assemblage allows the player entry into this middle place through the connections and relations that all the parts of the assemblage create. This process of becoming, a continuous process as Deleuze and Guattari asserted, involves a de- and re-territorialization of the body. Parts such as the controller, the console, the phone, the computer, other players, the creators of the game, and the characters in the space of the game come to make up the body of the player+avatar assemblage which is able to play in the game-world and access the sensations and intensities of that space. The assemblage of player+avatar allows access to this in-between space of videogame play. After exiting the space of play, that assemblage re-territorializes once again back into the player herself. However as I have shown repeatedly through the previous chapters, although the body re-territorializes again, the body never re-forms into the same being that it was before the assemblage was created. The processes between the parts that created connections between the player and the avatar will impact the player and those new connections change the player, no matter how minutely. Videogames underscore the significance of relationality of bodies – organic and non-organic – with one another and the potential for growth and change through that relationality.

Since the space of play is influenced by the external environment as Winnicott would argue, and since assemblages are historically unique entities as Deleuze would assert, it would follow that the affective intensities of the space of play change depending on the bodies that come to make up that assemblage entity. As I demonstrated in chapter six, such intensities can lend themselves to a different affective play, such as that of haunting. Haunting is such a specific

affective state that it further signifies the distinction between affective intensities and emotional states since experiences of haunting can rarely be contained only within emotional states and described as such. The affect of haunting is a profound example of the historical, the collective, and the personal implications of affect and affective intensities. Haunting emerges from the past, born out of a particular socio-political and cultural field, seeking recognition, a witnessing, or a registration. Haunting as an affective sensation is the illustration of an intensity born out of a specific historical milieu and the interactions between all its ‘players’.

As I demonstrated in depth in chapter six, affect theory particularly following the Spinoza-Deleuzian cleave has some limitations. One of the short-comings of affect is its inability to be fully contained within any medium, including language. It is difficult to write about affect. Timothy Bewes (2018) claims that there is paradox of affect which lies in the paradox of language. For him the predicament of affect is that it is “caught between muteness and bathos” (Bewes, 2018, p. 318). Drawing on Jean-Francois Lyotard, Bewes (2018) writes that affect causes a ‘scandal’ (using Lyotard’s terms) for discourse, as “discourse does not appear to be able to support for long an unarticulated and unargued remnant remaining outside of its grasp” (p. 318). This paradox of language and its inability to support and *capture* affect and all its intensities and capacities, points to how affect is, although registered, never fully captured. The difficulty in writing and speaking about affect, is that something of it always escapes. In every attempt to translate affective forces, through whatever artistic medium, something of affect seeps through, leaks out, and merges back with the environment or the body that gave birth to it.

Harvesting Affects of *Monopoly*

The outrage in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder in May 2020 in Minneapolis while in police custody, lead to widespread demonstrations inside and outside of the United

States. The new wave of civil rights protests resulted in some positive changes, such the promise of police reform in states such as Minneapolis (Ankle, 2020), and led to some destruction of both public (Police Head Quarters in Minneapolis) and private (business) properties, and ‘looting’²¹ (Louwagie, 2020). Looting became a much heated argument and was used as a spearhead to delegitimize the civil rights movement that was and continues to happen. In response to the arguments around looting, Kimberly Jones, a Black Lives Matter activist and the co-author of *I’m not dying with you tonight* used the example of the board game *Monopoly* to brilliantly explain the interconnection of race and class, and the socio-economic disparity that exists between white and black America (David Jones Media, 2020). In that viral interview, which has had more than two million views on YouTube, Jones succinctly tapped into the affective processes of playing *Monopoly* that many are familiar with, in order to explain the economic and racial inequality:

Imagine we are playing *Monopoly* together and for 400 rounds of *Monopoly* I don’t allow you to have any money; I don’t allow you to have anything on the board, then another 50 rounds and then everything that you earned during those rounds I’d take it [*sic*]. That was Tulsa, Rosewood²²... So for 400 rounds of *Monopoly* you don’t get to play at all, but not only you don’t get to play, you have to play on behalf of the person that you’re playing against. You have to play, make money and wealth for them... So then for 50 years, you get a little bit and you are allowed to play and every time that I don’t like the way you’re playing or that you’re catching up they [*sic*] burn your money. Then after 450 rounds they say okay catch up now, at this point the only way to catch up is if the other person shares the wealth. But what if every time they shared the wealth, there would be psychological warfare against you saying you are an equal-opportunity hire. So if I play 400 rounds of *Monopoly* with you and I had to play and give you every dime I had and for 50 years every time I played, if you didn’t like how I did, you got to burn it, How can

²¹ The concept of ‘looting’ as a direct result of a protest is a heated topic of debate and my analysis here is not to provide different political perspectives on what is considered looting, the historical and the colonial legacies of looting that took place both on and off this continent, nor it is about whether or not looting is an appropriate action as a result of centuries of injustice and economic disparity. My argument here is to only demonstrate how a century-old boardgame was used to provide some answers to the above questions and more importantly for my analysis, the reason that this explanation went viral was because many of the listeners understood and connected with the affective and emotional capacities of *Monopoly* that they themselves had played.

²² The Tulsa race massacre of 1921 and Rosewood massacre of 1923, are considered among the worst incidents of racial violence in American history where towns of Tulsa and Rosewood which were populated by affluent black Americans were burnt and destroyed and many black Americans were killed or injured.

you win? How can you win? You can't win, the game is fixed. (David Jones Media, 2020)

This was one of the best explanations of the relationship between race and capital that I had seen and I am convinced that part of the reason that Jones's explanation of socio-economic inequality with roots in slavery went viral, was because many people watching this video connected with Jones's explanation of *Monopoly*. Many Americans and Canadians are familiar with the board game because *Monopoly* is one of the most culturally significant board games of the twentieth century. Many have played it and are keenly aware of the sensations the game brings out about the power of income, the random luck of landing on a space and drawing money cards or losing money, going to jail, and paying taxes or rent to other players as a result of their properties on the board. The majority of the game is a randomized movement on the board through dice rolls, and the goal of the game is to bankrupt everyone else in order to win the game. Bankruptcy in game functions through paying rent to other players whose properties you land on. If you do not have the money to pay the rent, you can remortgage your own property, which means your own properties will no longer generate income. The game becomes an economic downward spiral for all but one player in the game: the biggest landowner.

The game was formed from a 1903 game called *The Landlord's Game* by Lizzie Magie and it was meant as an educational tool in explaining and understanding accumulation of land and wealth in private monopolies (Pilan, 2015). The game is a forceful critique of capitalism which attempts to show the reality of land monopolization and accumulation of wealth in the hands of one person. Those who have played this game might not be consciously aware of its anti-capitalist critique but they all know too well of the frustration, the common arguments around the table over who did what, the utter lack of fun towards the end of the gameplay because often players spiral out of control economically and they forfeit the game. The lack of

fun towards the end of the gameplay and the predictability of the game at that stage create a sense of viciousness.

In fact people often do not play by the strict rules of the games as to lessen the severity of the game. These modifications to the rules of the game are meant to make the game softer and kinder, as many rules are quite brutal, but even these modifications only extend the inevitable: the wealth of one is accumulated at the expense of everyone else's bankruptcy. The 'win' is achieved at the expense of everyone else's misery and demise. There is a shared felt-knowledge produced through the process of playing *Monopoly* and through the relations and connections that the players made with the board and other players during and after the game. Jones leveraged the affective potentials of this felt-knowledge that many, if not all, *Monopoly* players have in common. *Monopoly* is a game about capturing the affects of capitalism on the lives of everyday ordinary people caught in the cycle of wanting to accumulate capital and most often losing. That affect is familiar and relatable. It is something that one knows *of*. It is *of* power and lack of it. As Kathleen Stewart (2008) writes about the affects of power:

Power is a thing of the sense. It lives as a capacity, or a yearning, or a festering resentment. It can be sensualized in night rages. It can begin as a secret kept or as a gesture glimpsed in a hallway. It can be leaked or harvested for future references. It can spread like wildflower seeds randomly tossed on a suburban lawn. We do thing *with* power, and *to* it. (p. 84).

Power as a sensation can be *harvested for future references*. There is a different kind of understanding, a feeling-sensing-understanding that results from personal experiences of playing the game and processing it. In addition, in line with how gamers talk about game processes, Jones' use of pronouns "I", "you", and "we" in her narrativization of the game, pulled the

audience in by inserting them back in the space that they once occupied while they played. Her explanation activated the connections that were already made, by invoking the feelings of the game and calling up the listener back into the game. This is the point of play: to create new connections and relationality with ourselves, our histories, and others, in the hopes of doing better or being better. Jones harvested those familiar sensations, the bodily-knowledge obtained through the process of play, in order to explain the economic disparity that might cause 'looting'. In playing that game, engaging with the sensation of the game and creating new connections, the players of *Monopoly* have experienced similar sensations and thus have a similar understanding of each other's experiences in the game and can relate to those experiences. This mode of explanation of 'looting' is more powerful than most statistics, facts, or theoretical arguments about poverty as the result of years of colonialism and capitalism combined. Affective learning in games "addresses important societal issues such as managing conflicts, caring for the environment, and fighting prejudices and stereotypes" (Dormann et al., 2013, p. 217). The above example of *Monopoly* being analyzed politically and understood viscerally, is an example of a socio-political boardgame, which although quite powerful, does not maintain the degree of persuasive abilities of a socio-political videogame. The extent in which immersion, flow, and blurring of the boundaries of bodies which take place in a videogame and the extent in which in this space of play the player has the capacity to watch her in action on a screen, increase the potentials for greater connections and deeper understanding. Such powerful affective capacities from a socio-political boardgame only points to the significance of play and its incredible potential in a videogame format. Since the space of play is a microcosm for life itself, the significance of the space of play that SPGs create is not to 'win' but to *feel* and to follow that feeling and where those might lead.

Play as an agent of change

‘We are living in an anti-intellectual time’, Judith Butler said in a recent interview on debate and discourse on equality and gender identity (Ferber, 2020). The very nature of social-media spaces and the platforms which hinge on the speed of the spread of information, do not support thoughtful debate which is often long and slow (Ferber, 2020). In this era of wide-spread misinformation and mistrust of knowledge and who disseminates that knowledge, corporeal experiences become a site of the only knowledge that can truly be trusted. Videogames, specially socio-political games, are the new art form that offer a different kind of learning by creating a space that requires investing time to play. This time investment and the repetitive procedures inherent in most videogames, allow a greater space of slowing down the formation of knowledge particularly around socio-political issues of our time. These games represent a Renaissance, to borrow from Katherine Isbister (2017), and the belief that immersion, enactment and identification in a videogame are important non-traditional tools of knowledge dissemination and formation.

Just as World War I brought about a significant shift in the landscape of art and literature, the current global politics have increased the need and desire to express social and political critique through innovative art forms. Artistic movements of post-WWI era, such as Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism were direct responses to the atrocities of the war and the socio-political shift that ensued as the result of it. Critical paintings and etchings of George Grosz and Otto Dix forever changed the depiction of war (Johnson, 2016). Authors such as Boris Pasternak, Ernest Hemmingway, and Virginia Wolfe portrayed not only the horrors of the war but the also the reverberations of it throughout society (Onion, 2018). What these paintings, drawings, etchings, and the literature of the time, had in common was an attempt to visibilize the

forces of life and death and the intensities of their vibrations in a war zone. Impacted by the abhorrent reality of the human condition, these artists attempted to capture the affective attunements and intensities of war.

Socio-political games are the newest genre of gaming and the newest aesthetic creation of this time as they are incredibly powerful tools of a corporeal knowledge production. Socio-political games are created by a generation of players who have understood and felt the affective potentials of videogames and utilized that capacity to form a space of play where stories are co-created and re-examined. By putting the player in a situation where moral and ethical dilemmas are experimented with and their consequences are sensed and felt through the body, the player is able to create stronger connections and relationality to other bodies, ideas, and the themes of the game. Experiential and experimental knowledge, what is learned through the body's interaction with her environment, is a powerful site of learning because corporeal knowledge can be more powerful than facts, statistics and purely cerebral arguments. SPGs are the new expressive language that endeavour to display something of reality, which cannot be expressed any other way. This new language of expression, which always hinges on the participation and thus the expression of the player, is a new political art form that does not concretize politics, rather keeps socio-political thoughts and arguments malleable through the moving dimensions of affect, feelings and intensities.

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