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Affect At Play: Politics Via Videogames

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine affect as a theoretical framework in the discussion of cognitive and pedagogical potentials of videogames. Using two social justice-focused videogames: *1000 Days of Syria*, and *This War of Mine*, I illustrate the aesthetic and affective qualities which set videogames apart from any other mode of cultural communication. This medium challenges and breaks down the boundaries of the body/the player in order to visibilize forces, sensations and intensities that were otherwise impossible to perceive. I will particularly draw on the works of Gilles Deleuze and his analysis on the ability of art to turn the body into a zone of indiscernability wherein the potentials for becoming and formations of new relationalities are made possible. I explore the ways in which such aesthetic creations disrupt normative thinking and act as a point of rupture in our understanding of politics and question the multiplicity of truth.

Author Keywords

Affect; aesthetic; sensations; Deleuze; *1000 Days of Syria*; *This War of Mine*

Intensities

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 son's 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 a mother of two who is trying to survive the Syrian uprising in Daraa. The game gives me 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 have to 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, this videogame becomes an aesthetic creation which articulates something that cannot be articulated in any other way.

From early emergence of social justice-focused videogames, such as *Under Ash* (2001), *September 12th* (2003), *Darfur is Dying* (2006), to more recent games such as *Papers Please* (2013), *This War of Mine* (2014), and *1979 Revolution* (2016), there has been an attempt to educate the player on human rights abuses, environmental degradation, sexism, poverty, wars and revolutions. Much has been written on the capacity of videogames to trigger critical thinking and discussion (De Castell & Jenson, 2010; Gee, 2007; Weir & Baranowski, 2011). In his work *Videogames of the Oppressed* (2001), Gonzalo Frasca 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. These games attempt to elaborate and engage with the oppression and subjugation of people by addressing “real-world issues and foster critical thinking” (Flanagan, 2009, 245). Further building on this theoretical framework, I assert that such games are a critical cultural medium conceived to make something of reality visible. Through player actions, these games create a space in which forces with amorphous and prediscursive qualities make themselves known and affect the player.

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate the potentials of social justice-focused videogames in creating greater connections, attunements, understandings, and formation of new relationalities. Utilizing two specific social justice-focused videogames – *1000 Days of Syria* and *This War of Mine* – I assert that the pedagogical potentials of videogames lie precisely in the games’ ability to visibilize sensations that might otherwise be hidden. The potentials lie in bringing to life the affective attunements, moments of intensities and connections that happen in and through the game. In order to understand such impacts and their importance is it critical to turn to affect theory as a theoretical framework, drawing particularly on the work of Gilles Deleuze.

This project was formed out of my interest and curiosity in understanding the affective investments and capacities that videogames possess. Thus, I write this paper from the space of my encounters with the sensations that have acted upon my body and from the curiosity towards understanding such forces and their potentials. In this sense, I will provide a first person account of the games’ synopsis for a few reasons. One is to paint the foreground from which impacts were felt and point out the affective attunements of those moments of game play. This is also an attempt to engage the reader in the story in the hopes that they might feel their way through the game chapters, since it is engaging with the feelings, sensations and the unfolding which ultimately constitutes affective capacities. As I will further elaborate in this paper, I do not claim that affective responses are universal and manifest the same way in every subject. What I argue is that videogames have a capacity through both action and representation to impact the player in ways that are unique to videogames as a cultural medium. This ability is utilized extensively in social justice-focused videogames to imbue change. In order to fully grasp the pedagogical potentials of such games one must engage with affect and affect theory.

Playing theories

Prior to exploring affect as a theoretical potential, it is important to review the current theoretical frameworks used by game theorists, particularly those which attempt to address the psychological impacts of videogames in relation to self-knowledge, critical thinking, and cognitive development. Many theorists point to the ability of videogames to move the player, both literally and figuratively (Calvert, 2005; Jenkins, 2005) and attempt to explain the ways in which the body is moved through engagement with the games. Videogames are the only medium where the continuation of the medium is dependent on the actions of the gamer, thus making the player an active participant in creation of the story. The player acts upon the game in order to move it forward. The power of such videogames are argued to lie in their capacity to elicit strong emotional responses, such as empathy, fear, joy, shame, etc. in the player (Dahya, 2009; Gee, 2007; Jenkins, 2005; Sharp, 2015).

Ian Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric, a process through which a powerful message is conveyed through rule-based representations and interactions, is often used to analyze the potentials of videogames in fostering critical thinking (Allen, 2014). Bogost's argument hinges upon the ability of the game to persuade the player through procedures which are designed to express an argument or an ideology (Bogost, 2007; Dahya, 2009). *Papers, Please*, is an indie-puzzle game, wherein the player assumes the role of an impoverished customs agent in a totalitarian state, who screens those wanting entry to the country. The game periodically forces the player to choose between following immigration policies to the letter, which will let the player safely pay for necessities such as the healthcare costs of loved ones, or helping and sometimes saving those at the border, even if it means breaking the rules. Proponents of procedural rhetoric would submit that the game makes a procedural argument regarding the stress of balancing the duties of a bureaucratic administrator, which pays for one's livelihood and survival, and the need to act in accordance with one's ethics.

Multiple Identification Theory (MIT) is another theoretical approach which argues that a mode of simulation can change the attitude of the player if it fosters affective, cognitive, and behavioural identification (Williams & Williams, 2011). Through MIT, affective identification is often equated with emotional identification which is then argued to result in feelings of empathy towards the characters of the game. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory is often used to explain the capacity of videogames to affect and consume the player (Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008). This theoretical framework asserts that one way through which videogames promote engagement and an effective learning environment is through game design that results in the player being completely absorbed by the activity through a loss of self-consciousness (Whitton, 2011). The *Civilization* series, a game of exploring, expanding, exploitation and conquest, is emblematic of this flow, as the player is constantly curious to discover and influence the immediate future of the game-state.

These theoretical approaches often equate affect and affective responses with the emotional reactions that videogames elicit in the player. Although emotional responses, identification, flow, and connections to a game are powerful sites of learning and analysis, it must be noted that many times videogames draw out sensations which are pre-discursive, intangible and ephemeral. These sensations might result in the formation of affective responses to the game which may or may not include subsequent emotional reactions and verbalizations. It is through the capacity to act upon the game and influence the outcome within the parameters of the game, that these forces manifest themselves and at the very least leave traces on the body of the gamer.

What then is affect?

Although there are various traditions which affect theory stems from – including Spinozist, Darwinian and Freudian theories – in this paper I draw on Deleuze and his Spinozist trajectory. Spinoza defined the body “in terms of relations of movement and rest” referring to the body’s capacity, power, or potential to affect and be affected (Massumi, 2002, p. 15). Many affect theorists of this branch define affect as a force or forces of encounter which impact the body and is/are not separable from cognition (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Thrift, 2004; White, 2008). It is an embodied intelligence about the world (Thrift, 2004). It is the body’s capacity to act and also acts upon the body (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

Affect is part of a feedback loop which exists in “the oscillation between bodies and/or things, in the ever shifting synesthetic encounter of bodies with their surrounding” (Massumi cited in Lefluer, 2009, p.57). In this sense, affect 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. It is an active outcome of encounter between bodies and their surroundings (Thrift, 2004). It is something that is found in the in between-ness, in the intensities that pass through the body, between bodies and their environment (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Affect, thus, is a movement of sensations (White, 2008) which are shared between the subject and the object and are not reducible to only the subject or the object and their relations (Grosz, 2008).

For Deleuze, affect is the ever-changing bodily capacity that exists in complex assemblages that come to make up the body and the world (Hemmings, 2005; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). In this sense, the body is made up of the impacts of such forces which, no matter how subtly, change the body. Deleuze (2003) argued that forces present themselves through sensations that are felt in and through the body and through those sensations that escape the body to affect its surrounding. For him, sensation was the opposite of sensational and for a sensation to exist a “force must be exerted on the body” (p. 48). Something is felt through the everyday encounter that leaves its traces on the body. As Kathleen Stewart (2007) writes, affect happens 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 publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like something.”

Stewart (p.2)

Affect theory offers a turn towards the unfolding of moments and their potentials.

Sense, sweat, shock

In *1000 Days of Syria*, Swenson explains that the impetus for creating this game was born out of his trip to northern Syria and the greatly underreported atrocities that took and continue to take place. He asserts that his intention was “neither to entertain players with, nor benefit from the deaths that have resulted from the instability in Syria” (Swenson). Rather it was his intention to proffer a world through gaming where the sensations and their impacts are felt on and through the body. The game, which is part electronic literature, part newscast, and part choose-your-own-

adventure, invites the player to experience something of the Syrian war in 2012. This game utilizes such affective attunements to engage the player as a political actor.

The game juxtaposes the real events of the day to the horrid reality of the fictional characters within the game. For example, in September 2012, Human Rights Watch estimated that 20,000 individuals had died since the beginning of the Syrian conflict (Swenson). In the same month, Kofi Annan stepped down as the head of the UN's special envoy to Syria, and Iran confirmed that its revolutionary guard was providing financial and intelligence assistance to Bashar Al-Assad's regime, thus becoming the first third party to openly acknowledge an active involvement in the war (Swenson). These macro-level events are reported in the game alongside the extreme day-to-day hardships the main character experiences, as well as the life-altering decisions she needs to make in order to survive.

As an Iranian-Canadian player who has read extensively on the Syrian conflict, watched interviews and engaged with critical views on Iran's involvement in the Syrian war, thus considering myself jaded on such atrocities, I am momentarily and surprisingly shocked by the contextualization of this news within the game. I have become familiar with the news of Iran's involvement in the region which is an attempt to exert control and become a geo-political power. Yet no cultural medium has had the same breath-taking and heart-breaking effect on my body as reading this section of the game about Iran's involvement being juxtaposed against my character's survival has had. After some hours of play, the intensities of the game are starting to manifest on my body. I can feel my heart palpitating, the back of my neck is hot and I am nervous for my character. It is only a game, but I am affected and moved by it. I sit silently looking at my computer screen and re-read that sentence, as if repetition might erase something that I wish not to be. There are no pictures, no blood, no gore, and no actions. It is a simple interactive story and the implications of my decisions altering this story, has created a zone where I have become my character: a woman with two young children. Something ephemeral and intangible impacts my body. Something with much urgency reaches out of the game and touches me:

The only way to survive is to participate in the war efforts. My options are: making explosives in an abandoned factory near the camp or smuggling gasoline. I, the player, believe in non-violent intervention and have no wish to make explosive bombs. I'd rather smuggle gasoline, but that means leaving my children behind and there seems to be an increased risk of arrest and death through traveling. The impossibility of these options and the severity of their repercussions have me at an impasse. I, as the player, sit in the safety of my home and stare at my computer monitor for what seems to be many long minutes, trying to weigh in the pros and cons of my decision. I think about those two boys. I go with my ethics and think that smuggling gas is a better teaching moment for my kids to not engage in violent insurgence. Unfortunately I get arrested and imprisoned...

I have not seen or heard of my boys for weeks. I have become ill due to lack of sunlight, nourishment and sanitation in the prison. I keep thinking about what might be happening to my sons. After 3 months of imprisonment, a woman who has become my friend plans to escape and encourages me to escape with her. I can reject her offer and stay in prison in the hopes that they would soon release me, or take fate into my own hands and escape. I decide to escape. We slowly dig around the tiny window with a nail-file, and wait for night fall. I

decide to squeeze through the window first, my friend gives me a boost, I stick my head out of the window and breathe the fresh air. In that moment I am seen by a guard and shot dead. The escape attempt proves to be fatal and my character dies on Day 876 of the insurgency. Although I know that the setting of this game is a war zone and that death is a possibility if not an inevitability, the demise of my avatar catches me off guard. My breath is caught short in my lungs. My idealistic non-violent actions have resulted in her death and I can only think of her children. I sit and stare blankly at my monitor, unable to move...

The sensations and forces that affect my body when this character is killed in *1000 Days of Syria* cannot be felt in any other way. The forces and the intensities that make themselves public only do so through my interaction with something that emerges in and through the game. What happens to me as the player during this game goes beyond the need to trigger discussion, invoke critical thinking or to simply increase the sympathy of the player. The game attempts to capture affective forces and intensities of survival in a war zone. It unconceals something about forces of life and death. This is not to argue that such games allow the player to understand what living in a war zone is like, since that understanding can only be gained through actual experiences of war. Rather, games such as *1000 Days of Syria* allow the player to touch and be touched by something of the reality of war.

The game is an aesthetic creation that challenges the boundaries of the body of the player and those of the characters on the screen; it blurs the lines that separate the body from its surrounding. Identification with characters on the screen takes place precisely because the body of the player becomes what Deleuze (2003) described as a “zone of indiscernibility” (p. 20), where the gamer becomes the avatar and the avatar becomes the gamer. This subsequently allows the player to experience the impact of these ephemeral and corporeal forces, which ultimately form and deform the subject.

Shared vibrations

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, 2007, p.1). From this position, claiming that sensations as a universal force exist among bodies and their surroundings tends to erase everyday oppressive and micro-violent practices that make up the lives of oppressed individuals.

However, the positionality of subjects within poststructuralism locks the subject on a permanent grid of identity where movement is subtracted from the picture: “When positionality of any kind comes to a determining first, movement comes to a problematic second” (Massumi, 2002, p. 3). Recall that for Spinoza the body is configured through both movement and rest. In the poststructuralist framework, movement no longer defines the body, rather the body is defined by the endpoints on this grid. The player is defined through a set of social locations, such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc, which are considered to precede and supersede moving experiences of the body. 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 (Massumi, 2002).

This mode of thinking is also used by game theorists who argue that for realism, social and political practice to shed light on the reality of everyday oppressive forces, to exist in a game, there needs to be a “congruency” between the social reality depicted in the game and the social reality experienced by the gamer (Galloway, 2004, p. 10). For games to constitute this realism, they cannot be divorced from the context in which they are played in (Galloway, 2004, p.11). 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, p. 9). Although Galloway 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 claims that “fidelity of context” is a major component in realism (p. 11).

Galloway’s characterization towards a “typical American youth,” which I assume is a white liberal subject, locks that subject in this subject location, takes away the moving component of the body and forecloses on the potential. Affective responses will inevitably vary between a racialized and a privileged white subject. Yet this does not exclude the potential for understanding a dominant narrative from another position. A white liberal subject playing *Special Force*, or *1000 Days of Syria* does not preclude the potentiality of moments of connection with those Palestinians who fight for their freedom, or the Syrians trying to survive the war. It might be minute and fleeting but it exists and it alters the subject. Galloway himself asserts that “it takes a game like *Special Force*, with all Hizbullah’s terror in the background to see the stark, gruesome reality of *America’s Army* in the foreground” (p. 10). This potential happens regardless of the social location of the player.

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 body is waiting for the forces inside itself; it is inside the body that something happens (Deleuze, 2003, p. 14-15). 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, 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 game. This is to allow equal privilege in our theoretical frameworks to the movement of the body, the moving dimension that constitutes every subject, and its continual changes.

It is in movement that a sense of flow is created between the game and the gamer. This is how the gamer identifies with the characters on the screen, because prior to the emotional attachment (that MIT argues) a force has impacted the gamer. Something has been shifted, added, eroded or changed. This is where the procedures of the game, through both representation and action (as procedural rhetoric argues) results into visiblizing these forces. All these happen because the body of the player has become this indiscernible zone where the lines between that of the character on the screen, and that of the player have been blurred. The body can sense things that it could not sense before: “Something happens through sensation and the subject becomes in sensation” (Grosz, 2008, p.21). This becoming, this “subject-in-process” (p. 79), manifests in the always changing body that is altered no matter how subtly by the forces and sensations that affect it. Affect is the necessary component of the body’s perpetual becoming (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

Aesthetic formation and life and death forces

This War of Mine is a partially procedurally generated strategy-survival game featuring permadeath, wherein the player is tasked with the control of a group of civilians in a warzone, trying to survive until an unknown ceasefire date. 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:

Bruno, Katia, and Pavle have been thrown together after being separated from or losing family members and loved ones. 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 as the player decide Bruno is in the best shape for a night of search, thus set Bruno out to search for food and medication. On his search he slowly creeps into a supermarket looking for food. He finds some canned food and vegetables but must still look for medications. He hears gun shots but decides to ignore them. He continues to fill his bag with some other supplies when he hears an argument behind a 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 or kill her. My character crouches down behind the door and I have only a few moments to decide for this character, thus becoming him: 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 kills my character. The woman is able to escape and Bruno dies on the floor of the supermarket.

The fight for survival imposes a sense of dread as the player navigates the game. I had to delete two of my sessions out of the sheer frustration that I could not keep my characters alive for a mere two days. Non-violent actions are almost always a swift way to ensure 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 suicide in the game.

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 do so as well. A simple climb of the stairs to get food becomes a drawn out task. 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:

It is day 20 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. Their mental state has deteriorated and they are all depressed and move slowly which impedes their work. 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. Pavle has been in charge of scavenging and on night 20, he finally finds some food and supplies and heads back to the shelter. Upon his return he finds the shelter raided and his friends 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. 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.

This is a significant and a tragically poetic design of the game, wherein emotional traumas have disabled the movement function of the character. There is enough food, medicine and shelter, which from my position of privilege seem to comprise the necessities of survival, but neither of the characters are able to access them due to physical and emotional injuries:

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 my characters 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 medical conditions and all I can do is to witness their slow deaths. 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. I am reminded of the real victims and survivors of wars and decide not to fast forward what was meant to be witnessed. I sit and painstakingly look at my monitor and witness my characters slow deaths...

A survivor's mental and emotional health is beautifully utilized by the mechanics in the game, which bring to life various components of survival. In these altered mental states, having water or food becomes irrelevant to a character's survival, as their grief becomes all consuming and drives them to suicide. The meaning of life and living, rather than mere biological stability, becomes a central theme of this game as it illuminates how the desire for survival is overshadowed by the refusal to collude with a state of 'non-living'.

Game designer Pawel Miechowski explains that his attempt was not to fabricate or provide false impressions of war, rather to underline the material and the psychological reality survivors endure (Muriel & Miechowski, 2016). This game, he explains, is a difficult game because surviving war is difficult (Muriel & Miechowski, 2016). Ian Bogost (2005) writes that this type of play "is not the stuff of leisure" (p.75). 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 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.

For Deleuze (2003) the function of art was to capture particularly these forces, rather than inventing or reproducing them. Further elaborating on Deleuze's work, Elizabeth Grosz (2008) argues that art is that which does not generate concepts, rather it addresses problems and provocations. The point of art is to render the invisible forces visible (Grosz, 2008). Art captures the forces and intensities that give rise to sensation as its mode of making something known. 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).

Social justice focused games are artistic interventions that arise from the need of socio-political critique, of solidarity with others, and of disrupting dominant narratives of everyday life (Flanagan, 2009). There is a growing body of work that critiques and elaborates on the function of aesthetics and videogames (Clarke & Mitchell, 2007; Jenkins, 2005; Parker, 2012; Sharpe, 2015). Art, from a Deleuzian perspective, is an unleashing of intensities and forces that could not be released or captured in any other way. These unleashed forces bring sensations into being and transform the body (Grosz, 2008).

In *This War of Mine*, grief impedes physical movement, which magnifies the forces of life and death. In slow movements we are made to witness that which otherwise might escape our notice; in slow movement there is no glossing over or momentarily shutting out, and through that the intricacies of life become more visible. It is in invisibilizing life that death reveals itself. My body is made to feel the death forces affecting the characters in the games. These games have the potential to increase the player's empathy with these fictional characters, but empathy is the secondary reaction to the game. The function of the game is to feel something of a truth about living in a war zone and grappling with forces of life and death. The point is to reveal something of truth, 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. I am convinced that social justice-focused videogames attempt to tap in to affective capacities in order to shift something, to disturb and disrupt in the hopes that something of a truth can be revealed and felt.

Towards Trajectories of potentialities

According to Balwood, "Art is what people accomplish when they do not quite know what to do, when the lines of the road map are faint, when the formula is vague (cited in Jenkins, 2005, p.177). Just as World War I brought about a significant shift in the landscape of art and literature, current global politics have increased the need and desire to express social and political critique through innovative art forms. Artistic movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism were direct responses to the atrocities of the World War I. Critical paintings and etchings of George Grosz and Otto Dix forever changed the depiction of war (Johnson, 2016). What these paintings, drawings, and etchings had in common was an attempt to visibilize the forces of life, death, and living-death 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. Social justice-focused videogames are the new expressive language that endeavour to display something of reality, which cannot be expressed any other way. They are political art forms that do not concretize politics or settle of the actual, the tangible, the already defined (Massumi, 2002). They leave sensations, vibrations, forces, and intensities up for grabs.

Affect theory is at times dismissed for its intangibility and abstractness. However, the dismissal of the potentiality of affect stems from a desire to regulate and hierarchize and to not let the moment unfold further (Le Fleur, 2009). It is to foreclose on the potential because it does not appear concrete. The 'critical' method of critical thinking which privileges positionality takes away the movement, "the moving dimension of the experience", in order to be able to pin it down and critique it (Zournazi, 2003, p.5). 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, p. 4).

Engaging with affect has the potential to significantly alter our understanding regarding the powerful impacts of videogames and their pedagogical potential. 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. Yet even in those moments not all affective forces and intensities are fully captured. Affect escapes, seeps through and circulates between subjects and objects. This is precisely why many game theorists argue that even violent games carry the potential of developing the player's critical thinking (Allen, 2014; Gee, 2007; Jenkins, 2005).

Social justice focused videogames are an interactive platform of social and political thought, filled with potentials that can change the subject. Videogames are among the few cultural mediums that move the player while they simultaneously occupy a space where affective attunements and intensities are made visible more clearly. They open up the body and through that a world which was inaccessible becomes known. The dual state, where the player experiences the game as herself playing the game and as her character navigating the game, opens up the body. In no other medium

does the connection and the identification with the characters on the screen become so great that the player narrates the game play and what happens to the character in first person's account. To feel the forces that impact the body in this way is something that cannot be replicated in any other cultural form.

It is precisely this opening up of the body that allows for new becoming. The mode of connection and attunement is amplified and expanded resulting in extensive affective responses. This potentiality manifests from a plane of sensory experiences that "engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things" (Stewart, 2007, p. 21), however they unfold. Rather than an investment in the finality of a desired outcome or a goal, turning to affect allows us to explore and experiment with moments as they unfold. The potential for great connection also carries with it the greater potential for formation of different subjectivity and different relationality and in this lies the great power of aesthetic videogames. Such videogames are not about concretizing and dictating political solutions rather they are about creating a platform where possibilities and potentialities can present themselves. Although I do not argue affect to be the theoretical answer in our understanding of the psychological impacts of games, I am convinced that engaging with affective potentials of videogames allows us to move from the fixed conditions of positionalities towards a trajectory of potentialities. It is precisely in potentialities where the power to change lies.

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