

Playing With Boundaries

Empirical Studies of Transgressions and Gaming Culture



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Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
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Abstract

This dissertation explores concepts of transgression in relation to games and gaming culture. It is an empirical study, grounded in game studies, and applying qualitative and ethnographic methods in its approach to a nuanced understanding of the complexities of play, games and gaming culture. Core to the dissertation is the concept of transgression, and several perspectives and theories of transgression and the transgressive are presented. Transgression involves crossing or breaking boundaries consisting of societal and cultural norms, or, in some cases, individual and legal boundaries and limits. Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and Bataille's interpretation of that which involves how transgression can be a source of pleasure and indulgence, and also seeing how transgressing a boundary can lead to reaffirming and strengthening that boundary. In this dissertation, we can see how transgression and transgressive behaviour in gaming culture is a form of boundary keeping.

This dissertation draws on a wide range of scholarly fields, primarily on game studies, folkloristics, ethnography, media studies and even extremism studies. The main objective is to explore how players deal with issues that raise provocation, discomfort, or can be considered sensitive in games and gaming cultures. What role does transgression play in games and gaming culture? The dissertation provides answers through four independent articles, three of which have been published, and a fourth has been conditionally accepted and awaiting revisions.

The first article of this dissertation is an autoethnographic account of *This War of Mine*, exploring how the anti-war game creates discomfort and a sense of complicity in tragedy. The paper shows that the game creates a transgressive play experience that enhances the sense of realism of the game.

The second article builds on the experience of *transgressive realism* and related concepts such as positive-negative experiences and out-of-play seriousness, in the design of a live action roleplaying game (larp). *The Asylum Seekers* is a larp that tries to create a positive-negative play experience, through the use of design intended to create a sense of discomfort with the situation. The effect of which is investigated in interviews during post-game debrief sessions.

The third article investigates how White Nationalists appropriate the world of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* through interpretation and playing. The appropriation of *Skyrim* is a

transgression against the assumed intent of the game developers, as well as social norms opposed to White Nationalism.

The fourth article explores how *feminazi*, a sexist pejorative, is used to draw up the boundaries of gaming culture. Analysis shows that the majority usage of the slur is sarcastic and as counter to the meaning of the word. This article provides evidence of both boundary keeping through transgressive speech, and the nuances and complexities of gaming culture, as well as internet culture.

This dissertation concludes that transgression or transgressive games and play provide players with a point of departure to explore and discuss difficult “real world” issues, and it can provide an impetus for personal reflection, and an enhanced sense of realism. The dissertation also reveals several examples of play that rely on breaking boundaries to establish boundaries. It is grounded in extensive field work in online forums, autoethnography, interviews and larp design. It can serve as a future reference point for continued discussions on games and gaming culture in relation to transgression, furthermore it can provide inspiration for methodological development for empirical studies of games and gaming culture.

Foreword and acknowledgments

Here it is.

Having published a handful of books in my life, and now having finished this dissertation, I can safely give recognition to the saying that (artistic) work is never finished, it is abandoned. There have been many times I have considered giving up on this dissertation, which I believe is only natural. It has been hard work. Made worse by my own ADHD-brain, and so many things that just kept happening - whether it was a pandemic, losing a parent, becoming a parent, getting ill, having to learn how to walk again or just the day to day stuff that comes with doing a PhD on the side of both work and... all those other projects.

Did I mention ADHD?

But here it is, finished or abandoned. The culmination of many years of work, of sweat, tears, heartache and headache.

Games have always been a passion of mine. Whether it is the mechanics that makes the fantasy spring to life, or the imaginary worlds behind it, games have captured my imagination ever since I played war with my friends, before the Amstrad CPC464 entered my life, and before I discovered role playing games and complex board games. Digital, tabletop, larp and everything in between, the form did not matter, what mattered was the experience, the world and the story told through play. For many years, games were my refuge, what I did when I weren't studying and when I wasn't working. And yes, sometimes, games were work, when I was putting together adventures for role playing games, for friends or publishers, but it was always a passion.

Over the years, teaching, writing and researching right-wing extremism took more of my time, and I had less time for games, though the passion never faded. A chance to join Kristine Jørgensen's Games & Transgressive Aesthetics project was too good an opportunity to miss, a chance to put games back in focus of my life. Getting introduced to Game Studies has been an inspiring and harrowing journey; there was, and still is, so much to learn about play, games and game culture and I feel privileged to have been able to experience so much during this time. I have met so many brilliant people, who have shared so much of their experience and knowledge with me that I am in complete awe. Whether over dinners, conferences, seminars, workshops or my stays in Krakow. I have made friends whom I will

hold dear for life. This dissertation has been an action adventure in itself, which must, like all good things, come to an end. Though, there are many sequels and spin-offs in the works already.

Here at the point of abandonment, on dissertation desertion, there are many who deserve my thanks and gratitude, too many to mention by name. A thanks of course, goes to the Norwegian Research Council for funding the Games & Transgressive Aesthetics project, and my PhD. Without them, this would not be.

Thank you to all the anonymous reviewers of my papers and conference presentation, you made this what it is.

This dissertation would have been nothing without the generous support of my supervisor Kristine Jørgensen. It's all thanks to her friendship and patient belief in my project that this is finished. Thanks also to my co-supervisor Faltin Karlsen for his kind, and rigid scientific mentoring. I have no idea how you guys managed to get me here, and I am sorry for taking so much time.

The Department of Information Science and Media Studies and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bergen deserves my gratitude for having me, and giving me support through my PhD-period. Likewise, the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies and Faculty of Humanities at the University of Bergen, have my gratitude for granting me a leave of absence to pursue this project, and continue to do so on my return. And a particular thanks to the Digital Culture research group at the department who took me on when I returned to my position.

A thanks, of course, to the supportive Game Studies community associated with the Games and Transgressive Aesthetics projects, in particular to Torill Mortensen, Jaroslav Švelch, and Tomasz Majkowski who have been extremely supportive of a freshman scholar trying to find his way. The many friends I have made in Krakow and the Jagiellonian University deserves a mention, as you welcomed me into your community in the first weeks of my PhD and have become my game studies crew. You are too many to name, but I am eternally grateful to each and every one of you, and I count the days until the next time we meet, the next time we play, and the next time we toast. Thank you. And thank you to my fellow PhD students at the University of Bergen, for being patient with my transgressive strangeness. And to Ea Christina Willumsen for being my fun office mate, when I was there.

A particular acknowledgment should also go to my former students, Malgorzata Anna Pacholczyk for her excellent aid as research assistant, and Ida Sekanina for throwing the ball with me methodically.

My friends, old and new, all deserve my gratitude for their support and friendship through these years. And for watching movies and playing games with me whenever I had the time. Without you, I would have gone crazy a long time ago. You all keep being you.

A special thank you to my family. My father, Anders, who always supported my academic endeavours, and to my dear departed mother, Sunniva, for always encouraging me to play, and to be me. I am sorry she could not see me complete this. To my sister, Birte, her partner Arild, and their children Anders and Aurora, for always inviting me into their home, and allowing me to work at their dining room table. To my aunt, Anne Karin, for always being the aunt I can call.

And last, but definitely not least, I dedicate this to my new family. To my beautiful partner, Anne Lene, my co-conspirator in all things playful and diligent proof-reader. Thank you for all your encouraging words and company in hard times. Finding you was the highlight of this period, and we will continue exploring games together. And the kids; Ayoub, Salih and Sofiya - thank you for playing games with me, and for giving me insights into what it means to grow up with digital games. You are the weirdest and best, all of you. And to Anne Lene's mother, thank you for accepting me, and for taking care of the kids when work overwhelmed me.

And to Simba, for being the best cat ever. I love you all.

Now, on to my next adventure.

PART ONE: SYNOPSIS

Introduction: Players on the Boundary

In contemporary folklore it is often accepted that the internet consists of equal parts cats and pornography. In 2016, *Yandere Simulator* (YandereDev, unpublished), still in development, became a good example of this with its newest update. *Yandere Simulator* is available for free online, with a very active and vocal community surrounding it. The theme of the game, along with its lone developer, YandereDev, is highly sexualized, leaning strongly on pornographic fantasies. The game is set in a Japanese high school, and the goal is to get the romantic attention of another person at school, trying to get “senpai to notice me”. In order to do this, you have to eliminate the competition in different ways, and you can acquire information on the girls in school by taking up-skirt photographs of their underwear and trading the pictures. So far, so good, for the community awaiting the game’s completion. Within the context of the genre, inspired by Japanese manga and anime and the gaming community surrounding it, this hardly raises an eyebrow, but rather inspires glee. In the update launched the summer of 2016, however, YandereDev introduced new mechanics, utilizing the cats in the game. When you kill one of your rivals, you have to hide the body, and if you bury it, the search dogs will sniff it out. In this update, a way to prevent this was introduced. You could kill a cat, and bury it on top of the body of the girl, thus fooling the police to think the dogs reacted to this instead¹. At this point, the community blew up. How could you do this to a cat? How do you expect *us* to do this? YandereDev had crossed a line with the gaming community online. Kill teenage girls, take pictures of their underwear, all this was fine... but don’t mess with our cats!

As an act of crossing boundaries it is transgressive, and this story exemplifies the complexity of transgressions and its social dimensions; while the boundaries are different, depending on different social contexts. For many, the game’s general theme is transgressive, as it focuses on sexualizing and killing teenage girls, but for those jaded inhabitants of the internet, the killing of cats was an uncrossable line. Looking at this from the outside, it all seems pretty horrid or transgressive. And it conflicts with the idea that play is harmless fun, something that can be considered for children, a notion that can be referred to as the *idealization of play* (Stenros 2015, 2019) or the *fallacy of play* (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). Play can be very serious, even transgressive, as shown in the example of *Yandere Simulator*.

This dissertation is an empirical study focused on transgression in games and gaming culture, but is based on a broad scale perspective on games and culture, that goes beyond

¹ The relevant update video introducing the concept can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOycJQmrlA4&t=0s>

simplistic perspectives on games as either harmful or positive, as either the basis of culture and civilization or the decline and destruction of it. The main objective of the dissertation is to explore how players deal with issues that raise provocation, discomfort, or can be considered sensitive in games and gaming cultures. The research project is grounded in Games & Transgressive Aesthetics (GTA), a research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council (NFR), whose primary focus has been on the development of perspectives on transgression, meaning norms and boundaries breaking acts, in play, games and gaming culture. This project values the player perspective on transgression, above the discourse of what non-players found transgressive about games they didn't play. The many panics surrounding games (Karlsen 2015) such as Doom (id Software 1993) and Mortal Kombat (Midway 1992) come easily to mind here, as does Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar North 2013). This dissertation is situated within game studies and media studies, drawing especially on research on audiences of digital media. Ethnography and folkloristics are the main methodological approaches, which I will explain in the following section.

My folkloric position

This dissertation draws on a wide range of scholarly fields, primarily on folkloristics, ethnography, media studies and even extremism studies to mention a few. It is the strength of game studies that it can contain a multitude of scientific perspectives, theories and methodologies within itself. This is something that game studies have in common with folkloristics, often acting the part of the magpie, frequently borrowing methods and theories from other fields. The primary concern of folkloristics, and folklorists such as myself, is not theory-building, but to observe, collect and collate cultural expressions, performances, narratives and ideas. Applying theory is often secondary to presenting culture as it is presented or experienced by community members; there is no grand theory of folklore, but, as suggested by Dorothy Noyes, folklorists should embrace "humble theory" (Noyes 2008). Naturally, this does not exclude hermeneutics, and folklore scholarship is brimming with interpretive works ranging from marxist and psychoanalytic to sociological.

Folkloristics has always had a strong focus on informal and oral genres, and the performance of culture and cultural practices, the "texture" (meaning its characteristics and qualities) of the performance or expression, and, significantly, context (Sims and Stephens 2011). These are the aspects of gaming culture and the online communities in this dissertation that I have focused on. The context being not just games and game culture, but online culture in general and our contemporary socio-political backdrop, and the many posts and repeated expressions are the performances that I have found interesting.

Just as important as a theoretical position, is the self-reflexive understanding of how I as a scholarly researcher influence the field and data of my study (Sims and Stephens 2011). This implies the awareness of not only how a folklorist is situated within a performative context and thus influencing it, but also the significance of the scholar in the interpretation of that performance. Removing oneself and one's biases is of course a commendable goal, but it is not entirely possible, and this calls for an awareness and reflexive transparency on behalf of the scholar. I have to position myself, not just within a field of study or a theoretical school, but as a person, aware of how my own personality, psychology and social background influences the results of my study. That means not only who I am as a scholar, but who I am as a person, and a game enthusiast, as someone who is not only interested in games and online culture, but one who plays them and is fully embedded in online practices. And although I have always been a tech-savvy, pop-culture aficionado, I am now discussing game phenomena from the privileged perspective of a white, middle-aged academic.

This dissertation consists of four papers. Two papers are oriented towards game content and how players deal with sensitive issues during play (Bjørkelo 2019; Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018), and two papers are studies of online culture without intervention from the researcher (Bjørkelo 2020, Bjørkelo conditionally accepted). This has provided two different perspectives on transgressive gaming. The first approach has provided an opportunity to explore delineated aspects of transgressive play, while the other has furnished an exploration of actual cultural expressions pertaining to this topic. I have used a complimentary set of methodologies, such as autoethnographic close-readings, game design, interviews and ethnographic forum studies. The papers are presented below.

Background and research questions

The overarching Games and Transgressive Aesthetics project was funded in the midst of #Gamergate which highlighted the toxic, or rather transgressive, behaviour of self-declared gamers online. The hashtag #Gamergate was a rallying cry for discontent in gaming culture, that in 2014 quickly became the focal point for discussions about games. The campaign that followed was marked by aggressive and threatening behaviour by its proponents, and how it interlinked with anti-feminist and anti-progressive rhetorics. #Gamergate was not just about rude comments and harassment in online game chats, but threats and harassment directed against those deemed a threat against gaming - in particular women, feminists and other progressives in journalism and academia (Massanari 2015, Todd 2015, Mortensen 2016,

Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016). Although #Gamergate is not the object of study in this dissertation, it is the relevant cultural context for the project. #Gamergate showed that what stirs controversy in gaming culture correlates to controversies in society at large. The lines of division and conflict are similar, and similarly political. At the same time, however, #Gamergate indicated that the context of play also matters.

The papers in this dissertation add to the pool of knowledge generated by the Games and Transgressive Aesthetics project. From the onset, the dissertation wanted to explore what players themselves found transgressive in games and the gaming community, through observing online discourse in gaming related forums. Working from an ethnographically-inclined and folkloristic perspective, the aim of my project has been to adopt a player perspective on topics that raise provocation, discomfort, or can be considered sensitive in games and game discourse - topics that we can refer to as transgressive, or in terms of transgression. Gaining an in-depth understanding of player experiences of such topics not only called for lengthy online-data gathering, but also required me to work out a conceptualization of transgression in games, and how it affected play and the players. The concept of transgression is handled in different ways in all four of the papers included. I start from the dictionary definition of transgression as an “action of passing beyond the bounds of legality, a violation of law, duty or command, disobedience, trespass or sin” (Transgression 2017). Transgression is a wide term, covering both the content of games and game culture, but also the activities of people within the games and game culture, and speaks to both breaking of social norms and crossing of personal boundaries. Transgression, as a concept, ties much of this dissertation together and will be discussed more extensively in chapter 3.

As previously mentioned, *the main objective of the dissertation is to explore how players deal with issues that raise provocation, discomfort, or can be considered sensitive in games and gaming cultures.* The overarching research question is as follows: (RQ) *What is the role of transgression in games and gaming culture?*

In order to deal with this complex objective, the research has been divided into four related, but separate papers exploring the subject matter. They explore the following questions;

- (RQ1) *How does This War of Mine create a sense of transgressive realism?*
- (RQ2) *How can a sense of transgressive realism be applied to game design?*
- (RQ3) *How do white supremacists transgress social boundaries through the appropriation of Skyrim?*
- (RQ4) *How do forum users construct and negotiate the boundaries of gaming culture through transgressive discourse and play?*

The first two research questions required a conceptualization of transgression in games, and how (and if) it affected play and the players. The focus of the research is on the feelings of discomfort that may emerge when encountering game situations that reflect real-world situations that are personally and emotionally distressful, and on how it relates to a sense of realism.

Furthermore, the dissertation explores transgression within gaming culture or player communities, in order to answer RQ3 and RQ4. Given the political backdrop of the study, and the lingering effects of #GamerGate, it was natural to focus on the controversial political discourse in play communities. This made up a small part of the collected data, but was potent and appropriate for our times. The political zeitgeist of our time was clearly evident in the discourse and play taking place in gaming culture.

The research questions are answered through an extensive data collection in primarily two large gaming forums, through playing games such as *This War of Mine* (11bit Studios 2014) or designing transgressive experiences like *the Asylum Seekers* (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018). The questions and the analysis has been developed through numerous presentations at workshops, seminars and conferences as well as the four papers included in this dissertation. There are still areas that call for embellishments and future studies, but what is presented in this dissertation represents key findings and conclusions.

The included papers

The findings in this dissertation are presented in four papers that are included at the end. These papers answer different aspects of the research questions, and present different conceptualizations of transgression within games and game culture focusing on discomfort and the controversial.

“‘It feels real to me’: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*” (Bjørkelo 2019) is an autoethnographic close-reading of *This War of Mine* (11bit Studios 2014). In this paper, I introduce the concept of *transgressive realism* to explain how this game creates a sense of realism through involving players in transgression in-game actions. Here, transgression concerns the feelings of discomfort and sadness that the game, through its paratext, narrative and mechanics, inspire in the player. This feeling of discomfort creates a sense of realism for the player, as the feeling of discomfort is real, so does the game. This paper relates to RQ1.

“*The Asylum Seekers Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism*” (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018) continues the development of transgressive realism through the design of a larp and the two subsequent playthroughs. Inspired by the genre of Nordic larp, *The Asylum Seekers* is a dramatization through play of the border crossing interview that asylum seekers are subjected to when entering the border of Norway. Here the focus lies on how discomfort influences the play experience, and enhances the feel of realism. *The Asylum Seekers* is a larp that tries to create a positive-negative play experience, through the use of design intended to create a sense of discomfort with the situation. The effect of which is investigated in interviews during post-game debrief sessions. This paper relates to RQ2.

The two last papers discuss the findings of the game forum study that were carried out as part of the PhD project. The study of gaming forums shows a complex political discourse that reflects the broader polarized political trends in contemporary society and online culture. They work as a microcosm of the on-going topical debates.

““Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic”: White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*” (Bjørkelo 2020) focuses on a specific White Nationalist forum and their ideological reading of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) using encoding-decoding and affordances as theoretical tools to unpack how the game allows itself to become a playground for racist nationalism. When forum users on the White Nationalists message board Stormfront play and discuss *The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim*, they do so in accordance with their own worldview and beliefs (Bjørkelo 2020). There is a tendency towards the communities in gaming forums to see contemporary issues through the lens of their interest in gaming, discussions on censorship and “cancel culture”, are about censoring games and the consequences of racist or sexist actions of gaming personas. In this paper, I discuss how the forum users transgress common social norms through their appropriation of the game and game world, and how the game affords this. This paper relates to RQ3.

“Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted) focuses on one particular keyword in the data gathered in the process of this dissertation - *feminazi*. As a slur, *feminazi* is not exclusive to gaming culture. It originates from conservative discourse in the 90s, and is today frequently used to attack progressives, and in particular feminists, in contemporary politics. In gaming culture, the term is used as a negative characterization for progressives who are accused of wanting to “ruin games” through “political correctness”. The term is used as a form of ideological

boundary keeping in gaming culture and part of a playful political style of throwing insults that can easily be considered transgressive as it causes discomfort and breaks the norms of polite discourse. However, we also find a counter-use and a counter-position of the term, showing that this part of gaming culture is mired in the same type of conflicts we find in contemporary discourse elsewhere. Gaming culture is not just a microcosm of contemporary culture, but an intrinsic part of it. This paper relates to RQ4.

Dissertation overview

This dissertation is an article-based thesis that consists of the four articles described above and this contextualizing synopsis. This synopsis consists of five chapters. In these I develop the theories, concepts, ethics and methodologies that are the foundation for the published papers. In this **first chapter**, I introduce my own position, and summarize the following chapters.

In the **second chapter** I focus on relevant key concepts and theories from game studies, as this dissertation relies on certain key concepts, all of which are expanded in this chapter. Different understandings of “the magic circle” are discussed, with a focus on both framing and the concept of a porous boundary that one is able to cross or transgress. The chapter also explores the concept of the gamer, and the preferred term, player, and gaming culture and its politics and the notion that play and games are always fun. Towards the end, the chapter explores games such as the dozens, where the usage of pejoratives and slurs are an important part of play.

The **third chapter** explores transgression from different perspectives relating to games. Starting with a sociological definition of transgression, followed by Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque and Bataille’s interpretation of this which involves how transgression can be a source of pleasure and indulgence. I further discuss how transgression in games in some cases can concern a form of wanted play experience that challenges the rules of a game or social taboos, and in other cases can be experienced as provocative or tasteless to the degree that it breaks with what the player is willing to endure (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). Towards the end of the chapter, I present how the four papers in this dissertation deals with the different notions of transgression.

The fourth chapter discusses methodology and ethics. Combining ethnographically oriented methods such as autoethnography and ethnographic forum observation with corpus assisted discourse analysis (CADA), and exploratory larp design, the dissertation combines

multiple methods. In this chapter I present these methods, with a primary focus on the data collection in online forums. I discuss the specific challenges of researching gaming culture(s) as part of an overall contemporary online culture. Researching and analyzing online cultures is demanding, as it requires the researcher to have an understanding of a large network of symbols and references beyond the chosen cultural field. The chapter includes an overview of the large sets of data that was collected in the process of writing this dissertation, and includes future avenues of exploration.

In **the fifth chapter** I briefly conclude this dissertation, and present the four papers and their findings.

Play, boundaries and the dozens

While the origins of this project lies in the concept of transgression, its focus is on the players and their experience of games and gaming culture. And as the notion of transgression is further explored in the next chapter, this chapter is primarily concerned with literature on players, their communities and the games they play. I start by discussing selected theories of play, and the boundaries of games and play. I will also discuss what I mean when talking about *players* in this dissertation, and how they can be distinguished from *gamers*. Last, I turn towards the communities that are born out of play activities and the discourse surrounding them. The latter being of prime interest to this dissertation, that for the most part is about online player communities and their relationship to games, politics and transgression.

Play and games

Two fundamental concepts in game studies are *play* and *games*, both central to understanding the objects of study in the field and the relationship between them. Play and games can both be understood in terms of *activities* and are for this reason central in research that aims to understand players. In English, we generally distinguish between play as a freeform and exploratory activity, and game as a more structured and rule-bound framework for play activities (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 72). The terms *games* and *play* have different linguistic and cultural connotations, as pointed out by Johan Huizinga who devotes a chapter of *Homo Ludens* (2001 [1938]) to this issue. Treating the two as the end points on a continuum, Roger Caillois (2001 [1961]) separates between the ur-form of *paidia* which is “uncontrolled fantasy” (Caillois 2001 [1961], p 13) and *ludus* which is in contrast is skill-based, disciplined, structured and rule-governed.

Considered as activities, games and play are not characterized as complementary forms of activities, but are closely related to each other. For Miguel Sicart (2014), play is a broader category than games. He argues that games are just one of the many different ways that we can play. We don't need a game to play, but we may need to play to engage with a game. According to Sicart; “Games don't matter that much. They are a manifestation, a form, of and for play, just not the only one” (Sicart 2014, p 4.).

While Huizinga and Caillois are often the starting point for scholarly discussions on play and games, they were certainly not the first to be concerned with the subject. In folkloristics, for

instance, children's play was long considered to be remnants of pre-industrial culture and rituals, and as part of oral culture, it was always under threat of disappearing (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971a, 1971b), as exemplified by *The Games and Songs of American Children* by William Newell (1883). While early folkloristics approached play and games as a lesser cultural practice derived from more serious, adult practices (Dundes 1969, Dow 2014, Sutton-Smith 1997), contemporary folkloristics has by and large moved on from an evolutionary perspective on games, play, and culture in general. Although a focus on play as a children's activity persists and the general concern is on the informal and traditional forms of play often associated with childhood games. Alan Dundes (1983) and Roger Abrahams (1970) both provide examples of how games, as folkloric genres, provide vehicles for expressing and forming identity and community. Dundes, always the Freudian, would rely on structuralism and psychoanalysis to argue that male games of contests, and war, have a strong homoerotic streak, being a struggle between the "dominant" and the "dominated", the latter being demasculinized in defeat (Dundes 1997). Closely related to player-oriented game studies, contemporary folkloristics with an interest in internet and game culture seeks to understand games not as structures or artifacts, but in terms of meaningful activities and processes. Bill Ellis (2020) has studied how play on virtual platforms such as Facebook is a reflection of ourselves, and how they are not only far from trivial, but highly exploitable by third party actors outside of the "folk group" of your social network.

Folkloristics allows for a bottom up perspective on cultural phenomena, and my primary concern is with play and games as activities and cultural markers, not in games as systems, artifacts or texts. I am interested in what happens when people play games, but also what people use games for or how they discuss them. In other words, what do people involved with games, players, discuss online "through" the lense of gaming and play. Considered as artifacts, games are important only as far as they are the objects of play and discourse in gaming forums. Furthermore, my interest lies in those situations when the way people play games is in tension; when play breaks or threatens to break the boundaries of social norms, or when play is the source of discomfort or controversy. When play is transgressive, which is explored further in the next chapter.

In this dissertation, the four included papers show different ways to conceptualize transgression and play. One of the papers is a close reading of a game, through an autoethnographic account of a playthrough, namely *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014). "It feels real to me: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*" (Bjørkelo 2019) and "'Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic': White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*" (Bjørkelo 2020) are the papers that come closest to dealing with games as texts

or objects with certain transgressive qualities and affordances. The focus remains on how players find that their play can create personalized experiences. In the context of play, however, more interesting is how ““It feels real to me: Transgressive realism in This War of Mine” (Bjørkelo 2019) and “The *Asylum Seekers* Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism” (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018) both deal with play experiences where the games are the source of the discomfort, and therefore could be considered uncomfortable or transgressive, while ““Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic” (Bjørkelo 2020) and “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” focus on transgressive player behavior and interpretations. A strong focus on the player and the play experience, and transgression binds these papers together and adds to our understanding of transgressive play.

Civilization is a game we play

Play is one of those words that can be futile to give a unifying definition of. Like folklore or culture, it becomes a matter of ideology and what function the definition will serve for the author. Play sociologist Brian Sutton-Smith suggested seven rhetorics of play (1997), meaning seven different ways of thinking of play, and defining play. These are all tied to societal trends or philosophical projects, such as the idea of children’s play being part of their training to become adults. This rhetoric of progress is central to the works of Johan Huizinga (1971) and Roger Caillois (2001) who, like early folklorists (Dundes 1969), linked the development of play to the evolutionary development of culture.

Much of the academic discourse on play starts with the structuralist anthropology of Huizinga, who in *Homo Ludens* (2001 [1938]) presented a grand theory of play’s pivotal role in (mostly Western) civilization. His argument centres around how our cultural practices springs from, evolves, and revolves around play and games. He exemplifies this with, for instance, references to art, war, economy and rituals having play and games at its core. Huizinga defined play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (Huizinga 2001 [1938], p 13).

Roger Caillois (2001) follows Huizinga, and in his critique presents a taxonomy of play; presenting four different categories: *agôn* (competitive), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (make-believe) and *ilinx* (suspense and excitement). Caillois argues that all of these

categories of play have developed from the unhindered and unstructured “ludus” to the more rigid and structured forms of play in “paidia”. Caillois believed play was, in principle, devoid of important repercussions, and argued for the purity of games and play as distinct from seriousness and non-game, but still an important aspect of it. Play would be corrupted by non-play seriousness, when the stakes were too high, as in gambling.

Huizinga and Caillois both uphold an understanding that games are not serious, while still a matter of cultural and even civilizational importance. Sociologist Erving Goffman, suggests that fun is the mere reason for games, and thus play, and that this makes it hard to take seriously (Goffman 1961). However, in spite of Goffman’s argument, play can be very serious business indeed. It has potentially serious consequences, as described by Richard Schechner (1988) with the concept of dark play, which involves forms of play in which only one of those involved is aware that there is a play situation going on, or where the play activity can have harmful, even deadly, outcomes. Dark play does not fall into a classical understanding of play, but nevertheless we have to accept this as play as long as the activity is framed as such by some of its participants. Thus, bullying could be considered an example of this. Play is always delimited by a particular context, the player’s mindset, or simply by the rules of a game, and play is not always about the unseriousness that Goffmann was looking for. And here we enter the territory of two concepts central for the following discussion: the magic circle (Huizinga 1971) and the fallacy of play (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020), both of which may be informative to understand the players, the communities they create around playing games and how games are defended.

Breaking the frames of play

According to Gregory Bateson (1987), play is defined by a social contract that distinguishes the meaning of play separate from non-play; that something which happens within play means, or represents something different, than it would outside of play. It is an expression of the common notion or presupposition that games are set aside from daily routine. Such understandings of play and its boundaries borrow much from the concept of *the magic circle*. This in spite of the fact that Huizinga only mentioned the magic circle six times (Stenros 2012) in passing, in *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1971). The magic circle has come to represent the way that games and play set up a boundary against the outside world, such as ritualistic practices in a social and physical distinct place, such as the allocation of the bedroom for sex (Ruberg 2010). This particular understanding of the magic circle has been credited to Salen and Zimmerman (2004), who argue that games and play are separate from “the real world” or out-of-play world.

This notion of the magic circle helps describe and explain how we accept something as true and acceptable within the frame of a game, and not in “real life”. For instance, it allows moral bracketing of activities in games and play (Sageng 2019). This interpretation of the magic circle has come under criticism for its rigidity and formalism by, among others, Mia Consalvo (2009) who suggests looking at frame analysis, and finds inspiration in folklorist Gary Allen Fine’s (1983) classic work on fantasy role-players. Fine uses the Goffmanian frame analysis to analyse how fantasy role-players differentiates between different frames, the primary and the secondary framework, and how they effortlessly shift between them based on social cues and interests. Players distinguish between what is relevant for the action taking place within the shared fantasy world of the role-playing game, and what is relevant for whomever is taking orders for pizza. They are both taking place at the same time, but are keyed differently, and players shift between these different frames. Keying is the way various frames are differentiated with subtle or taciturn signs (Goffman 1974), the way I implicitly understand that the same lewd jokes one would tell with a group of friends would cause a social backlash if told at an inter-generational family gathering. Actions made during play or in a game are keyed to be understood differently than outside of play. Goffman would suggest that they would be in jest or for fun (1961).

To stay with the example of role-playing games, players may revel in stealing and murdering their way to success when playing as bandits during a session of *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974 -)² as this is accepted within the frame of the game world, but the same players would reject that kind of behaviour outside of play (Pötzsch 2019). In a digital game a similar example could be as murder and robberies in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) or performing a mass murder in *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015). The same would also apply to the gameplay of *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft 2006), where the player is supposed to stalk intended rape victims, or japanese dating sims where women characters appear as both underage and overly sexualized. From examples like this, it is understood that play can have a different ethical framework that allows players to transgress against what would be the norms of the primary framework (Sicart, 2009, Sageng 2019). These are cases where there are separate ethical frameworks for the games and the out of game world, the ethical framework of the game is being contested by players and non-players alike in the data collected during this project. We can find the same distinctions with movies, literature and even visual art.

² *Dungeons and Dragons* has had multiple authors, editions, and publishers. This is reflected in the bibliography.

Ashley ML Brown (2015b) uses this Goffmanian understanding of frames (Goffman 1974), and the primary and secondary framework of real world and play, to describe how players differentiate between distinct moral and ethical worlds, (and maybe even distinct selves in the case of role-playing). She finds that play affords this duality, and players accept it willingly;

“The nature of play and the structure of games, it would seem, allow flexibility in the interpretations of moral codes and behaviour, and the overall significance both hold for conceptions of the self as an ethical being” (Brown 2015b, p 122).

This echoes her findings in *Sexuality in Role-Playing Games* (Brown 2015a). Brown suggests that the rules are a major factor in creating acceptance of otherwise unacceptable elements in the game, such as “savage genitalia” (Brown 2015b). The ability to shift from one frame to another, to go from play to non-play and back again, indicates that the magic circle should not be conceptualized as a strong border. Indeed, when expanding on Bateson’s concepts of frames (Bateson 1987), Erving Goffman introduced the *interaction membrane* as the more permeable boundary of a social encounter, like someone playing a game together (Goffman 1961).

Based on this, it is tempting to throw away the magic circle all together, but we need a system to understand how we bracket play activities. Even theories that exclude a strong demarcation between play and non-play, presupposes that there is something non-mundane about play and the state of playfulness. Jaakko Stenros (2012), among others, suggests a more porous understanding of the magic circle, that allows for the two realms of play and non-play to intermingle and influence each other, and to bracket the ethical and moral world of play.

Markus Montola has written about how play and non-play influence each other, using the notion of *bleed play* to describe how real life affects play, and how play affects the life of the player. Montola likens it to brink play (see below);

“[...]in which the *magic circle of play* serves as a social alibi for non-ordinary things. Bleed designs aim to simultaneously maintain a sense of alibi, and to weaken the *protective frame* of play in order to explore powerful emotions” (Montola 2010, p 2,).

Play thus becomes about more than fun and the game itself, it becomes about exploring emotions that may have real consequences for the players. This could potentially affect them in the long term after the play has ended.

In conclusion, rather than understanding the magic circle as a conceptual feature created by the game itself, it is better understood in terms of a playful mindset created by the player through their intention of play. In solitary games, this is strictly speaking a mental activity, while in social play situations, it is better understood in terms of a social contract (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 473; Stenros 2012; Consalvo 2009).

The un-fun in games

In discussing dark play, Schechner (1988) considers how this play activity endangers and dissolves the frames of play to the point that it even confuses the player whether or not play is taking place. The concept of dark play contradicts many of the ideas of what traditionally is considered play. It can be dangerous, it can be one-sided, and it does not restrict itself to a magic circle. Jaakko Stenros (2019) recognized that while play is “associated with contradictory characteristics” (Stenros 2019, p 13)³, it is primarily conceptualized in an idealized manner, focusing on its positives. This has caused certain forms and expressions of play to be excluded from academic considerations (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984); they are considered “not-play”. With reference to Stenros (2019), I will refer to play that breaks the boundaries and frames of play as *transgressive play*. Stenros (2019, pp 17 - 23) suggests a partially overlapping, but broad list of such play practices. Some of which are very relevant to this dissertation and included papers, such as *parapathic play* which is play to evoke emotions and responses that are not related to “fun”, such as playing a horror game, or *This War of Mine* (11bit Studios) (Bjørkelo 2019). This encompasses a lot of the play activities that have been of interest to this dissertation; namely un-fun play, and play that evoke negative emotional responses or discomfort. These activities of play has been at the core of the conceptualization of transgressive play experiences. Parapathic play is closely related to the notion of *transgressive realism* (Bjørkelo 2019), and is the play experience we had in mind when designing the discomfort of the *Asylum Seekers* larp (Bjørkelo 2016, Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018).

One of the key components of transgressive play is the breaking of norms and boundaries, and as such *taboo play* is perhaps the ultimate form of transgression in play. This is perhaps what comes closest to the profoundly transgressive (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, see also next chapter). Taboo play is unacceptable, no matter the context or the people involved.

³ “[...]such as being free, voluntary, spontaneous, autotelic, safe, unserious, separate, absorbing, uncertain, unproductive, rule governed, trivial, creative, wasteful, fun, familiar, joyous, repetitive, regenerative, cathartic, preparatory, predatory, mirthful, childish, disruptive, dangerous, uncivilized, and fragile” (Stenros 2019, p 13).

It is unacceptable both within Goffman's primary and secondary framework, and it may include play that integrate forms of racism, sexual violence or incest, which according to Stenros retain "their edge even when there is pretend play involved" (2019, p. 22). No matter how unacceptable, there are still those who would engage in these activities within a playful context and framework, and thereby aestheticizing the transgressive nature of the taboo (Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020). Stenros links taboo play with play that defies the same taboos, such as forbidden play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, pp 477-81), which situates the norm-breaking activity within a playful activity that makes it acceptable. An innocent example would be playing criminals in a game of thieves and robbers, or as a world leader instigating a Nuclear Holocaust in a multiplayer session of *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games 2016).

The fact that some would engage in taboo play and accept it as play, contingent on social and cultural context and personal tastes, goes to show how difficult it is to lock down what is truly unacceptable, taboo or transgressive. For some the inclusion of sexist or racist trash talk is unacceptable and enough to shut down the playful framework, for others it is an important part of what makes play pleasurable (Vossen 2018), which is a topic to be explored in the next chapter. For this dissertation, taboo play comes to signify the profoundly transgressive play which no longer risks breaking the framework of play and playfulness, but shatters them, and in the words of Emma Vossen bursts the magic circle (Vossen 2018, p. 2010).

The inclusion of harassment and trash talk within playful discourse, like the one we find in the use of the misogynist slur *feminazi* (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted), is related to *brink play* (Poremba 2007), where play is an excuse to justify doing something specific, like play-fighting in order to get physically close to your flirt, or make misogynist remarks under the guise of playing or "just joking". Brink play is on the brink of transgression, but it "does its damndest not to get caught in transgression" (Stenros 2019, p 21). Brink play can thus also involve bullying and one-sided play, but can also be characterized as *dirty play* which is the transgressive play of adolescents: "aggressive pranks, vandalism, and sexual talk or racist remarks" (Stenros 2019, p 21). Such forms of play can sometimes also border on *player-inappropriate play* where it is not appropriate for a player to take place in the play activity; a soldier playing hide-and-seek with children during a military exercise or a priest "playing the dozens" (Abrahams 1970) with the kids after communion. Another related form of play is what Stenros refers to as *unplaying* where children play in ways children are not "supposed to play".

Another form of transgressive play is *Context-insensitive play*, in which the context is inappropriate for play; in other words, it is play that transgresses against the social contract of the situation. There's a tension here between the primary framework of not-play and the secondary framework of play, that potentially makes the play all that more exciting and pleasurable. Examples include play in funerals or in the courtroom. Loudly engaging in bet-taking for how long the marriage will last, or disrupting the ceremony would be examples of this. But according to Stenros (2019) there is also an aspect of power-struggle in such play forms, as the play undermines the accepted structures and norms of a situation. Stenros compares this to *illicit* play which children use to undermine authority. Trolling can be an example of *playing the system*, according to Stenros, where the system is not intended to be played with, and is thus a form of context-insensitive play.

These are the most relevant forms of transgressive play discussed in this dissertation; where parathetic play is clearly important to the games it focuses on, the players who use gendered and misogynists slurs about political adversaries (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted) are taking part in various degree of taboo play that may be either context or player insensitive, and always on the brink. The players involved in interpreting *The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) as a White Nationalist narrative (Bjørkelo 2020) is taking part in a particular form of in-appropriateness, not only breaking with expected conventions of interpretations and playstyle, but their ideological interpretations transgresses the norms of society in a way that is strongly context-insensitive (games shouldn't be White Nationalist!) and so offensive that it is close to taboo.

Beyond these forms of dark play, we could discuss a myriad of other forms of play covered by Stenros (2019), such as one-sided play, dangerous play, deep play, violent play, sensation-centric locomotor play, repetitive play and instrumentalized play. And the list goes on, to show that play is more than the "fun" assumed by Goffman (1961) and others. These forms of play not only helps us see how definitions predicated on idealized concepts of play, excluding commonplace play and playful activities, they also point out the interesting space in which play is not just fun, but serious, where the boundaries between play and not-play are at its weakest. Where play is influenced by "the real world", and "the real world" is influenced by play. It is perhaps in this intersection that play is at its most vibrant and dynamic.

The idea that play is somehow always about fun and separate from other concerns, is referred to as the *fallacy of play* by Torill Mortensen and Kristine Jørgensen (2020), who write that "it is a fallacy to see play as non-serious, fun, safe, and not having any

consequences to life” (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, p 102), and that by joining a game, the player “have agreed to a social contract that states that there is a risk of discomfort and disappointment” (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, p. 104). This more or less sums up the above discussion. The forms of play presented here and in the papers included in this dissertation, all go to show how play is not just about “fun”, and to a certain extent the dissertation rests on this premise. It is also an argument against the existence of an impenetrable magic circle. Accepting something akin to the concepts of a magic circle (Huizinga 1971) or goffmanian frames of play (Goffman 1961 and 1974) as tools to understand perceived normative boundaries, we cannot help but see how play at times seems dependent on boundary crossing, i.e. transgression. It is possible to argue that play always exists in this state of tension or flux, and may even be dependent on it. This indicates that there is a vulnerable balance to play, that “needs to be maintained unbroken but at the same time needs to be challenged and put at risk in order to remain interesting” (Linderoth and Mortensen 2015, 6).

Seriously playing the real world

From these discussions above we can understand that play, being not harmless and not demarcated from the rest of our lives, is not trivial, but can be serious. We find ourselves with an understanding of play as an activity where boundaries are frequently being transgressed. Whether these are boundaries set up by rule mechanics, social contracts or the expectations of play and players or game designers (Aarseth 2007). Some forms of play, such as bleed play in live action role-playing games, intend in fact for the boundaries to be weakened in order for the worlds, in and out of play, to influence each other (Montola 2010). The boundaries of play, whether we refer to them as the magic circle or secondary framework, are present in order to allow us to ponder the (un-)reality of what happens in play, and spare us its consequences. But as different forms of transgressive play show, what happens in play can have real meaning and real consequences in spite of the pretense of it being somehow closed off. As Markus Montola writes about bleed play, it “[...]is based on a double consciousness: players both acknowledge and deny the nature of play” (Montola 2010, p 2) .

The experiences discussed with the notion of bleed and other forms of play that aren't necessarily “fun”, may be considered pleasurable or meaningful. The players take something away from the play experiences and the emotions that it sparks that somehow enriches or adds to their lives outside of play. While the experience could be viewed as negative, the

outcome post play, for the individual player, can be positive, and is often, and in this dissertation, referred to as positive-negative experiences.

The conceptualization of positive-negative experiences originates from folklorist Heidi Hopeametsä's paper, "24 hours in a bomb shelter" (Hopeametsä 2008), and was further developed by Markus Montola (2010), and describes how players derive positive feelings from play that is based on negative, uncomfortable and transgressive experiences. This provides a possible answer to the question: For what reasons other than fun do people play games? From these positive-negative experiences, players are able to derive meaningful intellectual and emotional experiences and responses. It allows the players to reflect on themselves and their emotional responses, as well as humans in general. They are able to convert the serious topics and experiences from a play experience, to play-external seriousness), meaning that;

"[...] the experience of seriousness [in play] goes beyond dedication to the game rules or the frames of play: It also concern topics and experiences evaluated as important in a greater context, and which affects the moods of the players, create experiences that feel real, and encourages reflection" (Jørgensen 2014, p 6).

These concepts serve to show how there is a constant exchange between the boundaries between play and non-play, and that both are continuously influencing the other. This is particularly important in play we can refer to as dark, transgressive, bleed, brink and so on, as the crossing the boundaries of the magic circle are at the core of these experiences. Furthermore, the idealization of play (Stenros 2019) and the search for the *fun in games* (Goffman 1961), only gives us a partial glimpse of why we play, and the meaning we derive from play experiences.

As Kristine Jørgensen writes in the above quote, part of this is that it "creates experiences that feel real" (Jørgensen 2014, p 6) regardless of whether they are real or not. These concepts lay the foundation for what I have labeled *transgressive realism* (Bjørkelo 2019), which is a theoretical tool for embellishing how the negative experiences sought after in play, creates a sense of realism, not unlike that of social realism (Pötsch 2015, Galloway 2004). It is based on experiences with *This War of Mine* (11bit Studio 2014), which makes the player complicit in tragedies of war, and creates a sense of emotional realism in spite of neither the game mechanics or graphics being accurate representations of the real world.

I understand game culture and the communities of players with these theoretical discussions in mind. People who are dedicated to playing games, including video games, are engaged with different forms of play, including that which comes from these types of dark or transgressive plays, where different boundaries are crossed time and time again in the name of playing. So from this brief theoretical walkthrough of play, we move on to discuss the communities of interest in this dissertation. Starting with the concept of the gamer, and why I have avoided using this term in the dissertation.

What's in a name?

My focus in this dissertation is on *players* and their experiences and communities. While I could easily have replaced players with *gamers*, I have chosen to avoid the term gamer because of its many implications. To understand the breadth and diversity of the manifold game cultures, however, it is important to understand the connotation that the gamer brings to games and game culture. Yet, gamer is a much maligned term, which conjures images of both basement dwelling dropouts from society who excel at the online shooters and the angry, internet troll raging against the appropriation of video games by anyone not conforming to his (the presumption is often that the gamer is a male), self-image. Garry Crawford summarises the stereotypes of gamers: “anti-social, aggressive, addicted, male and adolescent” (Crawford 2012, p 48). The gamer has been traditionally associated with such negative traits and “the gamer stereotype is often perceived as negative and exclusionary” (Stone 2019, p 2608). Jeffrey Stone (2019) aptly provides a different synopsis of gamer stereotypes, writing that the gamer is “a young, typically white male, who is both socially inept and professionally unsuccessful or, at the very least, idle and unmotivated” (Stone 2019, p 2608), as well as “overweight and unattractive” (ibid), and heterosexual. These stereotypes have been explored and contested in several works (see for instance the works by Adrienne Shaw 2010, 2011 and 2013 and Kowert, Griffiths and Oldmeadow 2012, Chess 2017, Salter & Blodgett 2017, William, Yee & Caplan 2008), demonstrating that the actual players of games are broader than what is implied by the term “gamer”. Indeed, there are different groups of players, representing different genders, ethnicities, and classes, they are interested in different genres, and play in different ways, and may also be said to represent a number of different game cultures. This fact is also demonstrated by this dissertation, which spans white nationalists on Stormfront (Bjørkelo 2020), the avid players debating feminism in online forums (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted) and live action role-players (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018).

Most of the work done to understand “the gamer” has been done within an English-speaking, white and/or American context, and this influences how the gamer is cultured, gendered and racialized. In contrast Deshbandhu (2016) has focused on players from India and how they define a gamer. His respondents all felt they fell short of their own definitions of being a gamer. Deshbandhu coined the term “gamerworthiness” for the idealized version of the gamer as someone particularly skillful or dedicated to gaming, which players strive to become. There are important class and gendered aspects in the responses he received from his players, as becoming a gamer requires both the time to devote to games and resources to buy the right games and have the computer or consoles to play them. Furthermore, their definition of gamer was gendered in two cases, the gamer is *male*. In spite of studies showing the growing number of girls and women gaming (ESA 2017, ISFE 2012).

Studies by Benjamin Paaßen, Thekla Morgenroth, and Michelle Stratemeyer (2017, as well as Morgenroth, Stratemeyer, and Paaßen 2020) indicate that in spite of the number of women in gaming, the stereotype of the male gamer persists, and this stereotype does to some degree determine who identifies themselves or are identified by others as gamers. This is contingent on how the term gamer is defined, and by who, and there are evidently many women out there who define themselves as gamers. Though these may face more resistance due to their gender. These findings are confirmed by others, such as Jeffrey Stone (2019) who find that the stereotypes are persistent, and that factors such as gender and frequency of play “still impact self-identification of one’s self as a gamer and that the duration of exposure to video games and frequency of gaming also plays a significant role” (p 2623). These studies all find that the stereotypes of the gamer are self-perpetuating, and only slowly changing to be more inclusive. The gamer is an prohibitive category, that, even when just looking at gender, excludes almost half the game playing population and culture.

Garry Crawford (2012) has defined being a gamer as a social career, along the lines of increasing levels of interest, skill and devotion to games, while others, as Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer (2017) have pointed out, consider the gamer a social identity (Shaw 2011, 2013 and Grooten & Kowert 2015), that goes beyond the activity of playing games. A broad definition of the gamer that only focuses on how much someone plays games, excludes how being a gamer is something enacted outside of play itself. Based on feminist scholar Judith Butler, Adrienne Shaw (2013) argues that the gamer identity is something to be performed, which is not available to everyone. Her perspective emphasizes who are *allowed* to identify themselves or be identified as gamers. In that paper, Shaw’s focus is on the players who are not included in the gamer stereotype, and how they relate

their playing activity to the “ideal gamer”, “[...] rather than try to disprove these assertions and articulate a new definition of gamer identity” (Shaw 2013), which seems often to be the aim of these studies. This leads to an argument for a shift of focus away from “gamers” and who or what they may be, for game studies, in order to study a broader spectrum of people who play games;

“Rather than argue that the gamer identity is too narrow or blissfully democratic (it is neither), I assert that critical perspectives, such as feminist and queer theory, offer an approach to video games that can focus more attention on the lived experiences of those who engage with these games outside the dominant audience construction — indeed outside of identifying as gamers — and make an argument for representation that takes seriously those perspectives.” (Shaw 2013)

Simply put, rather than broadening the concept of the gamer to include more subjects, we should broaden the perspective of game studies to include those who cannot perform the identity of gamers.

In this dissertation, I could make the assumption that anyone who takes part in a large gaming forum can be defined as a gamer, performing the social role of someone engaging in games beyond mere playing. However, this assumption would force an identity on these users, or worse, reduce them to a stereotype, that they may not be able or willing to perform. A broader perspective on people who play games, would include them all, and not just those who would self-identify and perform as gamers. I have chosen the term players, which is a neutral term without the cultural baggage of gamers. Choosing the word players means that I simply describe them as people who play games, and the word doesn't exclude or differentiate between different understandings of the gamer identity, frequency of play, play styles, gender and so on. This is of course somewhat arbitrary as it is a personal preference of my own, and does not necessarily reflect the self-identification of the players discussed in this dissertation, who may or may not define themselves as gamers, who may be neutral to the term, or find the term off-putting.

Furthermore, this dissertation was started in the aftermath of #GamerGate in 2014 (Chess & Shaw 2015, Massanari 2015a, Massanari & Chess 2018, Mortensen 2016 Paul 2018, Burgess & Matmamoros-Fernández 2016, Butt & Apperley 2016), which brought the gamer identity to the forefront of online drama, and was both weaponized and politicized (Mortensen 2016, Backe 2018). During #GamerGate self-identifying gamers lashed out for many reasons, one of them being that they felt their identity questioned and threatened. Subsequently, marginalized people, women, and academics were targeted for online

harassment (Massanari 2018) by those who claimed to represent gamers. This only added to the negative stereotypes of the gamer, and brought an even more ominous trait to how the gamer is portrayed by others. The repercussions and change this brought to gaming communities is felt throughout my data collection, and can be seen in “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted). And only lends strength to my decision to not identify all the members of the gaming communities as gamers. If only out of respect for those targeted by harassment by self-identifying gamers. That being said, this is not intended as a devaluing of those who find purpose and meaning in identifying as a gamer.

The case of the Dozens and the boundaries of gaming culture

In this final part of this chapter, I explore how transgressive play can and will take different forms, with contests of ridicule and insults as the point of departure. This type of activity can both take the form of transgressive play outside of gaming culture, such as with the case of the dozens below. This type of activity is also commonplace within internet and gaming culture; while for some it is a part of play, for others it is play breaking (Vossen 2018).

In “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted) my focus is on a distinctly mean and aggressive way of interaction that is all too common in online discourse, and not just game culture. Emma Jane (2017) has explored the rampant misogyny found in online discourse, while Adrienne Massanari (2015b) has explored the different facets of discourse on Reddit, also focusing on how gender was policed online. Perhaps the best case in point about particularly gendered and aggressive interaction online is #Gamergate (Chess & Shaw 2015, Massanari 2015a, Massanari & Chess 2018, Mortensen 2016 Paul 2018, Burgess & Matmamoros-Fernández 2016, Butt & Apperley 2016). Even before the onset of #GamerGate, gaming culture (both online and offline) was the stage of sexist harassment against women who dared question the status quo of the culture (Consalvo 2012).

Foreshadowing #GamerGate, Mia Consalvo wrote:

“The “encroachment” of women and girls into what was previously a male-gendered space has not happened without incident, and will probably only become worse before it (hopefully) improves” (Consalvo 2012, p 3).

From the early days of the internet, flame wars was a regular occurrence (Dery 1994), defined simply as “vitriolic online exchanges” (Dery 1994, p 1) and became a part of the established internet culture, as would trolling (Bjørkelo 2015, Cook, Schaafsma & Antheunis 2018, Nycyk 2017, Phillips 2016, de Seta 2017), the act of inciting emotional responses for

fun and thrills. Whitney Phillips in particular has explored the world of trolling and antagonistic online culture (Phillips 2016), and in particular its folkloric, humorous and playful nature (Phillips and Milner 2017). These are aspects of internet culture that plays into works by both Angela Nagle (2017) and George Hawley (2017) who trace the resurgence of a radical right-wing to this part of online discourse. A common reference in many of these is #Gamergate and gaming culture, and there are playful aspects to flaming and trolling, as they are experiences as contests (of will) by those who engage in them, and are often attempts to entertain the “in-crowd”. This activity can be one-sided play where only the aggressor finds the interaction pleasurable, but this is not always the case as both participants in an outright flame war take part willingly (Dery 1994).

This transgressive play can take the form of a contest of norm-breaking, slinging insults and derogatory statements at one another. It brings to mind rap battles, or even more traditionally, *the dozens* (Hughes 2006). This game is attributed to the oral culture among “dispossessed urban youth” in the US, described by Roger Abrahams in his seminal book *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1970), where he traces the first mention to 1919 (Abrahams 1970, p 260). The dozens is here portrayed as a verbal fight between adolescent male asserting their manhood in the community, and Abrahams, like Dollard (1939), underlines the aggression involved. The dozens is a dark social interaction of playful one-upmanship, competing in negative characteristics of the others, or, more preferably, their mothers. From the outside, the near violent verbal attack might be perceived as nothing but toxic and destructive, but as with most folk culture this is a too simple answer to a complex question. The function of the dozens is, according to Abrahams

“[...] to effect a temporary release from anxiety for both himself and his audience. By creating playgrounds for playing out aggressions, he achieves a kind of masculine identity for himself and his group in a basically hostile environment” (Abrahams 1970, p 60).

As such it is related to many of the categories of transgressive play discussed previously in this chapter, for many it would be parathetic play, as the immediate reaction to being the subject matter of the insults would be anger or even sadness. In other situations the dozens is taboo play, as the insults delve into subject matters that are usually off-limits, and it's also forbidden play as the subject matter is anesthetized by the playful contest involved.

This kind of behaviour is also found in gaming culture, but is hardly exclusive to it, which is why the dozens is important to keep in mind. It may be a part of either very competitive cultures, or maybe even “masculine” culture, and maybe this competitive play is part of our

cultural heritage. In Northern European tradition, we find a similar practice to that of the dozens, flyting, a poetic insult contest, which dates to early Anglo-Saxon and Norse culture, but was popularized in 16th century Scotland (Hughes 2006). Again we find an agonistic playful interchange of insults and jabs, even as part of a political discourse. This playful aspect of what would otherwise be considered toxic behaviour and harassment is worth bearing in mind, in particular as to how this behaviour can be considered one-sided play. The perpetrators of aggressive discourse online may have a very different perspective on what is happening, than the victims. It is also not inconceivable that a gaming culture, embedded in competitive online discourse, with games and playing as their *raison d'être* would also perceive any discourse, in particular political ones, as a game, and an arena for playful behaviour - no matter how one-sided. For the perpetrator, the play frame is used to make harmful behaviour harmless (Phillips & Millner 2017), to make the serious into a joke. The inverse would also be true, depending on the situation and the perspective.

The discourse of the dozens, flyting or flame wars is obviously not unfamiliar territory to players, not only are they denizens of the internet, but the games themselves have brought these contests to the forefront. The latest example being the inclusion of flyting mini-games in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal 2020), where you, as a Norwegian viking, is tasked to beat the mostly Saxon inhabitants of England. An even more classic example would be insult swordfighting in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) and its sequels.

Games such as the dozens, and the toxic and aggressive nature of internet discourse also serve to preserve the sanctity of the in-group, and to exclude those who are not part of the oral community, and can therefore also be seen, partially at least, as a form of boundary keeping. According to Boudreau, the sexist, ageist, racist and homophobic vitriol

“can in part be contextualized within the frame of subcultural boundary keeping according to perceived skill and expertise, [...], but it is rage that leads to the much more harmful deviant and damaging behavior” (Boudreau 2019, p 266).

This is a type of subcultural behaviour (e.g. Bryson 1996, Langseth 2012), and Kelly Boudreau (2019) discusses how gaming communities perform boundary keeping through toxic behaviour within games, and this can easily be seen outside the games as well, in the social construct that surrounds the game, that is the many discussion boards and comment sections. While gaming has become part of the mainstream, gaming culture still perceives itself as a marginal subculture, and under threat, which is part of the explanation for #GamerGate (Mortensen 2016).

That there is a playfulness to this behaviour, and a history of insulting games such as flying and the dozens, does not detract from the aggressive and toxic nature of these boundary keeping activities. It does, however, go to show that play is not always harmless, and that there is oftentimes a very serious aspect to playful activity. These boundary keeping activities are one-sided play, and they are at times context-insensitive, taboo play, and on the brink. Attempts to separate “transgressive play as boundary keeping and more malicious transgressive activity (toxic behavior motivated through rage, for example)” (Boudreau 2019, p 270) is complicated by the fluidity of these categories. Like much of internet culture, it is neither nor, but a little bit of both, it is ambivalent (Phillips & Milner 2017).

Beyond boundary keeping, this activity can also be discussed in terms of differently keyed frames (Gofman 1973, Fine 1983, Brown 2015b), where the actors never shift frames completely away from that of playfulness, where harassment and toxic behaviour becomes an expression of playfulness, deadly, serious and toxic playfulness, but also the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984), as this is the meeting ground of politics and playfulness; where the political becomes an object of play, and play becomes an expression of politics (Phillips & Milner 2017). In this space, a slur, a social transgression, can always be understood or excused as a joke or playful reference, not to be taken seriously, while still remaining deadly serious. And in a way it is both serious and playful; ambivalent (Phillips & Milner 2017).

It is from this perspective that I approach the political nature of gaming culture and the discourse within the communities discussed in this thesis. I understand play and playfulness as something not necessarily “fun”, and that it allows for transgression and darkness and for bracketing these things as “just play”. While this kind of dark play is found outside of play communities, and can even be political in nature (see Sicart 2014), it is only natural to also see this in connection with an online culture that enjoys playful ambivalence. I also believe it is important to understand that when dealing with communities of play, a playful approach to most things is to be expected.

Theories of Transgression

This dissertation was born out of meditations on boundaries in gaming culture; in other words, on the questions of transgression in games and play. Where do we draw the lines in play and gaming culture? What are the boundaries that are crossed, policed or carefully balanced?

If we look at the dictionary definition, *transgression* is an “action of passing beyond the bounds of legality, a violation of law, duty or command, disobedience, trespass or sin” (Transgression, OED). To transgress is to cross boundaries, to break rules, to overstep and to sin against God or the natural order of things. To transgress is going too far, to do what you are not supposed to do.

Transgression is a term discussed in a number of academic fields, spanning criminology, the arts, and sociology. While criminology treats transgression as violation of the law (O’Neill and Seal 2012), in arts and aesthetics transgression refers to a particular genre of modernist art that aims to provoke and offend (Julius 2002). In sociology, the term has been used to discuss practices and activities that break the social and cultural norms of a given society, spanning the relationship between individuals and between individuals and institutions (Jenks 2002). In this dissertation I follow a sociological understanding which presupposes that while there are institutional boundaries at play in some transgressions, transgression is contingent on individual and personal tastes and sensibilities (Jenks 2003, Pötzsch 2019). This means that transgressive acts are transgressions only in the eyes of specific persons, and not to others. An example of this would be gay marriage, which to some is an institution that legitimizes same-sex love, but to others a sacrilege for that very same reason. This means that discussions of transgressions always run the risk of blurring the line between the transgression against commonly held norms and institutions and individual values and tastes.

In game studies, *transgression* has been used to describe deviant or subversive play practices, either in the form of play that breaks the intended design of the game (Aarseth 2007), or that explores new and alternative ways of playing games (Kafai et al 2009; Sundén 2009). Transgression has also been used to describe game content that provokes and offends (Bjørkelo 2019; Jørgensen 2019; Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020), that breaks with conventions of the genre (Majkowski 2019), and player practices meant to disturb others (Stenros 2019; Consalvo 2019; Boudreau 2019). In my research, I wanted to seek out what

provoked people about games and gaming culture, and to focus on those who actually play games, not those who try to police play and gaming culture from the outside. What were the games that sparked the players' anger, fear or discomfort? This is an important distinction, because those who play games understand the language of gaming as having a specific literacy to understand the codes and tropes used. Games and gaming culture can be considered both violent and sexist, and therefore repugnant and inscrutable to those without the necessary literacy (Przybylski 2013, Schott 2016); in effect, those who partake in this culture will be provoked by other aspects of it than those who don't.

Such transgressions also have political aspects. I found that a large part of the topics discussed as controversial or provocative in the forums in my study were of a political nature. This should come as no surprise after #GamerGate (Chess & Shaw 2015, Massanari 2015a, Massanari 2018, Massanari & Chess 2018, Mortensen 2016 Paul 2018, Burgess & Matmamoros-Fernández 2016, Butt & Apperley 2016), and foremost among the political subjects in online forums in my collected data is the politics of gender representation. This would often take the form of discussions about either objectifying aesthetics or about the assumed censorship of sexualized characters in games, keeping with the "feminazi agenda" (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted).

The discourse surrounding games can, as in the above mentioned case of the feminazi, be quite aggressive, and some of the positions taken, such as white nationalist finding a home in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), are boundary breaking, and to be understood within a framework of transgression. Two of the papers included in this dissertation focus primarily on developing a theory of boundary breaking in games through discomfort and transgressive realism (Bjørkelo 2019, Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018), while the other two focus on games and politics as seen from very different communities (Bjørkelo 2020, Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted). Boundary breaking is such a prevailing theme of this dissertation, though the boundaries being broken are varying, meaning that a core concept to discuss for my dissertation is that of boundary breaking, or *transgression*.

Taboos and the carnival

When discussing transgression, it is common to look towards Bakhtin's notion of the carnival and the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984, Bataille 1993, pp 89 - 94). Bakhtin's idea of the carnival represents a temporary upheaval of the established, where rule-breaking and boundary-crossing is encouraged, if not institutionalized. The carnival serves as a representation of those situations where rules are set aside, whether the actual carnival

parades, April Fool's Day or even the Pride Parades. From this state of the carnival, we understand the *carnavalesque* as that which resembles the carnival with the overturning of norms and power-structures, albeit often temporarily.

Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque has an element of transgression being temporarily institutionalized, and serves to test and reaffirm the boundaries and taboos being transgressed. While transgressions can cause boundaries to shift, according to Bakhtin, it seems more likely to accentuate them and strengthen them. Likewise, sociologist Chris Jenks argues that transgression is tied to the acceptance of the conventions being broken: "Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation" (Jenks 2003, p. 2). This is also a central theme for the French philosopher and author Georges Bataille, whose fiction not only illuminated the concept of transgression, but were often transgressions in and of themselves, as is the case with *Story of the Eye* (2012). Bataille's transgressive fiction explored taboos in a style that evoked disgust and arousal, which in turn created discomfort in the reader, and he continued this exploration in his philosophical work.

Following these three authors, transgression becomes a boundary-crossing activity, taboo-breaking, sacrilege that tests and reaffirms these boundaries, confirms the taboo, and sanctifies both the sacred, but to some extent the transgressor that, even for the briefest time, transcending the profane world and enters the sacred. At least on an abstract, philosophical level.

Transgressive pleasure

Transgression is also a question of our reactions to boundary-crossing behavior, and the motivations of the transgressors. Following Bakhtin's description of carnival and the laughter it produces (Bakhtin 1984), there is a distinct pleasure to be derived from the breaking of rules, of transgression and provocation on a personal level. As the saying goes, forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest, and there is a certain thrill to knowing that you are doing something you aren't supposed to be doing, and some find a specific delight in shocking and disturbing an audience. Sometimes in order to make a point, and sometimes, characteristic for Internet culture - just "for the lulz" (lulz, Collins English Dictionary). Sociologists Lauren Langman and Andras Lukacs (2010) argue exactly this, and that while modern society is predicated on repressing chaos and disorder, "transgressions not only provide forbidden indulgences, but the very fact of violating the norm and "getting" away with it provides another pleasure" (Langman and Lukacs 2010, p. 67). Furthermore, that "the gratification of 'forbidden desires'

whether erotic, exhibitionist, narcissistic, or aggressive is even more pleasurable due to the very transgression of the norm” (Langman and Lukacs 2010, p. 67).

Langman and Lukacs associate this tendency of pleasure in transgression to both the “seduction of crime”, as well as that of transgression in games and play context. Adapting this reasoning to games, Torill Mortensen and Kristine Jørgensen use this as one possible reasons for why players accept transgressive video game content (Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020, p. 1), alongside the notion that play takes place in a separate space with different rules. Games allow for a certain kind of escapism that can be compared to the carnival situation, where what is not allowed outside of games, is allowed or even encouraged within games, like going on a killing spree in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) or *Saint’s Row* (Volition 2003). This distinction between what is morally allowed within the fictional setting of a game contra what would be allowed outside of the game (Sageng 2019) is important, beyond the callback to theories of the magic circle as discussed in the previous chapter (Huizinga 2000, Salen and Zimmerman 2004, Consalvo 2009, Stenros 2012), to treat the world of play and the world outside play as related, but separate moral universes. This distinction allows people to act differently and make different judgments about what happens within a game context, than outside.

That profound disgust

As important as what transgression is philosophically, or what motivates us to transgress, is how being subjected to the transgressive makes us feel, and how it provokes us. And for that I turn my attention to discomfort and transgressive art. Transgressive art isn’t just transgressive because it breaks with art conventions or social norms, it is transgressive because it provokes a list of emotional responses contingent on individual tastes, values and expectations. Speaking of art that could be considered transgressive Aldama and Lindenberger (2016) expound on the expressions:

“[...] which disgusts, discomforts, unnerves, offends as well as art that triggers in us experiences of pain and shame. It’s art that we also identify as gross, cringe-worthy, and grotesque” (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016, p. 1).

This discomfort is the subject of their conversations on art and aesthetics, but is highly relevant to our topic of emotional responses to transgressive content in games and gaming culture. Emotional responses such as shock, disgust, anger and discomfort are not uncommon in public reactions, and are not uncommon reactions in gaming forums. Here they come in the form of what I call *unsolicited, articulated, emotional responses* (See next chapter). These responses are to be considered indications of transgression, not the

transgression in itself. They are the immediate responses to the breaking of conventions or boundaries, and that “would trigger reflection more than vomit” (Adama and Lindenberger 2016, p. 3). What this entails is that some transgressions are so deep and provocative that it prevents further engagement with it, while others keep us interested and able to express an opinion. It is the difference between a profound transgression and a transgressive aesthetic (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). Where the former defies our engagement, the latter borders the unacceptable without crossing it as long as it is accepted as an aesthetic, or in terms of this dissertation “just play” or “just a game”. While *aesthetics* often refers to the quality of beauty in an artwork, or more specifically to the value judgements relating to works of art (Kirkpatrick 2011, 13), Aldama and Lindenberger discusses aesthetics as an experiential phenomenon that emerges from the relationship between a work and the perceiving subject (2016, 42). In the context of games, this means that they can be considered aesthetic works as long as they are appreciated by players, and entails representational, game-mechanical features as well as play (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, 5).

Thus, returning to Mortensen and Jørgensen’s distinction, a profound transgression is one that would trigger a physical reaction, such as vomit, or would keep someone from engaging with the phenomenon. While an aesthetic transgression is one that “we are able to contextualize and somehow process due to its aesthetic context” (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, p. 2). This means that the aesthetic nature of games can lessen the effect of the potentially offensive nature of some of its expressions, similar to how transgressive art and literature is acceptable due to the simple fact that it is just that: art and literature. In any other format both *Lolita* (Nabokov 2011) and *Story of the Eye* (Bataille 2012) would likely meet legal sanctions. The extreme violence of a fighting game or shooter, the sexualized portrayals of underage girls in Japanese dating games, and so on, are all “aestheticized” and contextualized as “just a game” or “just playing around”, and is therefore “often experienced as less severe and therefore also bearable” (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, p. 3). In play, this can sometimes be achieved with the player engaging in *gamer mode* (Frank 2012), where the player focuses on winning the game or mastering its mechanics rather than engaging with its themes.

This perspective loops back to that of transgression both questioning and strengthening boundaries. When institutionalized, Mortensen and Jørgensen, writes, transgression won’t be profound: “They are accepted as challenging established norms, but it is also implied that by being accepted, these practices do not go as far as actually breaking said norms in this particular context” (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, p. 4). It would be hard, if not difficult, for

us to engage with a work of art or a game that was profoundly transgressive, and even more difficult to find discussions about it online, as these works of transgression, by their very nature, reject engagement.

A truly profoundly transgressive game experience would by this evaluation be unplayable, and there probably are no works of art and fiction that is transgressive in its every moment or word. In academic context, the act of moving an expression into the analytical academic context is mitigating the profound transgression. It begs the question that I often found myself asking while gathering my data: Would an actual profoundly transgressive game experience be attainable for me? Any intellectual approach would render it less profound. In much the same as a sardonic and ironic approach to any transgressive material tends to render it impotent and harmless.

The early 80s Atari game *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique 1982) has garnered enough well-deserved scorn and derision to be referred to as a transgressive game. In this game the player tries to move Custer across the screen, avoiding flying arrows, in order to rape a native american woman bound to a pole. It is abhorrent in so many ways, which has earned it a place in the hall of fame (or shame) in video game history. But is it profoundly transgressive? If so, why was my reaction to a version of the game with updated graphics a gleeful grin and laughter at the audacity of the project, and not shock and dismay? Transgression can come in different forms and shapes, and we all relate to them differently in different situations. It is very much contingent on ourselves, our background and the context in which the transgression occurs. It is likely that *Custer's Revenge* had a lesser impact in 1982 than it would have had today, as the audience was smaller and the cultural status of video games. It is also possible to be entertained by the transgression, while still recognizing that a transgression has occurred. While accepting the horrifying theme of *Custer's Revenge*, I am entertained not by the game, but by the notion that someone would actually make a game like this. It is contingent not just on distance in time and the lack of graphical realism, but also on me as an individual who finds the outrageous to be fascinating in and of itself.

Another example would be *Sad Satan* (unknown, unpublished), a game rumoured to only be found on the deep web and to use images of child molestations and murder. The game itself reportedly functioned as malware, attacking the host computer. It was the snuff movie of games, and the man supposedly responsible for the original version was arrested for the possession of child pornography (Hernandez 2015). Transgressive, no doubt. In judicial terms, at least. But I first learned about it while guesting a youth camp, and the kids had

gathered to tell me the tale of the “worst” games they knew about. They approached telling me about *Sad Satan* in the same way one tells a ghost story around a campfire, with shudders, laughter and corrections from the group. This narration is a performance of transgressive aesthetics, and it sent me on a wild hunt for a copy of the original version of the game in order to confirm (or not) its existence. I can hardly fathom a more perverse and disturbing game, but it may also well be that the idea of this game and what it implies is more disturbing than the game itself.

And assuming that the kids actually have played it, we may question whether the game is profoundly transgressive when they can tell me about it with gleeful fright? Their seemingly appreciative response suggests that their relationship to the game is rather one of transgressive aesthetics. This engagement mitigates or dissolves the profound aspects of the transgressions, though it is still shocking and appalling. It calls upon the aforementioned pleasure in the transgressive, our enjoyment in breaking taboos. In the end, what is transgressive or not will always be an individual assessment. And just as the above described social context will aestheticise the transgressive content of *Sad Satan*, so could one assume that the game mechanics and context would aestheticise the play experience, mitigating what would otherwise be a profoundly transgressive experience.

Torill Mortensen and Kristine Jørgensen argue that “the profoundly transgressive negates the transgressive aesthetic, while the transgressive aesthetic mitigates the profound transgression” (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2016). Mortensen and Jørgensen’s use of profound transgressions in opposition to transgressive aesthetics is helpful in understanding how we mitigate and aestheticise the uncomfortable, disturbing and transgressive. The profoundly transgressive keeps eluding us as a subject of interest, as our analytical gaze softens or mitigates its transgressive nature. As does our pleasure in the hunt for that which would offend, upset and cause extreme discomfort. And in this lies what Mortensen and Jørgensen refers to as the paradox of transgression (2020).

Transgressivity: the cultural context of transgression

Leaving behind the question of whether we can engage with anything profoundly transgressive, we are still left with the question of what is transgressive. A question that is difficult to answer because transgression will always be contextual and subjective, meaning that our understanding of it is contingent on the cultural, social and historical situatedness as well as individual preferences and sensibilities. What you find to be transgressive content,

might be enjoyable or “tame” to myself. What we consider offensive today, may have been every day a hundred, fifty or even twenty years ago today, and vice versa. In the introduction to his suggested typology of transgressivity (see below) Holger Pötzsch (2019) describes his personal experiences of playing *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra On-Line 1987) as a teen, and the feeling he derived from the forbidden nature of the game due to its perceived sexual content. Looking back at the game he found that it was no longer transgressive in the same manner, now the transgression was derived from how the game portrayed women as sexual prizes to be manipulated and won. The game hasn’t changed, but our experience of it has changed. And we could even argue that;

“[...]the sexist presentation of female characters might be more about Larry’s - and other men’s - perception of women and about what they take to be the “rules of the game” than about real women and their sexuality as such” (Pötzsch 2019, p 46).

As a long time fan of the *Leisure Suit Larry* series, I recognize Pötzsch’s observation. And it isn’t just me who has changed, but society. Showing that the experience of transgression depends on both context and individual perception.

In order to handle this complexity, Holger Pötzsch suggest the term transgressivity (2019) rather than transgression, which he states:

“[...] refers to how concrete breaches and boundaries change over time or contexts, how they are experienced and negotiated by situated individuals, and how they reciprocally change their own conditions of emergence. As such, transgressivity is contingent and ultimately lies in the eye of the beholder” (Pötzsch 2019, p 49).

Transgressivity thus does not only indicate a general breaking of laws, rules, or norms. Pötzsch thus argues that transgression in games is not only occurring within a historical, social and cultural context, but it is also performed and experienced by individuals, who bring their own histories, emotions and prejudices to the interpretations. From the concept of transgressivity, Pötzsch builds a typology that includes its form, its perception and context. The typology of transgressivity in games and play are strongly linked to the frames in which the transgression takes place, and each category of transgressivity is tied to the form which transgressivity takes in the game, and the play practices involved (Pötzsch 2019, pp 50-1). For instance, *ludic transgressivity* is when the player exploits a “weakness” in the game core or mechanic, to break with what they are “intended” to do, this can be through a glitch, cheating or using a mod (Pötzsch 2019, pp 50-2). Using a bug, or a cheat code, clipping through walls in a game, or moving from one area to another would be examples of ludic transgressivity.

What Pötzsch calls *diegetic transgressivity* refers to acts that breaks the rules of a game world like in *The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), when you steal and murder your way through a town if you so wish, and incur the wrath of the local law enforcement (Pötzsch 2019, p 52). Likewise, if you run over throngs of pedestrians in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013), or start sniping people from a rooftop, you are breaking the in-game law, and will have to face the in-game police hunting you down.

Situational transgressivity encompasses transgressions against the social and cultural norms and conventions, as well as values, taste or etiquette (Pötzsch 2019, 58). This includes games with tasteless gameplay, like the now infamous slave tetris (Serious Games Interactive 2015, Towns 2020) in which kids were to learn the horrors of the slave-trade by stacking slaves in a cargo hold, or boundary breaking play activity, such as when politicians play *Pokemon Go* (Niantic 2016) during a hearing. This would also include harassment and “griefing” in online games, but could also be expanded to include activities outside of games such as heated political debates in gaming forums, which is covered in this dissertation.

Idiosyncratic transgressivity (Pötzsch 2019, 59-60) covers subjective experiences of transgressions, whether experienced in play or witnessed in someone else’s play. Many of the reactions people have had to games like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015) are very subjective, as they trigger individual responses based on the players own personal history. *Life is Strange*, for example, is a narrative, and choice heavy adventure game focusing on a teenage girl attending a private school and coming to terms with time-bending powers. Throughout the game she has to make choices, both trivial and difficult, pertaining to the lives of those around her, and we are faced with themes of teen suicide and sexual assault. This game has become known for evoking strong emotional responses in its many fans. We all have different responses to games and play activity, and many of the responses found in my data would fall in the category of idiosyncratic. But if there are enough of them to form a pattern, are they still idiosyncratic or subjective?

Hegemonic and *critical transgressivity* are treated as a pair, and is succinctly summed up by Pötzsch:

“Critical transgressivity aims at questioning and possibly subverting prevailing discourses and power relations, and hegemonic transgressivity employs transgressions in a speculative or cushioned manner with the often implicit objective to stabilize, reinforce, or capitalize on dominant arrangements and structures” (Pötzsch 2019, p 53).

This means that while critical transgressivity, whether it is written into the game and gameplay, or injected through player actions, seek to criticize existing systems, hegemonic transgressivity ultimately confirms and reinforces existing structures and boundaries. In this pairing we not only see the Marxist concept of cultural products reproducing the dominant ideology, but also the exchange between how transgressions can serve to both undermine existing order, but also to reaffirm its boundaries. The many military shooters, such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009) only provides shallow avenues of critique against the modern war complex that the games conceptually rests on, and can be described as hegemonic transgressivity - the message being, war may be hell, but it's very exciting and fun too. On the other hand, games such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yaeger Development 2012) invert the common tropes and expectations of war games, offering up greater opportunities of critical engagement with the genres, and falls into the category of critical transgressivity.

Lastly, *judiciary transgressivity* includes games that transgress legal boundaries, or play activities within a game that breaks the law (Pöttsch 2019, 57). The well-known ban on using a swastika in Germany, including in games, is one of the examples that comes to mind of this (Pfister & Tschiggerl 2020). Another would be the restrictions on positive depictions of drugs in Australia, that has affected several games (Walker and Williams 2021).

The typology Pöttsch suggests is fluid, in that it allows for a game or a play-act to be included in one or more categories, depending on circumstances. It does not however, take into full consideration whether or not the players themselves find the play-act transgressive or not, as it focuses on play as it relates to more formal norms. The category of idiosyncratic transgressivity needs further exploration and expansion. Within the context of gaming culture, it is the players who play or observe a game who are the arbiters of transgression. And any evaluation of whether a game or play activity is transgressive is contingent on the individual player and the gaming culture in which they take part. As always, what is acceptable within a culture of gaming, may not be the same which is acceptable outside of that culture, and what is acceptable will also be a matter of discussion within the culture.

I recognize the usefulness of the typology of transgressivity as introduced by Holger Pöttsch; it touches on the specific ways that transgression is contingent on context. Transgressivity is therefore a notion that helps introduce the flexibility and fluidity of transgressions, and which fits within my overall understanding of transgression. Transgression, by being fluid, however, is also operating in-between both text and experience, between play and outside of play. I will rely on the concept of transgression in

this dissertation, while I lean on the typologies presented for transgressivity. So from the idea of transgressivity, we move on to this middle-ground of *metaludic transgression*.

Metaludic transgression

Richard Sageng (2019) introduces another distinction concerning transgression in games, namely between intraludic and extraludic transgression. Extraludic transgressions are game-related practices that cause offense outside of the game world, while intraludic transgressions are transgressions that are contained within the realm of the game. Thus, a game can be experienced as transgressive for a particular player both because it involves events that are doubly uncomfortable: It is both painful for the characters in the fictional world of the game, and for the player because it refers to something norm-breaking in the actual world. For example, the torture scene in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) is an example of this because it is both painful for the character being subjected to it, and because torture is not only illegal but also a taboo in real world corporal punishment.

However, Mortensen and Jørgensen argue that there are many situations where it is not clear whether a sense of transgression emerges from the game itself, or whether it emerges from how the game relates to the world outside. Idiosyncratic transgressions are one such form of transgression that complicates this situation. They write:

The strength of Pötzsch's typology is that its fluidity allows us to not just distinguish between the extraludic and intraludic, but its fluidity allows for us to see how these two "worlds" interact and flow into each other. To quote Mortensen and Jørgensen:

"Many game transgressions do not spring out of either the game or public discourse alone, but out of an amalgamation of associations relating both to the game and to real world situations" (2020, p 54).

They suggest *metaludic transgression* as a bridging concept: "Metaludic transgression is neither intra- or extraludic, but can simultaneously stem from both the game and the outside world" (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, p 60). This concept speaks to this important interplay between the intraludic and the extraludic, that Pötzsch's typology allows for.

However, idiosyncratic transgressivity is different. Idiosyncratic transgressivity refers to game events that are deemed transgressive because they stir something personal in the player. Thus, it cannot be associated simply with the breaking of societal norms shared by most. When a player finds that they do not want to play a particular game because the main character looks like a person who bullied them at school, this is a personal association and

has nothing to do with how the game is designed or whether or not the game was intended to be transgressive. In the example above featuring the torture scene in *Grand Theft Auto V*, this would be idiosyncratic only when a particular player has a personal experience relating to torture, such as having been subjected to it him/herself.

While non-idiosyncratic forms of metaludic transgression can be experienced as meaningful in the gameplay context because it allows for the representation of the breaking of social norms in a fictional and aestheticized context, idiosyncratic forms of metaludic transgression are likely to create an overwhelming sense of recognition that may cause the player to stop playing the game.

In my study I find ample forum discussions on episode two of *Life is Strange* (Dontnod 2015), in which the player character is put in the near impossible task of preventing a suicide by saying *just the right things*. Suicide is an emotional issue, and giving the responsibility to the player to prevent it, is creates a situation where the player is forced to consider the narrative of the game in extraludic terms, and their feelings or experiences of suicide. It is both transgressive in the sense of intraludic, as what is happening in the game is shocking and hard, and our out-of-game references to the subject creates or strengthens that same sense of transgression. In this lies the metaludic transgression. For most of the players, this leads to the conclusion that they think the game is powerful or even realistic (see transgressive realism), and in Mortensen & Jørgensen's term it is an experience of transgressive aesthetics. For one player occurring in my field notes his/her personal attempts at suicide makes the scene difficult to digest. It is an idiosyncratic discomfort or transgression, bordering on the profound; the player expresses the need for a shower to put it behind him/herself. Interestingly, for others, the real transgression lies in the notion that saying the right things can prevent suicide, and that, furthermore, saying the wrong things is *failing* to prevent a suicide.

Another example of the dynamics of metaludic transgression is in my analysis of *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014, Bjørkelo 2019); where to me the game is uncomfortable not just because of how the game works, but how it calls upon references to, and reminds me of the real cost of war for innocent civilians. For my friend, however, a survivor of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, this was not a game at all. Both are reactions to the same metaludic transgressive elements, but for her there is a stronger idiosyncratic element to the extraludic dimension. Whereas for me it is a transgressive aesthetic that strengthens my own fondness for the game, to her it is a profound transgression that keeps her from engaging with *This War of Mine* as a game.

Transgression and transgressivity in the dissertation

In this chapter, I have presented different categorizations of transgression in games which are relevant to my empirical data and published papers. As already established, transgression is crossing boundaries. These boundaries are historically, socially and culturally variable, as well as individual. They are always contextual and sometimes idiosyncratic. And thus, what is transgressive is hard to pin down. The typologies and categories in this chapter is an attempt to define transgression, such as it relates to games and play, and to an extent gaming culture.

Transgression “ultimately lies in the eye of the beholder” (Pötzsch 2019, p 49), and the transgressive is found in the emotional and affective responses to it. This was the primary concern for my data collection (see chapter four).

The papers included in this dissertation deal with this from different angles. In “It feels real to me: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*” (Bjørkelo 2019) I focus on *This War of Mine* (11bit studios 2014), whose transgressions are arguably primarily in line with critical transgressivity, as it attempts to disturb the player into thinking critically about war. But one of the tools used to create this disturbance is through diegetic transgressions, as the game forces the players to break the in-game norms and laws in order to survive. The paper represents a phenomenological approach to what transgression can be, and what it can feel like. It is a particular case, as the game’s mechanics and themes arguably transgresses against the players (see also Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020, Jørgensen 2019). To me, the game represents a transgressive aesthetic, and this is likely the aim of the designers as well, but as seen in the example above, for some the mere concept of the game is uncomfortable, beyond what is playable.

The same could be said for “The Asylum Seekers Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism” (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018). In this paper, we are attempting to produce a sense of positive discomfort (Montola 2010) and transgressive realism (Bjørkelo 2019), testing if this can be a meaningful experience within a framework of play. In the sense of the profoundly transgressive and transgressive aesthetics, we find that the players are, in spite of seriousness and discomfort, safely ensconced with a play framework and never approaching the profoundly transgressive, even when they were crying or subverting the game (Stenros 2019). While a game that tries to shed light on the asylum seeking process is

easily labeled as adhering to a form of critical transgression, the game design also transgresses against the norms and expectations of war-themed games by taking the perspective of civilians and could also be considered to belong to the category of situational transgressivity. And while these are primarily extraludic considerations, there is also a question of whether the game design crossed the boundaries of players within the game. The players expressed stress and discomfort at the situation, balanced against the “fun” of being safe in the game. The players approached the game with a ludic mindset, which helped mitigate the discomfort, and played as if in more distress. If we had players who had actual experiences with the situations, we could have spoken of an idiosyncratic transgression or transgressivity. The discomfort experienced by the players within the ludic frame, enhanced their experience of realism of the situation, and we categorize it as *transgressive realism*.

In ““Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic”: White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*” (Bjørkelo 2020) there are several points of transgressions at play, but they are not primarily focused on the content and form of the game, but rather players’ interpretation of the game. As the players on Stormfront interpret in ways that the game allows for, there is still a sense of transgression against the implied player (Aarseth 2007) and the assumed intentions of the game designers, furthermore their interpretations and the ideological positions are transgressive against the accepted political discourse and hegemony. So, while the game is not transgressive against the players on Stormfront, their creative play with the game is a transgression against societal and progressive norms, and the assumed wishes of the game designers. There is an element of hegemonic and critical transgression in their interpretations and discussions, but also a diegetic transgression in that their interpretation is not just an issue of debate outside of game, but active play in the game. They play the game as White Nationalists. Their politics inform not just their interpretation of the game world, but their in-game activities. This leads to further intraludic and diegetic transgressions, like racially motivated murder.

The last paper of this dissertation, “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted) deals with the use of the word *feminazi* in two gaming forums. Like with the previous example, the transgression here lies in how the community transgress social norms and values, in this instance with their language and politics. It transgresses specifically against the commonly held ideal that harassment and sexist language is wrong. Being called a feminazi and similar can be very uncomfortable, for some uncomfortable enough that it feels excluding from gaming (Vossen 2018). In the latter case it could be considered an idiosyncratic transgression, but as it is a

slur against women in general it is hard to say that it is “just” idiosyncratic, and an issue for few individuals. The harassment and use of slurs is primarily a transgression on an extraludic level, as the discussion goes far beyond that of games and gaming, but it also reflects how these players interpret games’ content and form, and consider them “feminazi” and thus transgressive against their hegemony. Like with most political transgressions, it therefore falls within the category of hegemonic and critical transgressions - critical inasmuch as the term *feminazi* and its inherent politics meets resistance in the gaming community. It calls to question whether we can consider gaming culture as subversive or transgressive in and of itself. A question that is critical in light of #GamerGate and the harassment campaigns associated with it (Mortensen 2016, Massanari 2018). The use of aggressive language and slurs are on the surface indicative of a transgressive and hostile culture, even toxic, but it is also a type of boundary keeping that is common with many groups, and can also be indicative of a playful framework. It calls back to medieval flying contests and urban games of the dozens, and is arguably a form of transgressive, but traditional play. In this paper, I find that while a large amount of the usage of the slur is directed against progressives, feminists, women and games that are considered to be ruined by these, the majority usage of the term is a pejorative against those who could be considered likely to use *feminazi* in this manner. And it shows how this kind of playful activity, while clearly related to either hegemonic and critical transgressions, the situational and contextual aspect of it, makes it difficult to categorize it clearly.

Taken together, the papers in this dissertation explore different aspects that can be considered transgressive in play, games and gaming culture. In this chapter I lay out useful concepts and categories of dark or transgressive play, transgression and transgressivity, of which I find relates to the subject matters in the papers. These are tools to think with, rather than definite and exhaustive categorizations, much like transgressive realism, which I introduce in the discussion of *This War of Mine (11 Bit Studios 2014)*. I find that the concept of transgression defies simple definition, and that this is true for related terms such as the transgressive, transgressivity and so on. Transgression, in its nature, breaks the boundaries of definitions, as it is always moving, and always contingent and potentially idiosyncratic. The concept of transgressive realism has been proven useful, as it shifts its focus towards what a transgressive experience provides us, in this case a sense of heightened realism. It is also fruitful to consider transgressions in terms of the profound and the aestheticized expressions and experiences. Where the transgressive aesthetic becomes something valuable or even useful, while the profoundly transgressive is a more elusive experience that promises both mental and physical rejection. In terms of games and gaming culture, I have explored transgressivity as a fluid concept of transgressions, and have related this to both

intraludic and extraludic experiences. To me, however, it seems clear that there is more often than not a metaludic factor involved in the transgressions that are discussed. Transgressive content in a game is often transgressive because it calls upon or parallels the uncomfortable and transgressive outside of play. And one would perhaps not be as transgressive without the other. In *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007), we learn of the Genophage that have sterilized and practically eradicated the Krogan species - itself a transgressive notion, made all the more poignant by our knowledge of mass sterilization programs and genocide in the not so distant past of the real world. In the end, transgressive aesthetics, transgressions, transgressivity, metaludic, intraludic transgressions and so on, are tools, like transgressive realism, for us to tackle a complex issue on ever shifting ground. Tools which I have made use of in this chapter, and in the explorations in this dissertation.

Method and methodology

As we have seen in the previous chapters, discussions on play and games can sometimes run hot, and lead to name-calling and harassment. People are passionate about their hobbies, about their games and gaming culture. We find that this passion in discussions about games can be found in all corners of the web. Publishers will run boards dedicated to their games, and some boards will wax and wane in activity with the popularity and relevance of their games. In the early aughts I was the moderator for the *Seadogs 2*-forums hosted by Bethesda Softworks. This was until they made a deal with Disney, and had the russian developer, Akella, transform the game into *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Akella 2003). I mention this because I can vividly remember the morning I woke up to this news; the closing of the discussion board was an emotional experience, not because I lost my privileges as a moderator, but because we lost a game I was looking forward to, and it dissolved a vibrant and close-knit community. We were very different people, from all parts of the world, of different political and religious beliefs and social standing who shared a love for pirates and nautical-historical games. Some of us tried to stay in touch over the years, emigrating to different discussion boards or connecting on different social media platforms, but without the *Seadogs 2* discussion boards and the game disappearing, there was little to keep us together. This is nothing extraordinary, but it serves to show how communities form around games as much as other topics and cultural products. It has afforded me the type of insider perspective that helps me to understand how people feel not just about their games, but their gaming communities. This kind of insight into internet culture and gaming culture, helps me understand and decode the many references that litter the field of study in this dissertation (Phillips and Milner 2017). In the same way that many years of following White Nationalists helps me understand the discourse on Stormfront (Bjørkelo 2020).

While I can honestly say that personally, I never again found another online community with the same sense of belonging as the *SeaDogs 2* forums, people find and lose these communities every day. These communities allow us to strengthen social ties and legitimize our interests, as well as share stories, thoughts and *feelings*. And as I learned from my time in the *SeaDogs 2* discussion board we feel for, both the games and the content of the games, but also the communities which they create. The discussion boards are arenas where we can articulate these feelings, our *emotional responses* to something that affects us. These are thoughts I have returned to on multiple occasions while writing this dissertation, and they are formative for how I as a folklorist view gaming culture and online discussion boards. The many emotional responses to games like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod

Entertainment 2015) and *This War of Mine* (11 bit Software 2014) are indicative of how games affect us, and spur a need for us to articulate our emotional responses.

This dissertation presented me with the challenge of collecting data on how players react to gaming experiences, and how they expressed these reactions online. While it is only natural that players express their feelings about games and game culture online, the question remains to what extent and how. #GamerGate (**see chapters 2 and 3**) is an indication of how inflammatory and highly emotional game content and gaming culture can be, as people rushed online to discuss “the issues” they found important. A simple sweep of social media shows that Twitter, Facebook and online forums are overflowing with discussions about games and gaming culture, much like popular movies and music, and at the heart of these discussions lies the emotional impact of the games and emotional investment players have in them, the industry and the culture. My primary intent has been to approach this systematically through the use of ethnographic methods, and in the context of the overarching themes of the *Games and Transgressive Aesthetics*-project looking for those emotional responses elicited by transgressive content. No research design will survive its first encounters with the field unscathed, and this is no less true for my own project. As I encountered challenges narrowing down the field and dealing with the ethical constraints on internet research, my methodological approach changed and evolved from an overarching ethnography featuring participatory observation over time, to a passive observation of selected forums, combined with autoethnographic close-reading of a game (Bjørkelo 2019) and a manual corpus analysis of collected forum posts using keyword searches. Corpus analysis is most commonly used in linguistic analysis, but is here used in order to analyse the key cultural concepts in the material somewhat akin to corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Baker et. al. 2008, Talyor 2013). Additionally, one paper relies on larp design and group interviews (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018). I found this shift to be necessary to cope with the large amount of information provided by the forums I was observing, and to secure responsible research ethics.

In this chapter of the dissertation, I present, as transparently as possible, the processes involved in gathering my data and the methodological choices I have made. All of which, along with the data I gathered, was funneled into the papers in my dissertation, as well as, potential future papers.

While the majority of this chapter focuses on the methods of gathering data from forums and ethical considerations made in this process, it is not the sole methodology for this dissertation. Two of the papers included attempts to grapple with the subject matters with

different toolsets and perspectives, in order to develop the concept and theories of transgression and discomfort used in the dissertation. The methods used in “It feels real to me”: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*” (Bjørkelo 2019) and “The *Asylum Seekers* Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism” (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018) are detailed in their respective papers. The autoethnographic process used in “It feels real to me”, allows for an emotional close-reading of the game, as it allows for better access to a raw emotional processing, biographically and culturally situated, that observation in a forum. The insights provided for this was channeled into the design of the *Asylum Seekers* larp, where the design process, observation of play and the group interviews during debrief all become useful research tools in seeing how players engage and reflect around discomfort in games, and transgressive game play experiences. The use of larps as a research tool, is founded on performance studies and allows for the documenting of ephemeral events (Waldron 2014). The methods in these studies allows for a closeness to a difficult and ephemeral subject matter that forum studies does not allow, and thus became important methodological perspectives to ground this dissertation in.

The methods applied in this dissertation have been mixed, and had the goal of finding how players of games express their views on difficult or controversial subject matters in games and gaming culture. This in turn speaks to parts of gaming culture, and its relationship to certain aspects of transgression (**see chapter 3**). I have primarily focused my attention on two forums with high levels of activity and large user bases. The two forums can be most easily differentiated in level of maturity, as one forum has stricter rules for registration than the other, while both are publicly available. The discussions in these two forums are related to, and relevant to our understanding of, the greater tapestry of online culture and political discourse.

From my experiences and observations, I developed the concept of *unsolicited, articulated, emotional responses* as a way of thinking about how we express our feelings, elicited by games and gaming culture, to acquaintances and strangers in online forums and how these form parts of our discourse on games. This is partly a theoretical conceptualization, but it is born out of methodological considerations. I will therefore first discuss the methodological process that led me to this concept, before discussing the concept in full. The process starts with the general challenges of studying internet culture, taking inspiration from folkloristics and anthropology. And to the challenge of lessening the influence of my own bias on the data - an impossible, but worthwhile exercise to commit to. And in doing so, I make the move from an observational ethnography to a small scale, and manual, corpus analysis based on keyword searches.

In short, *unsolicited, articulated emotional responses* are the ways we voluntarily express our feelings and reactions orally, in writing and with popular response memes as part of our discourse with others. It has become important to me that these expressions are volunteered, and not solicited by a scholar, but elicited by an experience or social context, and can take the form of a discursive ritual using repeated phrases and memes. This becomes a useful conceptualization to understand activities in online culture.

Online culture and digital folklore

Adrienne Shaw makes the point that gaming culture has often been defined in terms of who plays what, and how they play it - meaning, how *gamers* play, and what games *gamers* play (Shaw 2010). In order to get a better and fuller understanding of gaming culture, we need to move beyond this limited scope, and the notion that gaming culture is an entity entirely separated from the mainstream culture that surrounds it. I believe focusing on players, rather than self-identifying gamers, is one step towards this. Furthermore, we must move beyond seeing gaming culture as a particular subculture, distinct and separate from majority or mainstream culture. This dissertation is an attempt to understand gaming culture in context, through a study of game forums situated in the intersection between internet culture, popular culture, and political discourse. The data I have collected more than supports this position, and the forums can at times be described as cultural and political microcosms from which we can gain insights into larger trends. This is for instance as the case with the slur *feminazi*, which I discuss in one of the papers (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted).

This does not mean however, that gaming culture and online culture is without its idiosyncrasies. Studying popular cultural phenomena online, such as gaming culture, carries with it a risk of being overwhelmed by numerous in-jokes, slang and multi-layered references to both gamer culture and other pop culture phenomena (Phillips 2016, Phillips & Milner 2016, Massanari 2015b, Jane 2017). It is an impossibly complex tapestry of ever-changing narratives and symbols that requires its own form of literacy to even begin comprehending most facets of it. The only comfort is that most participants in modern popular culture can be just as overwhelmed as a researcher. For are we not, as researchers too, part of these same cultures? To paraphrase folklorist Alan Dundes about academics relations to folk culture - We are the folk (Dundes 1977). It is however a potent challenge, as it is not enough to have an understanding of a single site of query, or a single topic; one must cope with a multitude of sites, of cultural expressions, ephemeral trends and identity markers. In other terms, gaming culture is not an island unto itself, it is part of a network of cultures intertwined

across the internet as well as the offline world. One can argue that treating the offline and online as separate entities is doing cultural research a disservice (Orgad 2009, Bakardjieva 2009, Gajjala 2009).

Identifying with a community or a particular interest isn't exclusive; you are never just one identity; a gamer is never just a gamer, he or she may also be a *Game of Thrones* fan, *Doctor Who*-fan (Whovian), a quilter, a spelunker, a political activist and so on, and thus has mastery of a multitude of cultural expressions and "languages". A researcher trying to understand a discussion about a particular game, must also understand the significance of popular memes such as an animated gif of actor David Tennant crying in the rain (A scene from *Doctor Who*), or of Pepe the Frog, a character whose current affiliation is with Donald Trump and the so-called alt. right⁴, but with a more varied past (Nagle 2017, Hawley 2017). The same goes for the many images of once-proclaimed queen of the internet, Boxyx (Knowyourmeme: Boxyx), a person and a character that has acquired legendary status on 4chan and other discussion boards, spreading from there to the rest of the internet, infinitely recontextualized to fit whatever purpose the user chooses. It's this kind of intertextuality and intertextual referencing that could be said to define the hypertextuality of internet (mediated) discourse, and by extension of contemporary popular culture. Intertextuality "refers to the accumulation and generation of meaning across texts, where all meanings depend on other meanings generated in alternative contexts" (Barker & Jane 2016, p 470); in other words, meaning from any text is contingent on other texts and refers to separate contexts. Arguably it works in much the same way as the endless cycle of references that the hypertext allows for. These practices and expressions may arguably be best described as digital folklore (de Seta 2020), and is recognizable as folkloric practices in the digital sphere.

Gabriele de Seta defines digital folklore as

"existing at the crossroads of anthropology and folkloristics, media and cultural studies, aesthetics and design, art history, and communication studies [...] digital folklore is the folklore of the Internet, a vernacular emerging from below and a folk art created by users for users, coalescing into repertoires of jokes, memes, and other genres of digital content" (de Seta, 2020, p. 180).

Folklore however, has eluded a set academic definition (Sims and Stephens 2005), much like its conceptual cousin *culture*. It has been defined along the lines of practices and performances, it has been defined as specific genres and artistic expressions, as well as orality, informality and vernacular expression. It has been situated among the illiterate

⁴ And later becoming a mascot for the liberal pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2019-20.

classes and “folk”, and as remnants of the past or expressions of contemporary concerns, both traditional, and as linking the two (Sims and Stephens 2005). I will not attempt a definition of folklore myself, whether contemporary, traditional or historical, but I rely on a broad and inclusive understanding of folklore as informal, oral, vernacular practices, performances and expressions, as well as genres such as memes and copy-pasta.

Digital folklore relies heavily on staying on point, and evolves to remain meaningful, adapting to new contexts and other texts. A meme will adapt and evolve and refer to other memes, which in turn will refer to movies, comics, people or other memes. Intertextuality is obviously not a modern phenomenon, but as the social world shrinks and the library of references available to us expands our communication becomes more multi-layered and referential. This requires the internet researcher to not only be methodologically versatile, but be able to navigate in between the many layers of vernacular expressions, memes and trolling. It requires an understanding of the many meanings an expression has and the history of its evolution and dissemination. It means understanding the layers of meaning in the aforementioned gif of “Tennant’s Doctor Who crying” and the antics of the “Feels Good Man” (Knowyourmeme: Feels Good Man), better known as Pepe the Frog. The performance of this digital folklore in discussion forums gives indication to people’s reactions and engagement with content, which goes beyond their written statements. If someone responds to a statement, by posting a picture of the Marvel Comics character Red Skull, with the text bubble “Clean Your Room”, I need to understand what this means in the context of the discourse. In this case, the controversial Jungian author Jordan Peterson has become synonymous with his advice for young men to clean up their rooms (bringing order to chaos), and that he has been identified as the villain Red Skull in recent Captain America comics. It’s a complicated tapestry to read, that demands a specific literacy on the researcher who wants to decipher contemporary online culture.

My method is inspired by folkloristic and ethnographic fieldwork (Sims and Stephens 2005, Alver 1990, Boellstorff et. al. 2012, Geertz 1973), meaning that it is primarily concerned with collecting the expressions and narratives of the people and communities that are studied, and that I strive towards studying their practices with as little interference from me as possible. Furthermore, my background in folkloristics has me focusing on informal cultural expressions, both of which are important descriptors of internet culture and lore, as well as the transmutability of culture. The narratives of the informants are held as valuable in and of themselves, as is an *emic* perspective and approach to analysis, meaning understanding things from the insider perspective of a community or culture. As a folklorist I am interested in how my informants or members of a community construct and make sense of their

lifeworld through stories, anecdotal and communal tales, and through other forms of expressions. It is easy to get the impression that folkloristics deals mostly in rural, “traditional” culture, and what is now confined to dusty archives and quaint folk festivals. In reality, contemporary culture is of utmost interest to the modern folklorist (Sims and Stephens 2005). In fact, one could also argue that the easily reproduced and mixed expressions of modern, and especially online, culture brings about a renaissance for folk culture. Examples such as the stories of the Slender Man, as seen in *Folklore, Horror Stories and The Slender Man* (Chess and Newsom 2015), show the similarity in both form, process and function in “campfire tales” online as part of a communal repertoire, told, retold and reshaped over time. Trevor Blank and Lynne McNeill refer to the Slender Man stories and other, so called, creepy pasta as part of the digital legendary (Blank & McNeill 2018), while Shira Chess and Eric Newsom recognize here that Slender Man fits the criteria laid out by Richard Bauman (1986) as; “variable, performed, and collective” (Chess and Newsom 2015, p 80). To this, I would add that internet culture is vernacular, or has a particular form of orality, which is also a key feature of folklore. Internet orality could be considered an aspect of what Walter Ong referred to as secondary orality (Ong 1982). Modern cultural expressions, such as memes, share many similarities with other genres of folklore such as jocular expressions and sayings. The dissemination of them is through “oral” and informal online channels changes and adapts these expressions, through the process of dissemination, to fit new contexts and communities. It is a mainstay of folkloristics to give voice to the subject of their studies, giving weight to their own narratives and interpretations, and to emphasize empirical descriptions over theoretical analysis. And this is also my aim.

Multi-sited

This work is by necessity multi-sited (Marcus 1995), as it focuses not only on a widespread and diverse community of players, but also follows their ideas and discourses to other platforms, when this is necessary for context or further depth. In his seminal review, George Marcus (1995) discusses how a multi-sited fieldwork follows communities, objects, people, metaphors and more, from site to site, instead of focusing on a localized culture. According to Marcus, this ethnographic approach arose “in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production” (Marcus 1995, p 97), as well as through postmodernism and interdisciplinary studies where ethnography have been employed in nontraditional fields. These “empirical changes” can only be said to have increased with the rise of the world wide web, which has created new virtual worlds and arenas for cultural activities and practices. Communities and cultural practices now easily

span different groups and spaces, both offline and online, requiring a great understanding of a large corpus of popular culture and cross-references to navigate expertly or as a native.

It follows that studying any culture that expresses itself online, and in a non-localized manner, such as gaming culture, means not restricting oneself to a single site or forum for context and understanding. While my work has focused on two specific forums or sites, they exist in tandem and relations to several other sites. My arrival at these two forums and the subject matters in focus, came through a journey through different forums, comment sections, Facebook groups, Steam pages and Twitter to mention just some of the sites that influence and overlap here. While gathering my observations, I would simultaneously keep an eye out for discussions elsewhere for context and better understanding. Without this multi-sited approach, the data would make less sense.

A specific example of this multi-sited approach, lies in the triangulation of sources and methods represented in this dissertation. In working on the assumed right-wing political aspects of *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) for my paper “Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic’ - *White Nationalist Readings of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*” (Bjørkelo 2020) I arrived at observing the activity on the White Nationalist website *Stormfront* after following discussions on the subject on different forums as well as Facebook. For “It Feels Real to Me’: Transgressive Realism in This War of Mine” (2018) I found support for my conceptualizations on the Steam forums, while relying on autoethnography or a close-reading of the game for the data gathering. In “The *Asylum Seekers* Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism” (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018) we based our research on two playthroughs of the larp *The Asylum Seekers* (Asylsøklarane), and the debriefs following the games, and in “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted), I rely on the large corpus gathered for the dissertation as well as an understanding of the cultural contexts in which the relevant discourse takes place.

As a folklorist I take methodological cues from ethnography, in particular from different forms of online ethnographies such as virtual ethnographies (Boellstorff et al 2012, Hine 2000), which are often conducted in online virtual worlds, and netnography (Kozinets 2015). Ethnography is both a process, and an end product. An ethnography is often presented as a written text, traditionally a monograph, describing in detail a culture, cultural practices or phenomenon. This is ethnography as a product, a written (graphein) people (ethno) or culture (Boellstorff et al 2012, 14-15). As a methodology it values getting close to the group, practice or phenomenon which is the subject of the research. While there are a set of

methods involved in getting entry and learning to know the group, taking notes and so on, the main part of ethnography, according to Clifford Geertz, is being able to describe the phenomenon in question (Geertz 1973). Not only to make it a subject of analysis, but to make it approachable and understandable to others. It is a scientific practice engaged with, in order to know *the other*. The nature of ethnography is as varied as its practitioners and the many sites, both digital and analog, oneself and the other, that have interested ethnographers. A subject and site of interest and debate for cultural scientists such as folklorists and anthropologists for the last 40 years have been the virtual or digital domain, as it has become the site of cultural practice and performance, and the formation of group identities.

Studying online communities and culture

As people moved online and brought their cultural practices with them, researchers interested in these practices slowly followed. An early and oft-quoted study of how people form communities online, is Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Rheingold 1993), but more have followed, like *Tales from Facebook* (Miller 2011) and the more recent *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (Massanarari 2015), to name a few oft-cited examples. These books deal with communities, a core concept in anthropological and ethnographic studies whose characteristics are debated, especially when we discuss online communities that often lack the geographical and physical space that traditionally circumscribes a community as a field of study (Baym 2015). Folkloristics derives its moniker from the wisdom of the *folk*, which is a more archaic synonym for community with connotations of rurality and groundedness. Folklorists have also focused on the concept of group and even networks (Noyes 2003), and Alan Dundes have argued that a folk group is any group of people with something (such as cultural references) in common (Dundes 1965).

Communities of play was coined by Celia Pearce (2009) in the book by the same name, and served as a counter idea to the anthropological notion of communities of practice. In these communities, play and playing of games are the central concern. Pearce's ethnographic account of the diaspora from the canceled online component for *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (Cyan Worlds 2003), shows how a community grew up around the game both within and outside other virtual worlds. There is a tendency in game studies ethnographies to focus primarily on virtual game worlds and communities within the game context, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004- , Karlsen 2009, Taylor 2006, Corneliussen and Rettberg (eds) 2008, Boellstorf 2015, Nardi 2009, Golub 2014). Some of these are

unavoidably tied to forums and communities outside of the virtual game world. Online virtual worlds allow ethnographers to transport themselves off to a foreign and exotic site for their researchers, transplanting themselves socially, in a way akin to traditional anthropologists transplanting themselves to “primitive” tribes in foreign countries. This process aids in creating an intimacy between the ethnographer and the researched community, which some find necessary for this kind of research. The challenge lies in re-establishing a distance for the analysis of these same communities and cultures. As a folklorist, I was trained to perform research in communities far less exotic than this, and while maintaining the necessary distance, the folklorist also maintains a more “in-culture” relationship to the researched community. Internet culture and gaming culture is *my* culture, *my* community.

That being said, this study is primarily engaged with communities of play that do not have a single game in common, but rather the interest in games and play. Superficially this represents a difference to Pearce’s study of the Uru Diaspora (2009) or studies of communities in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-), but the focus on culture, community and play is the main subject of inquiry in both these approaches. Play, and, even more so, games as cultural artifacts, is what ties the communities that I have researched together. Even the White Nationalists of the gaming subforum on Stormfront come together for their common interest in play and games. Whether it is concrete games or related subject matters from game culture or current affairs, the common ground in games and playful activities, suggests a certain playfulness which is particularly apparent in heated discussions.

Celia Pearce rests on a classic understanding of communities as a collective of individuals, with a common affiliation (Pearce 2009), much like the definition of folk group by Alan Dundes (1965). In her discussion on community, group and network folklorist Dorothy Noyes (2003), however, makes an important clarification that makes it easier to approach the understanding of gaming culture as a community represented by the forums in this study. It is that communities, and our idea of what a community is, is a social construct, and it is therefore maybe more efficient to think in terms of *imagined communities* (Anderson 1991, Bräuchler 2013) or network. I understand gaming culture as an imagined community, a community constructed by the common interest and practice of playing games and this community is the site for the performative identity of the gamer previously discussed. To put this in other terms, while there is little to suggest that large forums are the kind-of close-knit communities that anthropologists and folklorists have often concerned themselves with, there is ample indication that they identify as such a community, and imagine themselves to be part of a community and representing this community of gamers.

Online Worlds and ethnography

This dissertation takes its cues from ethnographic work on online culture, such as *Misogyny online* (Jane 2017) and *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play* (Massanari 2015). These works and this dissertation are ethnographic in the sense that their focus is on cultural phenomena, using a variety of tools from ethnographic studies. Additionally, ethnographers and game studies scholars have paid a lot of attention to virtual worlds found online, such as *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003 -), *Everquest* (Verant Interactive 1999-) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard entertainment 2004 -), and the communities that find a home there. These kinds of virtual ethnographies fit well with game studies' interest in game worlds, such as those found in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-), and allows for the study and description of the social and cultural practices that take place within these worlds. Virtual game worlds are sites with a set of boundaries determined by the game designers, as well as a focus for activities, which makes them suitable for ethnographic fieldwork. In principle, the methodology of doing ethnography is the same in a virtual world as in the physical world.

Equally, following in the footsteps of Howard Rheingold, others have looked to online arenas that don't have the virtual space or geography of these worlds. Such as discussion boards and social networks, explicitly excluded from virtual ethnographies by Boellstorff et. al., because of their lack of worldness (2012, 7), or, put in other words, a defined "space" in which the community resides. These "non-worldness" arenas have been embraced by other ethnographers as legitimate fields, such as Robert Kozinets who coined the term netnography (2015) for this approach to fieldwork: "Netnography is about obtaining cultural understandings of human experiences from online social interaction and/or content, and representing them as a form of research" (Kozinets 2015, 54). Kozinets underlines not only the exploratory nature of online ethnography and how the social worlds develop alongside technology and technoculture, but also how netnography "focuses primarily on the artifactual and communicative realities of online social exchange" (Kozinets 2015, 54). And this perspective goes a long way of opening up what online ethnography, or netnography could be, unrestricted by the boundaries implied by virtual worlds and closed environs of niche groups - motivating a multi-sited approach. Kozinets is informed by his background in marketing, allowing him to shape a methodological approach that is efficient and directed towards specific subject matters as needed when doing market research (Kozinets 2015).

Netnography, and other approaches to online ethnographies and studies of online culture, is based on the assumption that people form communities, not only in virtual worlds, but everywhere online, as Rheingold simply put it: "Virtual communities are social aggregations

that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 1993, online). The principles of social interaction, such as communication, are the same in a virtual environment, as in the physical world, though the affordances available may be different, and the technology involved may favour certain expressions and practices over others (see below). And while Rheingold uses the term virtual, there is nothing virtual about the communities he defines or describes in his book. The social lifeworlds of virtual worlds are real (Boellstorff et. al 2012, 1).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines community as a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common (Oxford English Dictionary: Community). In an online context this could be translated into inhabiting the same group, discussion board, chat for a longer period of time, and sharing a defining characteristic or interest. In *Personal Communication in the Digital Age* (Baym 2015), Nancy Baym suggests five characteristics that are relevant to understanding online communities: “[...] sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relationships” (83-84). While a discussion of these characteristics and the nature of communities are beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to point how social networks, forums, chats and other arenas where people can congregate over time constitute virtual spaces of their own, even if they lack the representation of space in the same manner as a virtual world.

Examples of online communities would be players congregating in the Steam forums, and sub-forums dedicated to specific games, where they can cultivate their interest and set up, even if temporarily, a homestead of their own. Communities formed around games can be ephemeral things, as the interests in a particular game will wax and wane, while the platforms for play and discussion remain. Some games manage to cultivate a community, through moddability or through versatile replayability, to mention two factors, and these communities can become strong and long lasting, as the case is with *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) and *Crusader Kings 2* (Paradox Development Studios 2012).

When doing qualitative or ethnographically inspired research on online culture, I am focusing on communication and discursive practices, more than “physical practices”. These are forms of interaction that are contingent on the communication technology we use. An online study or ethnography takes place in the intersection between the offline world, the online world and the technical (Maczewski, Storey and Hoskins 2004), meaning that the study just doesn’t take place in a separate online space, but that this space overlaps with the offline culture,

and that the technological platforms that mediate the community and culture lay a premise for it. This is true for any study of culture online, and it has methodological and ethical consequences. It requires an understanding that our informants' lives continue when they log off, and their cultural practices and interests span both modalities. In some cases this means that a holistic understanding of a culture and its practices ideally includes participant observation in offline situations itself (Orgad 2009), but this is often not possible.

Further on we need to understand the technical limitations and possibilities, the affordances (Gibson 1977, Norman 1988) involved in the technological platforms involved in the communication. Is it real-time? Is it a private or public platform? Does it allow for emojis or other ways of communicating non-verbally? Does it allow for images? Videos? Voice chat? These are all important factors defining how we communicate, and how cultural practices take form. This is seemingly a contradiction to how Rheingold equates the social in the virtual and the physical, but just as the cultural and social context shapes how we interact in the physical, the technology and virtuality of online platforms affect how we interact with each other online (see for instance Nagy and Neff 2015, Shaw 2017). A straightforward example of this is how images and moving images allow us to express ourselves differently online.

A common way of communication on image boards has always been with memes and "reaction images", and as platforms such as Facebook have allowed commenting with images this has been embraced there as well, changing how we communicate there. In particular interest is maybe the animated gif, which I remembered as something of an enfant terrible in the late nineties and early aughts, and something only "amateurs" would use on their "annoying" homepage. But with the rise of social media and better technical solutions it has become an integral way of how we express feelings and humour on social platforms. It is even integrated in Facebook's Messenger app. At a click of a button you can send a reaction gif, such as the aforementioned crying Doctor portrayed by David Tennant, or countless animated images of Boxxy.

Just as an online study has to take the offline lives of informants and the offline practices of a community into consideration, it also has to consider how cultural practices can be spread over different platforms and arenas online, as these practices are multi-sited and intercultural. There are different forums to visit, chat rooms, social media groups and more which the informants may participate in or be aware of to varying degrees.

The forums

While my initial observations and journey through gaming culture has naturally been multi-sited, having spent time in Facebook groups and comment threads for relevant news articles, the majority of the time and data gathered was from two forums, along with a very thematic study of the Stormfront forums (Bjørkelo 2020). In this section, I will present the two major forums, before I present the kind of observational and keyword data (corpus) I retrieved from them.

The two forums were chosen for three criterias. 1) They had to be open, in the sense that they can be read and observed by anyone without an account, which allowed me to easily search the archives and follow discussions. 2) They had to have a large user base, in order to create the variety I felt my dataset could benefit from. 3) And their user base had to be active, to improve my chances of finding relevant discussions. They have been detailed in “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted), but both of them fulfill the requirements of being large, active and open. While they are *open*, it could however be argued that they are not *public* to researchers, or intended for scientific analysis. They are however often used as sources in news stories about games and gaming culture, and their size and level of activity excludes getting informed consent from every user on the site, and as I have been using an archival search, many of the users have moved on or have been banned since posting, which is particularly common in topics of a transgressive and provocative nature. The members cited have been thoroughly anonymized and paraphrased to protect them, but although the forums are easily recognizable, I have chosen to anonymize the two main forums as far as possible in compliance with regulations for Norwegian research ethics.

Norwegian ethics guidelines for internet research (NESH 2014, 2018), as regulated by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD.no) are relatively strict, and leave little room for individual judgment. In cases where informed consent is impractical or impossible, the only recourse is complete anonymization of the source material; and/or the fabrication of data based on collected data (Lüders 2015). Key to the understanding behind Norwegian research ethics, is that the easier a source or citation is to track or find online, the less available a researcher can consider it, i.e. the more public, the less usable, which creates an interesting paradox for internet researchers. In compliance with these regulations, the data that has been collected, or scraped, from the forums have been treated anonymously in dissemination, removing user-names and the quotes have been paraphrased in publications.

The forums have been designated as Forum A and Forum B. Even though they are recognizable, large and public, I have decided to err on the safe side in this matter. I made the opposite call when dealing with the Nazi site Stormfront in “Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic’ - *White Nationalist Readings of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*” (Bjørkelo 2020). While Forum A and B are relatively obscure to those who are not themselves engaged with gaming culture in one way or another, there are few large, long-standing public White Nationalist forums which would make Stormfront difficult to anonymize. The activities on a White Nationalist forum is also of public interest, so here I have decided to only paraphrase the anonymous users, and name the forum itself.

Forum A is characterized by being the more professional of the two forums, and is known for having members who are game industry professionals and journalists. Additionally, in order to post or interact with the forum, beyond observing, you have to register with a non-free e-mail address and wait your turn for validation. It was not until the end of my research period that my account was approved, and only then, I suspect, because a lot of active members had left the forums in a political mass exodus. Forum A’s image is contested; when talking informally to users they refer to it either as a hotbed of reactionary politics or a liberal swamp, and there are arguments for both points of views.

With the incident of #GamerGate in 2014, the administration of Forum A banned users explicitly backing the movement from the site. Creating an impression that the site was “anti-gamergate”, but it did not exclude other non-progressive topics or opinions from being voiced on the forum. Its position on progressive matters would continue to shift, and a few years later, after a crisis among the administrators, the forum would shift back to a less progressive stance among moderators.

Forum B on the other hand does not give the impression of having been able to host a sense of community or common culture among its users, as it doesn’t have the presence of an owner or a culture shaped by active moderation. It does have moderators, of course, but they appear only to moderate the most offensive or illegal posts. As with Forum A, you can read the forum, but you have to register to post, though anyone can join without vetting or other requirements. Where Forum A has the reputation of being a more mature or professional forum, Forum B is considered more sophomoric or immature.

The difference in moderation culture, also lead to a different response to #GamerGate which was never banned from Forum B. And while it never grew to become a central hub of the #GamerGate-movement like other sites (such as 8chan), its discussion and framing of

gaming culture was allowed. In my datasets it is also where the majority of more misogynistic and racist statements are found, though it is clear that the moderators have edited the worst of this activity. It leaves us with the impression that Forum B is a more rowdy or immature space than Forum A, though both host lively and heated debates. The discussions on Forum B have a certain juvenile flair that gives this impression. And the users on Forum B are often referred to as “15 year old gamers” by users on Forum A and other sites, or as “basement dwellers”.

Both forums host discussions about gaming in general, particular games, gaming culture and off-topic, and as such don't differ much from other online forums. The off-topic discussions can range from anything to dating advice to current politics, and it is in these threads we often see the overlap between gaming culture and current events. And while I have made no effort to track the user's activity, and the sheer amount of data would have made this particularly hard, I could still notice certain tendencies. I could note that some users seem to post exclusively in one subforum, while others will jump from one topic to another, continuing on-going conversations and animosities, and at times leaving those animosity behind when coming to the aid of a fellow forum user. It adds to the sense of community (Baym 2015).

Observation of unsolicited, articulated responses

Where the more active participant observation has a naturally high standing in qualitative and ethnographic methods, passive observation has its place as well, as do archival and keyword searches in forum studies. My focus here is on what I call *unsolicited, articulated responses* to games and gaming culture, which include emotional responses and opinions. And by this I mean the responses elicited by experiences with games and gaming culture, and which are voluntarily expressed (or articulated) in online forums and discussion. I have chosen the term unsolicited to indicate that I am not studying responses to questions asked by me, but expressions that are formulated by users in response to a thread initiated by another user. Thus, while they may be provoked by other users or by debates in gaming culture, they are not elicited by me.

While I focus on articulated emotions and opinions, I do so with the understanding that much is left to my own interpretation of these articulations as to what emotion they express. We only have access to these articulations and their contexts, and as a researcher I have to analyse this phenomenologically through a double hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2009) - meaning that I have to make sense of the forum posters, as they make sense of their own experiences through articulation. Posting on a forum is always a delayed response,

even if it is only a short delay. Emotions are the long term feelings that can arise from reflection and deliberations (Brennan 2004, Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020). Opinions, on the other hand, are more or less well-founded positions or judgments, that may be of a political nature or not. And these are the kind of responses I am looking for. I did not want to solicit, or elicit the players responses on my own, but see how the conversations developed naturally. They might be elicited by the game alone, or by other members of the community sharing their thoughts in a discussion thread. From this patterns and insights emerged. I am mainly concerned with expressions relating to reactions stemming from discomfort or boundaries being crossed, that is reactions such as sadness, anger, frustration and the like, and the gaming content that provokes these emotions.

These expressions being unsolicited means in practice that I have to observe them passively in selected forums and see how and when they express feelings of discomfort, or sadness, anger, frustration etcetera. Being unsolicited, it means that the responses are not asked for, prompted, or brought out by questions or actions by the researcher, as it would be when a researcher conducts an interview or participant observation. The presence of a researcher changes the situation in ways that are hard to perceive and predict (Maczewski, Story and Hoskins 2004), and while participant observation doesn't equal elicitation or solicitation of responses, the participation might affect the responses.

Observing in online forums, while being pretty straightforward, brings several ethical considerations (AoIR 2012, Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess and AoIR 2020, NESH 2014, NESH 2018, Lawson 2004, Sveningsson 2004). We do not know much about the people we are observing or their background, they may or may not be who they claim to be, and they may or may not consider their posts to be private. The chosen forums and posts are open to the public, and have thousands of people posting in them. The level of activity and visibility is high, and could be considered public for this reason, but an important consideration is also whether or not the users consider their posts public or not (Lüders 2015). There are also those who consider their posts not only public, but wish to claim authorship to their words (Lawson 2004), and they interact in the same discussions as those who expect privacy. In observing and combing through archives it is impossible for a researcher to ascertain whether an informant wishes to be identified or quoted, and when working with a large amount of posts, that may date back several years, it is difficult if not impossible to acquire an informed consent from everyone. Informed consent is a staple of ethical qualitative research; using this approach, the participants would be informed on the subject matter and nature of the research, while upholding their right to view, correct or delete personal data collected concerning them, and upholding the right to withdraw their consent. Thus ensuring

their privacy and right to be forgotten (see Lüders 2004, Lawson 2004, AoIR 2012, Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess and AoIR 2020, NESH 2014, NESH 2018, and more). Even if you acquire informed consent from the immediate source, you could perceivably be required to acquire the same from everyone interacting with him or her. Additionally, the asynchronous nature of forum data collection creates a gap in time between the research and the situation observed that will complicate tracking down the source. Given these complications, I anonymize any sources, and avoid quoting directly from them, and rely on paraphrasing whenever possible. It also means that I will not quote, paraphrase or use any comment that I perceive as indulging too much personal information or might put the poster at risk. It is important that any study weighs the risks versus the potential gain, and while the risk presented here might be minimal, we are skirting sensitive, emotional topics and should therefore be treated with care. Some have argued that anonymizing is not enough, and that the only way of conducting ethical research online is to anonymize to the point of fabrication (Lawson 2004, Lüders 2015) or not to conduct the study at all. In my honest opinion this is a harmful overreaction, that makes the data unusable and unpublishable, and akin to not actually doing any studies at all.

Gathering data and limiting bias manual corpus gathering and analysis

With focus on observation, there's still a question of how, and where, to perform the observation in order to find the type of discussions we are looking for. There's a uncertainty to this stage - do players actually articulate emotional responses online to strangers or the rest of the gaming community? And if they do, where? And how does one best observe this in a practical and non-intrusive manner? There's also the challenge of limiting my own assumptions about the hows and whats, my presuppositions and bias. Like the researcher's presence in the field influences the field itself, it is difficult to avoid the researcher influencing the data through subjective experiences. We bring a lot of bias to our observations, determining what we see and how we interpret it. And without resorting to interviews or follow up questions to the forum participants, it is hard to confirm or correct my interpretations, which would help limit bias. Bias, thus, is unavoidable, but researchers should be transparent about these biases and how they may influence the work, and also work to limit them and their influence.

A large part of this dissertation is based on using forum discourse in order to get a better understanding of how players deal with difficult and controversial subject matters in games

and gaming culture. This is a complex task, which presented several methodological and ethical challenges that needed solving. The main grounding of the work lies in ethnography, but I found that a triangulation of different approaches were needed in order for me to understand the subject matter. Starting with a passive observation of the forums in question, primarily Forum A and B, but also other sites where players would meet to discuss and argue, in order to get an understanding of the gaming culture. Alone, this approach would be time consuming, but provide an understanding of gaming culture and its communities. The second approach is to focus on the games itself, through case-studies such as ““It feels real to me”: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*” (Bjørkelo 2019), as well as ““Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic”: White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*” (Bjørkelo 2020) where the focus is on a particular community’s interpretation of a particular game. Other cases were discussed in a blog format (Jørgensen and Bjørkelo 2016, Bjørkelo 2016b, Bjørkelo 2017, Bjørkelo 2018), as well as seminars and workshops.

The case work and observation provided me not only with material for my dissertation, but the groundwork for designing keywords for archive searches using google in a similar way to what is performed by Jaroslav Švelch (2015) in his paper on grammar nazis online in an LMT framework. Using keywords derived from workshops and the initial observations, I would use Google to search the archives of Forum A and B, with research assistant Malgorzata Anna Pacholczyk taking the lead on searching Forum B. We would collect what was considered relevant threads, excluding instances where for instance the keyword was used in a prolific user’s username og signature, from the first ten pages of results on Google for every keyword. We would then, in order have access to context, download the relevant page of the discussion, as well as the pages following and preceding, in a format used by Nvivo (QSR International 2015). Combined with relevant discussions collected during the initial observation, the research assistant and myself had assembled a corpus of approximately 6000 pages of online discussion, using the relevant keywords. This would then form the basis of a partially machine-based analysis with the use of Nvivo.

Using Nvivo, I could automate parts of the analysis, such as creating a general overview of the keywords and trends, and to easily find relevant parts of the discussions for comparison. The main qualitative analysis was, however, manual. This becomes a manual corpus analysis, inspired by CADA, corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Baker et. al. 2008, Talyor 2013). In a traditional linguistic corpus analysis the focus is specifically on linguistical datasets, gathering a large amount of data in the form of words in order to compare, while my approach is more engaged with the apparent meanings found in the dataset and the

discourse it reveals. The subsequent analysis of the data systemized by Nvivo is manual, not computerized, and relies on traditional qualitative perspectives.

The tools used were technically fallible, and Nvivo's reproduction of the imported pages were often skewed and text obscured by formatting and graphics. And in the case of some pages, Nvivo were unable to import them. The large number of pages and instances that I did manage to collect, though, still form a sizable data set, one that I found too large and cumbersome to deal with without compartmentalizing into different subject matters and cases.

There are of course certain issues with this approach, as it is still dependent on subjective evaluations of relevance, and the the keywords are in many cases words I associate with the material, in this case the emotions, and could exclude idiomatic terms such as slang, as well as misspellings, intentional and not. There is also the question of language, and the study excludes non-English speakers from the data-material, though English is considered the lingua franca of the Internet (Svelch 2015). An important weakness to this method is that it excludes non-textual expressions, such as audio, video and images (such as gifs) from the search results, as the methods to trawl for these have not been available to me. They are however included in the collected corpus when they accompany discussions using the keyword terms. Furthermore, it is almost unavoidable that I have missed out on interesting discourse, both due to the limits on my observations, and the use of the Google search engine which, through its algorithms, has tailored its results to me and my research assistant specifically. And it is a good chance that we also missed out on interesting data in our selection, no matter how diligent we worked. The keywords themselves have been selected manually, and are therefore shaped by my biases, and there are obviously topics that I have not thought of, and keywords that were less fruitful than others, for more on selection of keywords see below.

Naturally there is also room for further finetune and expands upon the methodology. The use of keywords in combinations with search algorithms and automated analysis would provide for a better overview of the data, and may lead to different perspectives and more nuanced conclusions. Furthermore, future works building on these experiences would include more in-depth interaction with the forums, as well as interviews, which I was beyond the scope of this project as the data collection was time-consuming. As the dataset grew larger, and time grew shorter, I chose to exclude interviews from the process. In future research I will endeavour to include this, as I realize player interviews would greatly complement the dataset.

Prolonged observation allowed me to get a feel of the culture and an understanding of how they communicated in the two different forums, not only in what way they were similar and different from each other, but also how they related to the topic at hand. This allowed me to gather material as it came along. I visited the forums separately, for several intervals, reading through the active threads and making notes about common topics, and paying extra attention when something seemed to upset them, or they expected someone else to be upset, about gaming content. It was also apparent that in both these communities, there were a lot of emotions tied to the (cultural) politics of gaming, and politics in general. That is not necessarily surprising, as one should assume that those who are interested in games, can also be interested in politics and have always been so. After all, these are political times. The rise of the so-called Alt-Right and right-wing populist parties has been tied to internet culture and internet trolls (Phillips 2016), and while it is a simplification, there is some truth to it. The emergence of #GamerGate in 2014, showed the political potential of gaming culture for the populist right (Mortensen 2016), and allegedly foreshadowed the election of Donald Trump (Massanari 2018, Hawley 2017). Gaming forums are full of discussions whether political correctness, Social Justice Warriors, and, even worse, feminazis, are killing games and gaming culture (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted). These discussions are continued in discussions on popular celebrities in gaming culture such as the YouTube stars PewDiePie who flirted with the far right with his “edgy” humour and JonTron who gave his vocal support of right-wing and racist politics. These discussions probably caught my eye as a researcher because of my former work on, and interest in, the far right, and further incentivized me narrowing my papers on related subject matters.

This part of the data gathering gave me context and understanding that supported my archive retrievals and keyword searches. It also gave me material to work with, and links to ongoing discussions elsewhere and to previous discussions at the forums. By following these I could see history between the participants that influenced the discussions, as well as the discussions that formed the discourse as it is now. I generated a list of keywords from my observations, coupled with suggestions from colleagues. The latter was the case with the words SJW and feminazi (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted). And while they are still informed by my biases, it is hopefully limited.

Keywords

The list of keywords was ever evolving as the study evolved and different themes to explore arose. These words encompass both strong, and emotional statements of opinions and obscene, sexist pejoratives. Previous research has explored these kinds of pejoratives using linguistic corpus analysis to generate taxonomies and datasets for future research on hate speech (Kurrek, Saleem and Ruths 2020), as well as mixed methods, finding that these pejoratives are strategic, and enforce traditional world views, and are in essence anti-progressive (Felmlee, Rodis and Zhang) 2019). I find the same in my paper on the *feminazi* (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted), but like Jana Kurrek, Haji Mohammad Saleem, and Derek Ruths (2020) I find instances of counter speech and slur reclamation (p 141), but where they found fewer examples and excluded them from their collection, I found a significant usage of this, and have included them in my discursive analysis (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted). This points towards the subject of online usage of sexual and racial pejoratives, both in gaming context and not, to be a subject for further enquiry.

As I set out searching, the list looked like this:

Ragequit (300)	Worst Game (6296)	Fuck/Fucking (19975)
Seriously (928)	Hate (11075)	(So) Sad (5567)
Upset/Upsetting (689)	Depress/Depressing (3302)	Violence/Violent (6949)
Gore (3481)	Visceral (1757)	Gut-wrenching (319)
Cringe (2018)	Nightmare (701)	Bad Dream (4408)
Sexual (12593)	Transsexual (1730)	Homosexual (2989)
Disturbing (2345)	Sick/sickening (3888)	Gay (12112)
Uncomfortable (2294)	Gratuitous (634)	Disgraceful (661)
Monstrosity (622)	Feminazi (591)	SJW (13511)

The numbers in parentheses are the total number of mentions of the term found in the corpus by the software, and are included as indication of the weight and importance the different terms have. They are however not usable, as they are quantitative data without

proper contextualization and further work, due to several complicating factors, and requires a refining of the individual queries and a qualitative analysis for an actual understanding. For one thing, the data have been collected from two different forums, and there was more contextualizing data collected from Forum A, than Forum B. The exception being for the keywords *SJW* and *feminazi*. The numbers don't exclude irrelevant usage, nor when it is just used to quote other participants. Furthermore, due to the two forums having different layout and code, the software treated it differently, and there were anomalies in how things were counted. Such as the search term "seriously" which was counted in 151 titles in Forum A, but were not used in the text themselves according to the software and was thus counted as zero occurrences. The same was the case with the term *nightmare*, Due to the layout of Forum B, however, the title of the thread seems to have been counted here. The same seems to be the case with the bloated results of *SJW* in Forum B, with 7000 more occurrences, but there is no doubt of the high frequency of the usage of the term in this forum. A proper analysis of the term usage, therefore requires a qualitative analysis. However, combining the datasets for the different keywords, brings out interesting patterns, showing how the same keywords show up in datasets collected for other, different keywords, and allows us to see a larger picture of what terms show up as interesting. For instance, the term "gay" is often used, and an analysis will show how it used both as a pejorative about games, game characters and forum users, as well as a descriptive of themes, characters and culture.

The keywords have been chosen by myself, as a mix of words that are associated with emotional outbursts and articulations, sexual themes that seem to be provocative (*transsexual*), political terms (such as *feminazi* or *SJW*) and words they would use to describe content that would provoke emotions, whether effective or not (*gratuitous*, *disgraceful*, *monstrosity*). Some of these, such as *feminazi* and *SJW* were also slurs. Some of the keywords are more efficient than others, while others would return the same tagline from a frequent poster.

Ragequit, *worst game* and *fuck / fucking* were chosen in order to find discussions on games that provoked by their difficulty or design, angering the player. Or simply put - reactions to "bad games". Some of the other keywords might be used in this context as well, such as *hate* or *seriously*, though these are more generic terms that could show up in many different contexts. These words were chosen after having seen them used in discussions where players expressed their anger about game experiences, where the game design transgressed against the players' expectations of mastery in the game by being unfair, buggy or just simply too hard.

Keywords related to violence were included as violence is often considered transgressive, though mostly to non-players. There could however be cases where violence is so gratuitous or excessive that players would respond to them, as in the case of killing children or civilians such as in the game *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015), or the “No Russian” mission of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009). I used the keywords *violent/violence*, *visceral*, *gore* and *gratuitous* to find these discussions, though some of the other keywords are also related to this topic.

Keywords such as *sad*, *cringe*, *upsetting*, *gut-wrenching*, *disturbing*, and *uncomfortable* were chosen for their emotional relevance. These are words associated with discomfort, with cringe and gut-wrenching on opposite sides of the spectrum of discomfort. These are words that are used to express a strong emotional reaction to something, whether it is something sad, awkward or upsetting in some way. They are tied to the reaction to the situation, rather than to the situation or phenomenon causing the reaction.

While sex games are a genre of itself, and there are plenty of games with varying degrees of sexual nature, these are not often discussed in my material, with the exception of Japanese games, dating sims in particular, with their representations of hentai imagery and underage-looking girls, or loli. These discussions are often about the representative layer and how they might or should cause offense. Beyond these Japanese games there is a lot more discussion about representations of sexuality in other genres, this often ties into discussions on the value of “sexy” female characters, and how gender is represented in games. Discussions on different expressions of sexuality is never far behind, with discussions on both transgenderism and homosexuality being popular topics. In order to capture these discussions I used the keywords *sexual*, *transsexual*, *gay* and *homosexual*. Additionally, the keyword *gratuitous* could also apply here. I could probably have delved more into this, given more time, and added more and more specific keywords.

Of particular interest, in the political climate I have described, are discussions about “politics in games” and politics as seen through the lens of gaming culture. The above-mentioned discussions on representation of sexualities and gender fall into this category, joined by discussions found with keywords related to the animosity against progressive politics *SJW* / *Social Justice Warrior* and *feminazi*. These are slurs used to attack perceived progressives and progressive values that undermine society, internet culture and gaming culture specifically. As it is used often in discussions on feminism and gender equality, the social justice warrior implies a sort of monstrous and illogical feminine (Massanari and Chess

2018), and much the same can be said of *the feminazi*, which is a distinct female type of progressive, a mix of a feminist and a nazi, which I deal with in depth in “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted). By focusing on the keyword *feminazi*, I was able to find nuances in the uses of the word, something that is not just relevant to studies of gaming culture, but internet discourse in general.

Additionally, I used a set of more generic keywords that showed itself in different discussions, such as *hate*, *seriously*, *monstrosity*, and *disgraceful*, as I found them used in negative context in several discussions.

Output

The main outputs of this methodology is found in the papers on Stormfront and Skyrim (Bjørkelo 2020) and on feminazis in gaming discourse (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted). This methodology promises to be a fruitful ground for developing future papers on the different subject matters that these keywords provide insights into. Such as the keywords related to sadness and emotional discomfort could further discussions on *transgressive realism* and positive-negative experiences in “It Feels Real to Me’: Transgressive Realism in *This War of Mine*” (Bjørkelo 2019), using, for instance the case of *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015) and its very emotional response from players. I could also use these keywords and the methodological foundation to delve into player outrage to perceived transgressions in game design. This is probably best illustrated by the reaction to the inclusion of instrumental cat-killing in *Yandere Simulator* (YandereDev, unpublished) - a game about taking upskirt photos of schoolgirls - and killing them off in an attempt to win true love. A case that has fascinated me since 2016.

The keywords alone, as mentioned above, are indicators of trends and weight, but require an in-depth qualitative engagement in order to reveal their importance, and the inherent contradictions in gaming culture. The published findings indicate that the methodology is apt to reveal contradictions in online culture generally and internet culture, specifically. The interpretation of *Skyrim* by White Nationalist is one that is flexible and negotiated through discourse and play (Bjørkelo 2020), while the frequent use of the slur *feminazi*, is not absolute indicative of anti-feminist and anti-progressive politics in gaming culture, as the term not only meets with resistance, but is also used sarcastically (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted).

Similar analysis can, and should, be performed on other parts of the dataset. The term SJW for instance is frequently used, as is *gay*; both provide insights into contradictory usage of terms that are often considered pejorative, as well as revealing the prejudices found in parts of gaming culture. This is especially interesting as SJW is regarded exclusively as a pejorative, while *gay* has mixed usage in our culture and is contingent on who says it, about what and in what context. These are just some of the avenues of investigation that this corpus opens up for, which grew beyond the scope of this dissertation, but which I hope to engage with in future work, as the method and analytical framework is continually being refined.

A Conclusion with Eyes Towards the Future

This dissertation draws on different separate threads that are joined together by the games, gaming culture and the people who play games. The different papers included in this dissertation all explore different notions of transgression within games and gaming culture, in order to reveal a complex and nuanced tapestry of said culture. This synopsis provides much of the philosophical, theoretical and methodical framework of what is first and foremost an empirical work.

As previously mentioned, *the main objective of the dissertation has been to explore how players deal with issues that raise provocation, discomfort, or can be considered sensitive in games and gaming cultures*. Through a methodical approach to online gaming forums, I have been able to observe and identify several important issues for gaming culture. They follow along the lines of political discourse in mainstream society, as well as idiosyncratic and individual thresholds of discomfort. Gaming culture may not be as different to “mainstream” culture, as we the press would have us believe. With basis in understanding transgression as the crossing or breaking of normative, individual and institutional boundaries, the overarching research question for the dissertation was as follows: (RQ) *What is the role of transgression in games and gaming culture?*

In order to provide an answer to this research question, I have explored games and gaming culture through the lense of transgression in four papers and in this synopsis. The four papers each answer a separate research question:

- (RQ1) *How does This War of Mine create a sense of transgressive realism?*
- (RQ2) *How can a sense of transgressive realism be applied to game design?*
- (RQ3) *How do white supremacists transgress social boundaries through the appropriation of Skyrim?*
- (RQ4) *How do forum users construct and negotiate the boundaries of gaming culture through transgressive discourse and play?*

In “It feels real to me”: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine* (Bjørkelo 2019), I explore RQ1, finding that through paratext and game mechanics, the game creates a sense of complicity and discomfort, and this leads to a feeling that the play experience is realistic. The game itself transgresses against the expectations of a game, a war game especially, by focusing on the trials and hardships of civilians. But there are also individual boundaries

being transgressed, as the player is complicit in the tragedy unfolding, creating in some a strong discomfort in the player. From these observations I develop the concept of transgressive realism, that realism is born out of this discomfort or transgression.

This is further developed in “The *Asylum Seekers* Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism” (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018), where I answer RQ2. We applied the findings from ““It feels real to me”: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*” (Bjørkelo 2019), along with related ideas of positive-negative experiences (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010), and play-external seriousness (Jørgensen 2014), to designing a live-action roleplaying game (larp) experience, where the players experience discomfort in the process of seeking asylum, as well as the process of selecting seekers to grant asylum to. We found that the players responded well to the discomfort, prompting discussions on both the game and the real-world situation that was raised in the game.

In ““Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic”: White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*” (Bjørkelo 2020), I turn towards RQ3, and show how White Supremacist explores the affordances and open world nature of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* in order to appropriate the game for their own worldview and ideology. This appropriation is a transgression against the assumed intent of the game developers, as well as social norms opposed to White Nationalism. Though it opens up for the question of what the intent is in the design of an open world game. In this paper I rely on Stuart Hall’s schematics for encoding and decoding of media texts (Hall 1973), as well as James Gibson’s theory of affordances (Gibson 1977) in order to show not only how White Nationalists appropriate the game world, but how the game world and its design allows for it.

Turning towards two of the largest english gaming forums available in “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture” (Bjørkelo, conditionally accepted) where I explore how a sexist pejorative is used to draw up the boundaries of gaming culture, I answer RQ4. The data shows not only that the discourse in gaming forums parallels that of mainstream political and cultural discourse, but contains the same contradictions and points of tension. In this dissertation I compare the transgressive use of slurs and pejoratives with that of traditional games of insults, and how they are used to construct boundaries of a culture as well as “the other”. An interesting find here is that the majority usage of the slur is sarcastic and as counter to the meaning of the word. This paper therefore does not just demonstrate the boundary keeping through transgressive speech, but also the nuances and complexities of gaming culture, as well as internet culture. And provides a starting point for future discussions.

Through empirical studies, these four papers give a partial answer to the research question; *What is the role of transgression in games and gaming culture?*

Through the extensive work on this dissertation I have found that transgression or transgressive games and play provide players with a point of departure to explore and discuss difficult “real world” issues, and it can provide an impetus for personal reflection. The discomfort experienced in game media and play can also strengthen the sense of realism of the experience, and therefore helps the discussion and reflection that can follow. It is also possible to design game experiences with this in mind, as was the case with the *The Asylum Seekers* larp.

Using an autoethnographic approach to close reading of a game experiences, has allowed a more intimate access to ephemeral experiences, that are not available from forum studies or the analytical close-reading. The method, involving the analysis of one's own emotional reactions and feelings towards a game experience, has proven itself as a method well-suited for analysing the uncomfortable and emotionally difficult, which is what this dissertation has sought to explore. The autoethnographic approach has been combined with non-solicited studies of game culture, in which I have used observations of forum conversations to better understand how players talk about transgressive games without being prompted by a researcher. Thus, I have found that gaming culture can be transgressive in their play and interpretation of games, as was the case with Stormfront's interpretation of *Skyrim* (Bjørkelo 2020). As discussed in Chapter 2 of this synopsis, I argue that games are always in a state of tension, on the brink of breaking boundaries. My findings reveal several examples of play that rely on breaking boundaries or playing with them being broken, either for the “fun” and thrill of it, or to establish cultural boundaries as is the case with the use of pejoratives and aggressive language. Transgression, therefore, can be said to be a part of establishing identity and cultural territory through boundary-breaking play, by appropriation and by boundary-keeping.

To give a complete answer to my overarching research question would require further enquiry, and more diverse perspectives. The start of these enquiries can be found in this synopsis, as well as the four included papers. No doubt, transgression plays many more roles in gaming culture than the ones found and presented in this dissertation. I have gathered material for several case studies, that for lack of time I could not pursue further. I have not explored transgression in online games and voice chat, for instance aggressive speech and trash talk. Furthermore, I have not analyzed the many political debates surrounding games found in different online arenas, only touched on two specific topics of

many. I have not followed this through with interviews, which would lead to even further insights. This is for the future. Seeing how transgression is an important part of establishing the boundaries, further enquiries down these paths would expand our understanding of gaming culture and its nuances even further. And as gaming culture is an important part of online culture and a part of trends, it would give us insights into the complexities of contemporary folk culture. This dissertation is a step in this direction, and shows through empirical studies how transgression is part of the complex pattern of play and gaming culture. It is a way of playing with boundaries, of establishing boundaries, of creating realism and better play experiences. Gaming culture is not merely the consumption of games, it is a complex culture founded in online culture and an interest in games and play. And as the boundaries of gaming culture can be reaffirmed by social transgression, transgression in games can enhance the play experience and sense of realism.

Future work

Time and resources limit the avenues available for exploration within the framework of this dissertation, but as I suggest there are more avenues of further research that should be investigated. The political aspects of gaming culture should be of general interest, especially in how it mirrors political discourse elsewhere. Pursuing the political discourse in gaming culture could reveal more about the polarized, contemporary political discourse. What political questions divide gaming culture, and along which lines, and how do these relate to lines of division in contemporary political discourse? In particular, questions of gender representation and masculinity are hotly debated topics in gaming forums and deserve a closer look from different perspectives in order to bring out the complexities and nuances. This dissertation concludes that *feminazi* is a pejorative as much used as a sarcastic pejorative as not, but how does it compare to the more common term SJW and other expression of anti-feminist sentiments? These are areas of social control and boundary keeping, through transgressive behaviour and language, that might obfuscate the complexities and nuances that could teach us much about contemporary culture.

Furthermore, the role of transgression in games and play deserves further investigation in the future. This dissertation has built on established notions, such as positive-negative experiences, and on larp design, to explore what discomfort and transgression does to the players and the play experience. The notion of transgressive realism should be tested and interrogated further, through both design and case studies, as well as player interviews. Transgression may serve other functions as well, and transgressive content in game may serve as gatekeepers as much as transgressive behaviour among players, and should be

further explored. The play activities and games in this dissertation play with both social and individual boundaries, they are transgressive, but often not enough to break the boundaries completely in the sense of profound transgressions. Whether or not something is profoundly transgressive is a question of both social and individual boundaries and limits. Future research should continue along this path in order to better understand when a transgression becomes too much, when it ceases to have a function for play and becomes unbearably offensive. And why this is perceived in this way for some players, but not for others. Why in some contexts, and not in others. This dissertation has started along this path, as has the Games & Transgressive Aesthetics project, with *The Paradox of Transgression* (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020) in particular, but there are more avenues of investigations to be explored. Like the gaming community, future research should continue *playing with boundaries*.

Following this conclusion are the four papers in question. They are the main empirical works of this dissertation. Three of which have been published, and the fourth awaits revisions, having been conditionally accepted for publication in *Games & Culture*.

The papers are:

Bjørkelo, Kristian A. (2019): "“It feels real to me”": Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*", in: **Jørgensen**, Kristine and **Karlsen**, Faltin (eds.): *Transgressions in Games and Play*. Cambridge; The MIT Press.

Bjørkelo, Kristian A. (2020): "“Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic”": White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*" in: *Game Studies*, volume 20 issue 3

Bjørkelo, Kristian A. (Conditionally accepted): "Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture". In *Games & Culture* TBP.

Bjørkelo, Kristian A. and **Jørgensen**, Kristine (2018): "The *Asylum Seekers* Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism". In: *Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2018*.

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Article 1: “It feels real to me”: Transgressive realism in *This War of Mine*”

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10 “It Feels Real to Me”: Transgressive Realism in *This War of Mine*

Kristian A. Bjørkelo

Like movies and literature, games can present thought-provoking, uncomfortable scenarios that feel realistic to the audience. The pain and tragedy portrayed on screen and through gameplay seem genuine and affect the player. Taking a cue from this similarity, in this chapter I explore *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) through autoethnography as an example of *realism* in computer games. I do not consider this realism in terms of graphical or mechanical realism but rather as an accurate representation of a situation that is far removed from most players' range of experiences. I build on ideas of realism, social realism, and transgression and discuss how they relate to this game before I try to shed light on the gameplay experience.

Toward the very end of the chapter, I develop the idea of *transgressive realism* as a way of describing game experiences that feel real through their ability to disturb or be uncomfortable. Thus, they are transgressive because they are able to make us reflect in ways that entertainment media normally do not. Transgressive realism thus begs the question: Does playing a game that makes one feel uncomfortable or distressed enhance the game's sense of realism?

This War of Mine

First released in 2014, *This War of Mine* has received attention for dealing with wartime suffering in a mature and engaging manner. Created by 11 Bit Studios in Warsaw, it draws inspiration from the Siege of Sarajevo during the Balkan War of the 1990s to make a serious, social-realist gameplay experience. The marketing of *This War of Mine* focused on the game as different from other war games. The public-relations slogan was “In war, not everyone is a soldier,” and the trailers used slow-moving, black-and-white images from the game and from war, accompanied by somber, classical music. The message is that war is something that happens to civilians more than to soldiers and that it forces civilians to make difficult choices for their survival.

For many players, playing *This War of Mine* is a rewarding yet uncomfortable and disquieting experience, reminding them of or confronting them with the civilian experience of war. And as expressed in discussions online (Toma 2015, 217–218), there are also those who find the game frustrating for different reasons. For some, it does not live up to the expectation of a war game or of a resource-management game, or it is experienced as simply depressing. Other players treat it like any other game, giving tips on how to successfully deal with the challenges. Sometimes these players are joined by voices explaining that the game has to be this hard and frustrating because that is how war is (see Toma 2015). The message is: war is horrible.

In *This War of Mine*, the player controls a group of three to four characters trying to survive in a bombed-out squat during a siege. The game is set in a city plagued by a (fictional) civil war. When the game starts, the player does not know how long the war will last, and the actual number of days is randomized for each playthrough. During the course of the game, the player must gather supplies, reinforce the shelter, trade, and deal with other survivors. The game days are divided into daytime, when the player takes care of the characters' needs around the shelter, and nighttime, when the player sends out one of the characters to scavenge or raid buildings in the city for resources. Over time, the available resources become scarce, and the world becomes more violent as the characters grow more desperate. The player must make difficult choices so that their characters will survive until armistice.

The game is semirandomized: there is a limited set of locations and events, but the actual selection of locations and events is randomized for each playthrough. The safe house is also randomized and has different rooms, loot, and challenges, such as locked rooms and debris. This randomization not only increases replayability but also adds a sense of uncertainty when a new playthrough is started.

When a player starts a game, their first tasks are to secure the shelter and to excavate the most readily available areas for resources. Available resources range from manure, raw meat, vegetables, and canned goods to mechanical parts, electrical parts, and wood as well as, of course, weapons, weapon parts, and ammunition. These resources are spent on keeping the characters alive and upgrading the safe house. The player also needs to make weapons to defend the safe house from the inevitable nightly raids or to use during the nightly search for resources.

During daytime, the game plays out like a depressing version of a dollhouse simulator such as *Little Computer People* (Activision 1985) or *The Sims* (Maxis 2000), where the players micromanage characters and their needs. But in this game everything is in disrepair, and the characters move around slowly due to injury, exhaustion, or depression. At nighttime, the player may scavenge or raid the locations near the safe house. This is

the stealth-action part of the game and is not without its moral dilemmas. The player must choose where to go, and the map screen indicates whether an area is populated or not and whether the people there are peaceful or not. The player can therefore choose to encounter no resistance and scavenge in environs that are safe but have smaller rewards or take a risk for greater reward by going where they can expect resistance. There is also the opportunity to loot homes and safe houses belonging to nonplayer characters, though this choice may end in a violent confrontation. Is the player willing to steal? Is the player willing to kill innocents? As the resources become more and more scarce, the player is forced to ask these questions. Is it better to "safely" rob those who cannot protect themselves? Or should the player take the moral high ground and steal only from those perceived as a threat or as criminals?

Realism and Games

The term *realism* eludes a single working definition because it points both to a set of genres of artistic expression and to the attributes of these genres (Morris 2003). In addition, in philosophy, being a realist is an ontological and epistemological position, countered by an antirealist position (Braver 2012, 2015). Realism is further complicated by being defined and evaluated differently for different forms of expression; realism is not the same for paintings as it is for literature, nor is it the same for films or for games. As a genre, realism is generally focused on conventions for portraying reality with a certain level of authenticity and truthfulness. Postmodernists often accuse it of being obsessed with the minute details of everyday life (Beaumont 2010). When discussing realism in a particular medium, such as a book, a film, or a game, we tend to consider the level of realism of a work based on its verisimilitude—that is, to what extent it manages to create an authentic and truthful version of our perceived reality. For the purpose of this chapter, a working definition of *realism* is the representation of certain aspects of reality in a truthful manner or in accordance with our preconceived notions of what is real in the world.

According to Gonzalo Frasca (2003), videogames are not conventional representations like novels and paintings; they are simulations. They are dynamic models of complex systems that result in narratives or representations for the external viewer. Central to a videogame is the player who performs actions within the simulated game-world. According to Alexander Galloway (2004), the fact that games are played and are influenced by the player's actions complicates the problems of representation and thus the concept of realism. Because of the simulated nature of games and the player's actions, it is not enough to discuss the visual and textual representational qualities of

games; the world in which these actions take place and how they correspond to the “real” world must also be addressed. Galloway suggests discussing realism in games from the perspective of how these actions and worlds correspond to their real-world counterparts and how the gameworld adds kinesthetic, affective, and material dimensions to the discourse of representation and meaning. Furthermore, he suggests two distinct forms of realism in digital games: *realisticness*, which is the accuracy or authenticity of the audiovisual representation of the world, and *social realism*, which refers to the accuracy of game characters’ behavior, their social world, and the narrative. To this we can add *behavioral realism*, which refers to the truthfulness of the physics of the simulation—that is, the gameworld and the items in the gameworld behave according to our expectations of how they behave in the real world (see Breuer, Festl, and Quandt 2011, 2012; Pötzsch 2015; Šisler 2016). Behavioral realism is the springboard for Holger Pötzsch’s (2015) discussion of *selective realism*, wherein unpleasant aspects of warfare, for instance, are kept out of the simulation in war games, but concepts such as war, militancy, and violence are glorified. Commercial digital wargames are often surgically clean of civilians, thus allowing players to avoid the more problematic sides of war when playing such games.

These concepts become important as we move on to discuss *This War of Mine* and transgressive realism. In particular, *social realism* becomes central and is here understood as the truthful simulation or representation of the social world and character behavior within the game, as perceived by the player.

Transgression and Games

The chapters in this anthology approach and define the transgressive and the act of transgression in games from a multitude of perspectives. What is transgressive is contingent on who, when, and where. It is subjective, and it is contextual. Central to the concept of transgression is the crossing of lines and the breaking of boundaries. Chris Jenks defines the act of transgression as “go[ing] beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention, it is to violate and infringe” (2003, 2). Jenks adds that transgression implies an acceptance of the conventions: “Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (2). In this assertion, he finds support in Georges Bataille (1985), who argues that transgression serves to reaffirm the boundaries that are being transgressed. This position is perhaps well summed up by the saying “Rules are meant to be broken.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines transgression as “the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right, a violation of law, duty or

command; disobedience, trespass, sin. ... The action of passing of or beyond" ("Transgression" 2017). A transgression can be against conventions, expectations, or morality and is a violation that fosters negative responses by the community, institution, or individuals. A game can break with the conventions of a genre and thereby also with the expectations of the audience (see chapters 6 and 11 in this volume), but it can also include content that breaks with cultural ideals of morality (see chapters 3, 4, and 14 in this volume). Whether a game is transgressive or not, however, depends on the response it receives. A transgressive game, in this understanding, is a game that causes a negative response either from society or from the game community or from players engaging with the game in question.

With respect to games, the boundary being crossed can be the expectation that the game should be fun or pleasurable or that it should behave like other games in a particular genre. When a game breaks with expectations and turns out to be uncomfortable rather than fun or subverts game mechanisms with respect to the conventions of a genre, boundaries are broken. In certain contexts, this breaking of boundaries may create a negative response of disgust or offense (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016) and thus opposition to the game, but in other contexts the immediate negative reaction that the game does not follow expectations may be followed later by pleasure, acceptance, or reflection. In the latter case, transgression may reaffirm the boundaries that have been transgressed and further our understanding of them. Therefore, transgression can contribute to profound and meaningful experiences. In this sense, games also allow us to consider serious out-of-game matters (Jørgensen 2014) or to have negative experiences in a safe environment (Montola 2010). Games allow us to play around with transgression and corresponding emotions such as discomfort, anger, sadness, and disgust in a safe environment.

Autoethnography of the Individual Gameplay Experience

Playing a game is an individual experience, formed by, among other things, game design and the player's individual context. It is nearly impossible for a designer or researcher to account for each individual player, and no reading can define every possible experience (Boudreau 2012). The different readings, experiences, and playstyles of *This War of Mine* found in online forum created to discuss the game attest to this (Toma 2015). At the time of writing this chapter, more than 4,000 discussion threads on Steam are dedicated to the game. Only a few hundred of the threads are active at any given time. Most of them are asking for help in different ways; a few are reporting bugs; and some are emotional posts about war, about the game, and about its emotional impact

or are complaints that it is a bad game because it does not make players feel good. There is obviously no one single way of playing or understanding the game.

There is a growing trend of acceptance and usage of autoethnography in anthropology, folkloristics, and other academic fields in which ethnography is the primary research method (Reed-Danahay 1997; Anderson 2006; Denshire 2014). Autoethnography is both a process and a product (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) that seeks to lift the self-reflective notes and biography of the embedded ethnographer to the level of a primary source in order to get a firsthand account of a culture or experience. Combined with the stories and perspective of other actors as well as with theories and analysis, autoethnography becomes a layered account of that culture or experience (Ronai 1995; Anderson 2006). In the context of this chapter, autoethnography is used as a tool to enhance the textual analysis, wherein I, in the role of a researcher, add my own emotional responses, reflection, and autobiographical details to the analysis of *This War of Mine*. As a basis for analysis, playing the game is not only acceptable but necessary (Aarseth 2003). By using autoethnography, I aim to make visible the autobiographical factors that inform my particular reading of the game. In addition, strong paratextual (Toma 2015) elements, such as marketing material, reviews, and discussions, provide contexts that influence my reading. The reading is focused on transgression and realism as I have experienced them while playing *This War of Mine*. This chapter is an autoethnographical text in a limited sense because it deals with only a single text and experience, not with an overall culture (*ethno*). It is also limited in scope because the full journal account and autoethnographical text of my playthroughs of the game are quite extensive. Playing a game is a subjective experience, and every playthrough of a game informs and shapes how the next playthrough is experienced. My first experience was very distressing, so I approached the second one more cautiously. However, at that point, I also had a better understanding of how the game worked and was perhaps better prepared for success.

My Autoethnographic Account

While playing *This War of Mine* and documenting my play, I focused on detailing what happened in the game from in-game day to day, how the characters responded, and, most importantly, what my thoughts and reactions were to what was going on, while making detailed notes in my journal. I had already played the game a few months earlier, and I had failed to keep the characters alive. This first playthrough ended with them succumbing to illness, starvation, and injuries or being killed. The playthrough stopped completely when the final character became depressed and committed suicide.

This playthrough left me emotionally devastated. *This War of Mine* reminded me of the stories that people who had experienced the civil war in the former Yugoslavia told me. After telling a woman who had been caught up in the struggle as a civilian about the game, she flatly replied, "This isn't a game to me." No, it was her childhood, spent fighting to survive. My response to the game was formed by my relationships to the people who have lived through war—people who have starved, who have been in fire-fights, who have killed to survive, and who live with the memories of it all. Playing *This War of Mine* triggered my recollection of their stories and influenced my experience. This background to my playing of the game goes to show how our biographies form a context for our reception and reading of a game.

Throughout the text, I distinguish between the characters as programmed entities in the gameworld and myself as the player who makes them act in a certain way because this is how I experienced the gameplay, and I attempt to reconstruct my play experience. Likewise, being an autoethnographic text, the analysis is focused on the narrative experience of the play, even though that experience is without a doubt influenced by the underlying rules and mechanics of the game. These mechanics create a certain tension in the game as the player is pressed for time and resources and restricted in what and how they can solve problems. I also use present tense in my gameplay descriptions for greater immediacy.

Because the autoethnographic study was done during my second playthrough, I was better prepared. I knew what to expect, both from the mechanics and from myself. I could steel myself emotionally and was not as stressed because I had learned from my first playthrough how the mechanics worked and what the game allowed me to do. This shift reflects Elisabeta Toma's finding that ambiguity or uncertainty becomes a mechanical resource in *This War of Mine* (2015, 212) because the player doesn't know for certain how to play the game until the second playthrough, having learned the hard way in the first.

My second playthrough lasted longer than the first, about eleven hours and was spread over two days in early October 2015. I sequestered myself when playing it, turned off all my usual social media, and ignored the forums and wikis that could help me with the game, although, admittedly, I skimmed some of them after my first playthrough. I wanted to do this on my own, without the aid of others.

The playthrough starts with a household consisting of Zlata, a student; Cveta, a schoolteacher who loves children; Anton, an elderly mathematics professor; and Pavle, an athlete and a fast runner. I am allowed four characters because this is my second playthrough. They all have different skills that will be useful for survival;

Pavle, in particular, will be helpful because he is a fast runner with the largest carrying capacity.

I manage to stay out of trouble for the first few in-game days as I explore the neighboring houses. Early on, a sniper wounds Pavle while he is scavenging, and that makes me jumpy. Still in my first play session but fifteen days into the game, Pavle kills someone in self-defense while scavenging. I searched through that particular house earlier and know there are valuables left, and there are parts of the house that I have not yet searched, but at the time of my search there was a sniper keeping me from exploring the area. As I have Pavle dodge the sniper this time, my pulse is racing when I notice someone moving around the house. I remember the notes left in the house, indicating that someone actually lived there, and realize that he must have been hiding. I try to make Pavle run, but the man throws a punch at him—I instinctively return the attack. When I mash the mouse button to force the combat system to respond, Pavle strikes once with the crowbar, hitting the man hard. The man cries out and throws up his arms in surrender, but I have already pushed the button twice, and the crowbar comes down again, killing the man. It is not just a case of self-defense; it is killing an innocent who is defending his home. Back at the shelter, Pavle becomes depressed and unwilling to carry out any further actions. The different characters are programmed to react differently to certain actions in the game. Most of them will be depressed from killing innocents. They will slow down work or even be entirely unresponsive. Pavle has all of these reactions, which affects the rest of the household negatively and makes it difficult to get everything to run smoothly because the rest of the household start worrying about the depressed character. At this point, the player must have the others talk to the depressed character to cheer him up and return him to “peak efficiency.” In my playthrough, Anton tries to cheer Pavle up, while Zlata wonders how anyone will be able to live with themselves after the war. As a player, I tell myself that killing the man was an act of self-defense, that it was unavoidable and not really my fault—none of which I actually believe. I feel guilty. I am complicit in murder.

Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps argue that “games have the capability to make the player feel as though they are [sic] complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events” (2015, 277). Through the interactivity as well as reactivity of the game, the player gains a sense of responsibility for what transpires. In this instance, when Pavle kills the man in his home, I feel responsible for Pavle’s actions; they are after all my own, performed through keyboard and mouse. The feeling of complicity is a recurring factor through-out my playthrough of *This War of Mine*.

More hardships and doubts follow as winter approaches. In my journal, I question whether the game is designed to make ethical behavior difficult or if that is the nature

of war. Is the game rigged against being "good"? Is war? These questions, of course, play into the subject matter of this chapter. If war makes ethical behavior difficult or impossible, then a game that makes it hard or impossible *not* to compromise your ethics to survive is an accurate simulation. At least, it is a representation of the realities of war that resonates as truthful. As the situation becomes more tense and difficult, what would normally be clear-cut ethical lines begin to blur. Is it okay to steal from some people more than from others? Is it more ethical to risk a character's life by stealing from or killing bandits who can defend themselves or to keep the character safe by only preying on the weak and defenseless? This difficulty becomes a recurring theme as the game progresses and suggests that *This War of Mine* is what Sicart calls an ethical game because it forces the player into ethical reflection (2009, 212–215).

When attempting to scavenge Sniper Junction, Pavle is wounded by a sniper but survives and manages to get inside the nearby apartment building with the help of a wounded man. Once he is there, I can hear a baby crying. The room is dark, with a single light source shining down on a baby stroller. Whether the baby has been abandoned or the parents are just hiding, I cannot tell. The encounter sticks with me for a while because it makes me reflect over the fact that children are orphaned, mutilated, and killed in war. Children are usually conspicuously missing in war games. They are filtered out to create an ideological and morally "pure" playground for a war simulation, and, as mentioned earlier, this filtering constitutes a form of selective realism in which some elements are chosen to be truthfully represented, whereas others are downplayed or left out; "the [war game] genre plays into discourses that sanitize warfare and present it as a struggle limited to soldiers and armies" (Pötzsch 2015, 162). In *This War of Mine*, children remain reminders that they are also victims, whether as the crying baby or as the children coming to your door pleading for your aid. In the latter circumstance, you can choose to forsake resources or a certain amount of time of one of your characters for the chance that the children later may return a favor. The crying child in the carriage haunts me and serves as a reminder of what the game is about. Although it may have been a cheap rhetorical ploy to blackmail me through emotion, it works. When I later return to Sniper Junction, I look for the carriage, thinking that I may have overlooked something I can do for the baby, but the baby is gone. Picked up by its parents? Dead? Stolen? I would not expect a child to stay or survive in an actual situation like this, but I cling to the hope that the simulation is somehow lacking, that the baby would still be there and that I can comfort it. But, alas, not finding the baby feels like a defeat somehow.

As winter arrives, things intensify and get harder. I need to keep everybody warm, and after some days I start burning supplies I could have used to build things. Being

an academic, I try hard to avoid burning books, but some have to go, and I find this appalling. The idea of burning books strikes a certain nerve. It is the eradication of the written word, of knowledge and accumulated culture. It makes me think of the book burnings of totalitarian regimes and religious bigots. I burn everything else before this becomes an option, even when it means I am not able to build any tools or fortify the building. I still make the mistake of spending resources on building a comfortable chair—that is when I run out of firewood and have to scavenge some dangerous areas for more firewood.

The primary concern during the winter is Pavle's injury. This hurts my scavenging efforts, but I can still send out Zlata and even Anton if necessary. There are many of incidents during the winter that make me think that I may not make it to the end of the game. My characters are starving in spite of rationing food found early on, and they are falling ill due to the cold. Several scavenging runs are unsuccessful, but I start trading with different groups in the city. I cook moonshine and barter it for whatever I need—mostly at a local brothel, which I do not feel good about at all. It is obvious that the girls are being kept there against their will. I do not see them, but I can "hear" their voices as text floating over the building where they are kept, and I see men leaving the building after having satisfied themselves. The trading station is outside, so I never see the women themselves. I get only simple indications of their existence and the impression that they are ill-treated captives. The brothel confirms my preconceived notions about wartime prostitution and trafficking. I have read enough about sexual crimes in war zones to make my stomach turn, and I have heard women tell their own stories of what they have been forced to do in wartime. My instincts tell me to react—to do something, to turn the game into an action-adventure in which I save these women, but I fear it will not work. As someone who is invested and complicit in the fates of the characters in my household, I fear risking their lives. So I trade, and I turn a blind eye, wishing I could act differently.

When winter ends, I hope that things will change for the better. The situation, although still bad, is looking up. Cautiously optimistic, I send Pavle to scavenge in an abandoned church. The sortie does not quite go as planned because I am surprised by one of the armed thugs there. The thug manages to get off a few shots before Pavle beats the thug's head in with a shovel. Another bandit has heard the shots and comes looking. He does not see Pavle, but he is standing in Pavle's way. Pavle grabs the first bandit's shotgun and blasts away and does not stop shooting until the second bandit lies dead on the floor. Pavle is badly wounded and only barely manages to get back to the safe house. My heart is racing. This was way too close. I am not sure whether Pavle will recover.

Pavle is telling himself that they were bandits, and it is okay that he killed them because they have killed so many others. It was also self-defense. His bad morale, however, takes second seat to the fact that he is gravely wounded. He needs bandages—a lot of them. Everybody is happy he is alive but very worried. They all feel sorry for what he had to do and for his condition. I cannot say I blame them. I cannot help feeling that it was my fault. Was scavenging the church a necessary risk? Should I have instead tried robbing someone who could not defend himself? At this point in the game, I am pretty sure I will not make it. The fact that the game now enters its most dangerous phase, the Crime Wave, during which the shelter is constantly being raided, does not disprove this feeling. I am really desperate; I trade away everything that I do not have an immediate need for. Who needs ammunition ingredients when you do not have the tools to make ammunition? If I cannot use a resource to make food or take care of immediate needs, I am willing to barter it away.

After a brutal raid on my safe house, I become desperate for medical supplies and food. At the same time, children are at the door, begging for canned food. I decide to send Zlata to the brothel, but this time it is not to trade. I have seen a way in past the guards that will allow me at least to scavenge the place. I make Zlata sneak around the back and enter through a second-floor window. At this point, I am willing to steal from these guys. They are bad guys, creepy human traffickers, and I want to—no, I need to—win the game. Stealing from these guys just might be my best chance. Zlata manages to slip in through the top floor and is sneaking around when she is discovered. My judgment is that she can defend herself and get out, as Pavle did. I am wrong, and she is shot while swinging the crowbar at the guy who found her. She falls over dead.

The household falls into a depression, and their already scant resources are dwindling. I wanted to do better. I did not want Zlata to die, and it feels like losing the game. I know that people die in war. I know this on an intellectual level, but Zlata's death is an emotional reminder. And the fact that it was my decision—my misjudgment and my poor gameplay skills—that led to it makes me responsible for it. I am complicit in Zlata's death, as I was complicit in Pavle's murders. *This War of Mine* could be accused of blackmailing my emotions by enforcing a tragic and dark narrative played out in a war setting where mere survival is a success. This interpretation is aided by the game's paratext, the description of the game's theme and trailers, which instruct the players that it is meant to make them feel bad. As with Greek tragedy, the audience knows what to expect, and the game makes the player complicit in all the tragedy that occurs. So it is only natural that I feel really bad at this point. At the same time, however, I return to the game. I am not ending the session. I need to play this through to the end.

Luckily, soon after Zlata's death, the war comes to an end on. A simple slide tells me that the war is over. The slide is followed by a summary of the playthrough and short descriptions of the fates of those belonging to my household. I take a deep breath, and I feel my shoulders relax. I did not realize how tense I was during the last hours of gameplay. I watch the summary with a sense of melancholy and emptiness that overshadow my feeling of accomplishment. Even though I am relieved and happy at having succeeded, I still feel bad for the questionable acts I have been complicit in, and I cannot shake the knowledge that even though *This War of Mine* is just a game, it reflects the reality of so many people living today. Civilians are still the victims of war all over the world. Unlike with a classical Greek tragedy, however, with *This War of Mine* there is no catharsis (Aristotle 1996), there is no relief from discomfort; instead, the negative feeling lingers on like a dissonant note (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016), which runs parallel with the pleasurable feeling of having played through the game with moderate success and the feeling that it has been a meaningful experience. I tell myself it will be a long time until I play it again.

Making You Feel

But what can be learned from this experience? First, I had a *positive negative experience*: an experience that is distressing but gratifying because it provokes reflection (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010). There is a seriousness that goes beyond the gameworld and the rules—what Kristine Jørgensen calls “play-external seriousness” (2014): the experience is not confined to the game but extends into the real world and allows me to reflect on real-world issues. While playing *This War of Mine*, I associated what happens in the gameworld to the real world in part because of the paratext and because the representation of war seems truthful. With respect to the terms discussed earlier in this article, *This War of Mine* is a realistic game in spite of its lack of behavioral realism or realisticness (Galloway 2004) or maybe even because of it. Creating furniture or making guns is a much more complicated process than is portrayed in the game, and the real world allows for a wider range of actions than does *This War of Mine*. The game mechanics resist you rather than aid you when you are in combat. You have to be precise in clicking your target and remember to change in or out of combat mode, and the reaction time is slow. When Pavle kills the innocent man, it is because I clicked the mouse several times in frantic self-defense before the hitting animation started, thus forcing Pavle to hit the man more than once. The same occurred when Zlata was killed. Although this slow reaction time can rightly be described as poor combat mechanics, the poor execution also seems intentional because it strengthens the sensation that the

protagonists are civilians and not soldiers trained for this situation. This is how combat is for most of us. At the same time, it is frustrating and scary. In playing *This War of Mine*, you fear entering combat more than you would in playing other games in which your characters are excellent and trained combatants.

Likewise, the graphics of *This War of Mine* are restrictive and "cartoony," far from the vivid photorealistic worlds found in conventional wargames (Pötzsch 2015). Both the mechanics of the resource system and the graphics serve to create a dissonance between themselves and the game's themes. On the one hand, you are just playing around with a house and its inhabitants, like a simple clone of *The Sims* or, more accurately, *Little Computer People*; on the other hand, you are dealing with the bleak and brutal realities of war—grief, violence, and survival. This dissonance highlights my understanding of the latter and, it could be argued, strengthens the game's transgressive aspects.

This War of Mine is a game that strives toward social realism. The designers' aim is to transport the player to a warzone so that they can experience it as a civilian would (Skipper 2014; Preston 2015). In the forums on the game, it is "described and interpreted both as a realistic and critical depiction of war and as a game" (Toma 2015, 220). The game's representation of civilians in war seems credible to me, and I feel drawn into the misery of it all. I recognize the fight for survival against starvation, cold, injury, and illness as a real challenge in wartime. I recognize as realistic the moral and ethical tableau of the game's many scenarios and quandaries. In *This War of Mine*, the player is confronted with tough decisions about life and death, theft, rape, trafficking, and one's willingness to sacrifice for strangers and how much. These ethical dilemmas are part of war for civilians, which is an argument for *This War of Mine* as a social-realist game. At the same time, *This War of Mine* may force us to experience and admit these aspects of war, and it may even confront us with realities we have not completely considered or "which we would rather overlook" (Julius 2002, 189). It provides insight into a reality that we do not want to consider but that we now no longer can ignore. In this way, playing the game becomes a transgressive experience in a greater way than just making the player feel bad.

Elisabeta Toma finds that the game's constraints pressure the player "to make decisions which contribute to the emerging narrative of the gameplay" (2015, 213). This view echoes the statement that the dissonance between the lack of realisticness and behavioral realism, on the one hand, and social realism, on the other, serves to heighten the latter. *This War of Mine's* mechanics and procedural rhetoric—that is, how the game's rules and procedures communicate a message and convince the player to act in a certain manner (Bogost 2007, 2–3)—revolve around resource management, and time is the most important resource because everything costs time, even the other

resources that are spent. The player spends time trying to find resources, harvest them, and spend them, and they spend time handling the health and morale of their household. Time is a very limited resource in the game, one that is crucial for the player's decision making. The player has only limited time each day to manage their household and each night to scavenge, and at the same time, the player does not know how much time they ultimately have until the game ends. When characters become wounded or depressed or are starving, they move more slowly or not at all, and, thus, the player's resources decrease. The characters' actions are placeholders for the actions they can take and the time they have to take them. The fewer effective characters, the fewer actions the player can perform and therefore the less time the player has available. Add to this that it costs time and other resources to keep slowed characters alive and eventually to return them to prime efficiency. Thus, the player must ration other resources and actions to fit within these boundaries and to get their characters to last as long as possible. Toma argues that the mechanical constraints combined with the narrative component, which we could refer to as the social-realist aspects of the game, make sure that every decision is a life-and-death decision, a very difficult one at that: "The message that the game thus sends is that life is difficult during wartime and details regarding time and resource management become [*sic*] to have a high importance for civilians, that food and safety may turn common people into killers and victims" (2015, 213). Just as I experienced in my household.

Miguel Sicart describes an ethical game as one that allows players to make their own ethical value judgments and perform in accordance with them (2009, 212–215). A game that allows players to reflect on whether their actions are ethical or not and allows them freedom of choice is considered an open ethical system. *This War of Mine* is thus an open ethical system. It will give players constant feedback, priming or instructing them to think a certain way about the choices they have made. The different characters in the game will respond differently according to how they are coded (*This War of Mine Wiki* n.d.), but their responses serve to make players reflect about ethics, with respect to how the game system is rigged. This reflection occurs because *This War of Mine* uses what Sicart calls *mirroring ethics*, meaning that the game is designed for the player to go through "an ethical experience similar to the one the game object encourages" (2009, 217). The player must experience the ethical dilemmas and conflicts of someone trying to survive a war, and no matter what choice they make or what happens, they are complicit.

Another factor that connects the player with the gameworld is empathy. Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan (2010) draw on empathy research in different disciplines to explain how games can be used to enhance a player's ability to empathize. A relevant

observation here is the idea of the mindful playing of games: for the player to be mindful and learn from a game, the game must prompt the player to empathize with the actions and characters in the game. The game's paratext informs the player that *This War of Mine* is about civilians: "In a war not everyone is a soldier." It is a subtle but apparently efficient prompt that makes the player approach this game from a different, more empathetic angle than other resource-management and war games. The player is prompted to play the game mindfully and seriously.

James Newman (2002) suggests that in playing videogames the player identifies with the gameworld rather than with the characters. In this regard, it could be argued that the player of *This War of Mine* empathizes and relates to the entire household, its fate and its chances of success, and not with the individual characters. This explains the commitment and empathy I feel as I suffer the travails of *This War of Mine* alongside the characters.

Along with a strong sense of complicity and the mirrored ethics, several other emotions are at work that make me feel for the characters and the world they inhabit: frustration, anger, sadness, panic, anxiety, and so forth—all enhanced by my personal background (on this point, see chapter 3 in this volume)—and I am tempted to say, "It all feels real to me."

Transgressive Realism

This War of Mine can easily be understood as a realist and, in particular, a social-realist game within the definitions I have discussed in this chapter. I argue that the game can be called *transgressive realist*, wherein realism is not only what is experienced as truthful but also something that can be considered a *positive negative* (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010) or transgressive experience. The term *transgressive realism* has been used as the philosophical middle position between realism and antirealism (Braver 2012, 2015), but in the context of *This War of Mine* I use it to refer to the way the game convinces players of the truthfulness and authenticity of the play experience by making them feel bad. To be so convinced requires an understanding of transgression as something that evokes discomfort. These feelings are reported in the forums for and the reviews of *This War of Mine* (Toma 2015), and they are feelings I experienced while playing the game. The sequences involving Pavle's murder of the innocent man and later of the two bandits and then Zlata's death in the brothel struck a chord in me and stuck with me until the end of the game and beyond. These feelings were strengthened by my own biography and by the game's paratext, such as YouTube trailers and reviews, informing me of how I would feel about the game (Belman and Flanagan

2010; Boudreau 2012). This emotional response is also apparent in some of the negative responses that forum users had to the game, such as anger and frustration that the game is no fun, too punishing, unplayable and therefore not a game. The anger stems from being cheated out of the expected pleasure of a war game. To put it in a different way, the player has been transgressed against, but in a different way—perhaps by being confronted not only with unwanted emotions but also with unwanted realism and realizations about war (see Julius 2002, 189).

I suggest that when *This War of Mine* makes us feel bad, through mirroring ethics, empathy, and complicity, this negative emotion also feels truthful and real because it is real. This feeling creates the impression of realism in *This War of Mine* that runs parallel with its social realism, and it allows for further reflection on the experience, on the ethics of the situation, and how the game relates to the real-world situation that we are informed it portrays (Montola 2010; Jørgensen 2014; Aldama and Lindenberger 2016). When as part of the same research project from which this anthology sprang I co-organized a live-action, role-playing game that aimed to create *positive negative* game experiences, I found that creating discomfort for the players caused the game to be experienced as more realistic, even though the discomfort was purely mechanical and physical in nature (Bjørkelo 2016). Performing the game barefoot in a cold room, the players had a constant level of discomfort that bled (Waern 2011) into all the game's activities no matter how mundane, thus making it feel more realistic.

A counterargument can easily be made that because *This War of Mine* is realistic, players are more prone to have a purely negative emotional response rather than a positive negative one. This is a valid argument that I cannot dismiss. However, as is often the case, there is most likely a dynamic between the two processes at work. Where a game that feels real may provoke discomfort, this only serves to strengthen the sense of realism. The two form a feedback loop. In any case, I believe that transgressive realism is worth further exploration, not as a separate genre but as a tool to study the overlap between transgression and realism in an aesthetic context, focusing in particular on how social realism can be a potent vehicle for creating meaningfully transgressive game experiences.

My autoethnographic walkthrough of *This War of Mine* reveals a game that has several elements of transgressive realism. It is a game that tries to force an emotional response and ethical considerations from the player. The ethical challenges and experiences in *This War of Mine*—including murder, starvation, and sex trafficking—are intended to make the player feel bad. No matter what happens, the player is complicit in the wartime tragedies that occur. The worse the player feels about them, the more real the game feels. I suggest that the same can be said about scenes in other games,

such as the self-dismemberment scene in *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), in which the player, through performing this act in a very physical QuickTime event, becomes complicit in the act to the degree that they can almost feel the pain. The discomfort of the entire scene makes it all the more poignant and realistic, and it serves as an example of what can be called transgressive realism.

Conclusion

This chapter argues for use of the term *transgressive realism* to describe the relationship between negative emotions and what is perceived as truthful and authentic—in particular, when *real* negative or painful feelings make something *feel* more truthful and real. To put it simply, if the feelings are real, what evoked them must also be real(istic). The opposite and maybe more conventional argument may also be true: that what is perceived as real evokes stronger negative emotions. Transgressive realism is a dynamic process between the two. I argue that the concept is a tool, not a genre or a genre aspect, to be used when analyzing how negative emotional response is related to realism not only in games but also in other media in general.

For instance, the movie *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993) feels real because it is a harrowing emotional experience to watch, and we can assume it has been filmed with this intention. Our knowledge of the Holocaust, the film's plot and performances, as well as the technical savvy of the director, editor, and producers amplify a feeling of discomfort that makes the film feel realistic. Games such as *This War of Mine* and *Heavy Rain* do the same. Using the concept of transgressive realism allows us to see how transgressive content and *positive negative* experiences enhance the impression of realism in a work.

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Article 2: “The *Asylum Seekers* Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism”

Co-authored with Kristine Jørgensen, and presented at Nordic Digma 2018, and published as part of the proceedings from the conference.

The Asylum Seekers Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores positive-negative experiences (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010) and transgressive realism (Bjørkelo 2019) through discomfort experienced in a live-action role-playing game about asylum seekers. *Asylsøkkjarane* (*The Asylum Seekers*) was designed to create an uncomfortable, but meaningful experience for the participants who play asylum seekers and police officers who interview them. Discomfort is created through stressful social and physical conditions which seek not to simulate, but stand in for the stress experienced in the real world process. In the debrief following the two playthroughs the players describe their discomfort and how it relates to real world issues, which we relate to the concept of play-external seriousness (Jørgensen 2014).

KEYWORDS

larp, bleed, transgressive realism, positive-negative experiences, play-external seriousness, refugees, stress

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade there has been an increasing attention towards games that seek to provide insight into human experience. The idea that interactivity, agency, and complicity can provide a more intimate insight into lived experiences than what non-interactive media can do has inspired designers of digital as well as analogue games to explore how existing and innovative game mechanics can be used to communicate psychological states, emotions, and relationships. Examples of videogames that aim for a more emotionally deep gameplay experience are *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), which involves the player in the grief and loss of two children, *Life is Strange* (Dontnod 2015), which features bullying, suicide and euthanasia, and *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013), which puts the player with the dilemmas of being a border guard in a fictive totalitarian state. Also in analogue games we see an increasing number of games that attempt to implement similar experiences, from featuring the psychological trauma of the WWI trenches in *The Grizzled* (Ruffaud and Rodriguez 2015) to *This War of Mine: The Board Game* (Oracs and Wiśniewski 2017), in which the players take the roles of civilians during wartime. In the tradition of Nordic larp there is also a trend in exploring sensitive topics, exemplified by freeform roleplaying games such as *Gang Rape* (Wrigstad 2008), featuring rape, and *Fat Man Down* (Østergaard 2009), which reflects on bullying and fat shaming, but also larps staging fictional war situations in a modern Europe such as *Kapo* (Raasted 2012), *Europa* (Gräslund 2010), and *Halat hisar* (Pettersson 2014).

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In this paper we are presenting our own work of creating a live-action role-playing game, also known as a larp, that aims for an emotional impactful game experience for the participants. Our game *Asylsøklarane* (*The Asylum Seekers*), was a short larp inspired by Nordic larp and the game *Papers, Please*. Using techniques such as physical discomfort and insufficient information, the game attempts to model the experiences of stress and uncertainty of the asylum seeking process, with focus on the interview process. We will describe the design process and discuss its ability to capture the wanted experience, based on two playthroughs, including “debriefing” interviews with the participants. As a game created in an academic context, we will discuss *Asylsøklarane* from the perspectives of Markus Montola’s description of *positive negative experiences* (2010) and Kristian A. Bjørkelo’s concept of *transgressive realism* (2019).

BACKGROUND

Asylsøklarane is a game developed in an academic context. It is part of a research project where one of the central research topics is to explore player experiences with uncomfortable game content. While most commercial games that intentionally expose players for such content only provides brief scenes or episodes of discomfort, it is challenging to do empirical research on the player’s gameplay experiences with such content. For this reason, in the project we are triangulating methods to provide a broad understanding of the subject matter. Among our most important methods are the use of gameplay journals as well as trawling game forums for unsolicited articulated emotional responses to uncomfortable game content. Developing an uncomfortable larp is another of the methods used to secure both the collection of data that actually measures discomfort, and to test some of our hypotheses about what actually creates discomfort in a gameplay context. However, important for our game design project was not to simply create an uncomfortable experience. The risk about creating discomfort in an otherwise voluntary situation, is that if the experience becomes unbearable, the participants will quit. An important consideration was to create a high sense of discomfort, but not one that would transgress the players’ sensibilities to the point that they would leave the game (Jørgensen and Mortensen 2016). With this in mind, the game is created in response to the hypothesis that players choose to endure a sense of discomfort in a context that appears *meaningful*. Meaningful here can mean that the content feels meaningful in the context of the playful situation; and that the player sees that the discomfort is integrated into the game in a way that is of obvious significance to the game either immediately or at a later point in the game (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 34-35). But meaningful can also mean that it resonates with the player on a personal level by providing new, valuable experiences or viewpoints.

In order to create uncomfortable, yet meaningful experiences in our larp, we employed what Heidi Hopeametsä (2008) and Markus Montola (2010) call *positive negative experiences*. In their research on player experiences with distressing gameplay in live-action role-playing games, they describe gameplay experiences that are intense, uncomfortable, and sometimes disturbing, yet somehow gratifying because they create new insights or experiences (Jørgensen 2014, 6-7). The idea that media content can be uncomfortable yet gratifying because of its perceived of having experiential relevance in our lives is also explored by psychologists interested in the attractions of what they call non-hedonic entertainment (Bartsch and Oliver 2011, Oliver 2008, Oliver et al 2016). Ron Tamborini and his colleagues (2010) argue that media content that creates a positive sense of discomfort is connected to basic intrinsic needs relating to personal motivations as described by self-determination theory, and in their research Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and her colleagues (2012) show that people who appreciate

uncomfortable media content tend to find such content to be relevant for reflecting on their own lives. This indicates that for uncomfortable experiences to be interpreted as something positive, the experience must be understood as meaningful for the particular person, thus creating the positive sense of discomfort.

In our game we wanted to explore a particular kind of meaningfulness: that of perceived, or experienced realism. While a game is obviously a very crude simulation that can never claim to be neither authentic or realistic, our intention was to communicate an experience that can be perceived of as reflecting aspects of realism because the emotions it create feel real. This is the essence of what Bjørkelo calls *transgressive realism* (2019). The realism we here are talking about does not concern photorealism or an authentic simulation of actual processes; instead we are talking about a form of *selective realism* (Pöttsch 2015); a form of representation in which only certain aspects of the situation represented are included and intended to communicate aspects of that situation. Like the genre of social realism in representational media, selective realism is an aesthetic form of realism, where the techniques used may be stylistic, while the experiential impact on the audience may be that the work is able to convincingly communicate a certain experience or emotion. When we describe this in terms of transgressive realism, we are highlighting the idea that a sense of realism can be communicated by transgressing the player's boundaries by forcing them to step out of their emotional comfort zone. In the design of our larp, roleplay was an important feature. While not a scientific method, it enables the player to take on the role of someone with a particular set of experiences and imagine the world from their perspective, thus receiving new insights. This is further connected to the idea of the *bleed effect* (Waern 2011), which is the idea that the empathic relationship between player and character in the context of role-play leads to an emotional overlap between the emotions of the player and the character. With insight into this effect, we wanted to utilize the bleed effect to create a positive sense of discomfort in the players.

GAME DESIGN

The game design is strongly inspired by the Nordic larp tradition, a tradition that stresses character involvement, player collaboration, and the idea of games as a medium that can foster artistic and political statements as well as being entertainment (Nordic Larp n.d). Like many other game genres, Nordic larp has a focus on the possibility for exploring unknown territory within safe boundaries, although the Nordic tradition has a particular interest in utilizing this safe space as a critical tool that can create insight and empower players to make changes in their lives or environments, thereby also offering a tool for exposing obscured structures in the real world (Stenros and Montola 2010, 25, 28). While the project also is inspired by trends in interaction design to create uncomfortable experiences (Benford et al 2013, Brown et al 2015), we did not explicitly employ game design that is intended to make the player act against their own interest, a trend which also is known as *dark game design patterns* (Zagal et al 2013).

In the design of the larp we did not use any formal methods for game or interaction design, although we treated the process with a certain rigidity in terms of creating a convincing and thought-provoking experience. We consider the game a work in progress, still, and an iterative process where we have learned and developed the game after each playthrough. We are both experienced designers of tabletop role-playing game adventures, and the first author is also a published role-playing game author. In the process of conceptualization and design, we also consulted with four experts: one facilitator and designer of role-playing games in a serious environment, an interaction

designer, a project manager at a human rights organization, and a consultant at the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration. The two first assisted us in creating interesting gameplay interaction, and the two latter assisted in the creation of character with high-fidelity backstories and with insight into the asylum-seeking process in Norway. Given more time we would have also liked to include former asylum seekers into the design process for the purpose of bringing forth their experiences. Not having had the opportunity to do so thus far represents a minor ethical issue in the design process that we would hope could be remedied in the future.

The game is staging the interview situation for newly arrived asylum seekers at a border crossing. The ideal length of the game is 3-5 hours, which includes an introductory session where characters are distributed, and the players are stripped of their belongings and prepped into the mindset that this is supposed to be an uncomfortable experience, as well as a debrief session. The game is played with 7-10 players, where 2 play government officials doing the interviews, while the rest are asylum seekers in wait for their interview. For the players taking the roles of asylum seekers, the game presents an uncomfortable meeting with an impersonal bureaucracy but it also represents the uncertainty of their situation and whether they will be allowed to stay. For the players in the roles of government officers, the game is an encounter of how to tackle desperate people on the run. The goal of the asylum seekers is to present their case in as trustworthy manner as possible so that they can have their asylum application granted. The character concepts for the asylum seekers are designed to represent different aspects of the refugee crisis, and for this reason they are from different countries, cultures and ethnicities, and fleeing for different reasons, some of which are not valid reasons for seeking asylum. Everyone is willing to go far to get into the country. There are some designed conflict in between the characters that come up naturally, while other potential conflicts depend on player interpretation and enactment. The government officials are also designed with opposite personalities and political views. One is fiercely against immigration with the intention of rejecting as many asylum seekers as possible (referred to as "Bad Cop" below), while the other is an idealist who wants to help as many as possible (referred to as "Good Cop" below). This influence the conversation and the experience of the two players. Their task is to interview each asylum seeker twice, evaluate their cases, and in the end accept the entrance of up until three individuals; the rest are to be returned to their fate. The officers are also instructed to be on the lookout for swindlers and terrorists.

The game setting is two rooms; the interrogation room and the waiting room. There is typically visual connection between the two rooms. The interrogation room will typically have three chairs and a desk, and the government officials will have access to a laptop, on which they can search for factual information about the different regions and situations from which the asylum seekers claim to come. The waiting room is cold, and only be equipped with chairs for about half the asylum seekers. There are also two game masters who stand in as guards and whose role is to make sure the games move along by performing small tasks, answering questions from the government officials, and making sure that the situation feels tense for the asylum seekers by always "being around" - pacing, hovering over the most distressed characters, and being cold, aloof and passive-aggressive.

The game features more guidelines than absolute rules. There are suggestions for scripted events or interventions that can help create drama and tension. Creating imbalance between the asylum seekers and officers, for instance by providing the asylum seekers with sparse information about their background, while allowing government officials to search for factual information on the internet, is among these. This is to create stress, but also the effect of stress, as it is, according to the people we consulted, not uncommon for refugees to get their story mixed up and suffer from

“stage fright” during these interviews forgetting the most trivial aspects of their lives. This also enhances the sense of role playing and improvisation which are corner stones of this genre of games. This is something the players draws attention to in the debrief after gameplay. Also, language is used to complicate communication between the players. The asylum seekers are only allowed to speak in a foreign language (English), while the two interviewers are allowed to speak in their native tongue (Norwegian) to each other.

Ethical Limits to Discomfort

While live action role-playing lends itself well to both emotional and physical discomfort, there were certain limits to what we could do. There were numerous elements we wanted to put into place, such as surveillance cameras and props that would have helped enhance the game experience, and the discomfort of it, but were beyond our resources. But there were more important limitations that went beyond the limits put on us by the resources available. As larp organizers we have the duty to ensure the safety of our players. We were obliged to avoid physically harming the participants, but we also have to make sure that they have a way to escape emotionally overwhelming situations. If a game becomes to psychologically stressing for any reason, a player should be able to opt out. However, as *Asylsøktjarane* was designed and organized as part of a research project, there is also the issue of research ethics to consider, which limits us even further.

The participants were all required to be 18 years or older, and signed a consent form after being informed about the project and its purpose. We stressed that the research project was not a socio-psychological experiment such as the Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney et al 1973), but a game design project testing the limits of play. It was also made clear that they could leave the game at any time without providing a reason. We still felt obligated to limit how much discomfort we could subject the players to, since a core tenet of research ethics is to subject participants to no harm or unreasonable suffering even when having informed consent (NESH 2006, 11). The positive side of this, however, is that in order to get an explicit informed consent from the participants, we are able to prime them for discomfort. From this they will come to expect discomfort, and experience it that more easily.

PLAYER EXPERIENCES

As of August 2018, we have organized two playthroughs of the game; the first time at a Norwegian game convention in October 2016 with experienced role-players of both genders (group 1), and the second time at a Norwegian youth camp in July 2017 with a group of players with mixed role-play experience, also of both genders (group 2). In the first group there were 6 men and 2 women, while the second group had 4 men and 4 women. All participants were of Norwegian origin, and signed a participant agreement that stressed the fact that the game was intentionally made to be uncomfortable, and that players could withdraw at any time. Everybody who signed the agreement completed the playthrough. As both groups consisted of eight players, not all designed characters were used in either playthrough, though this seems to have had minimal impact on the play as the conflicts between them were not compulsory to make the game work. Only two of the asylum seeker characters had previous knowledge of each other.

Playing as Asylum Seekers

The post-play debriefs revealed that the players experienced a high degree of discomfort during the playthrough. In the two groups, the players taking the roles as asylum seekers reported being stressed by the interrogation, but also by the situation in the waiting room. They were all visibly uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally. Many of them moved around a lot, never being able to relax; not only due to the situation, but also because of the intentional lack of seating and the fact that they were barefoot. In the waiting room, there were long periods of awkward silence and whispering, while players were either sitting on the cold floor or pacing around, and the players reported being torn between being entertained by the game and by the discomfort and the seriousness of the situation as the game progressed. During the debrief, the second group reflected on the experience of a discomfiting, repressed mood relating to the long waits and the insecurity about how to act and what to do in the situation of the waiting room, but feeling that they should do something. This was also described as confusing by one participant. The constant presence of the guards looming over them played into their discomfort.

The players also reported the interrogation situations as stressful, as they had to keep both their character in mind, as well as their character's cover story. In this situation they would be confronted with questions they could not know the answer to since they as players did not have the detailed knowledge that the bureaucrats were asking for, forcing them to improvise new fabrications on the spot. According to one player:

“Then in the middle of the argument you [the government officials] asked, what is your first name? And I don't think I've even been this nervous in my life. I was blank. Was this just something you came up with on the spot?”
(Group 1)

While the lack of relevant information was an obvious source of stress, this player also experienced that in the process of fabricating a good story, he had forgotten to keep attention towards basic information that indeed was available for him. When then suddenly confronted with repeating his name, and he could not remember it, this increased his stress level.

The players taking the role as asylum seekers also experienced tension with respect to the social dynamic in the group and the drama that occurred between characters. In group 2, the players commented on how the different characters influenced each other, and one of the players was so affected by another character's story that she felt it was more important for her that she could stay than herself. Though one of the players tried to manipulate the situation towards the end, the second group recognized some of the dynamics of the role-playing. They also reported discomfort related to the social interaction in between themselves. One character in particular made the other players uncomfortable with his silent and threatening demeanor. In the debrief, one player admitted, “I was pretty afraid of you. Afraid you were going to bomb something” (Group 2). Another player explained: “He was simply discomfiting, when he entered the room, and how he entered the room, all quiet” (Group 2). The player of the character in question, on the other hand, described himself as feeling superior to everyone in the room.

Certain scripted events also put the players out of their comfort zones. In the first group, there were particular tension relating to a raid where the government officials would search the waiting room for contraband and harass the applicants. Another scripted event that was reported as awkward and uncomfortable, was a call to prayer (*adhan*), which affected the asylum seeking characters, as most of them were Muslim, and one

a devoutly practicing one. At a certain point in both playthroughs, one of the game masters would play the *adhan* on his cell phone, and in both instances the players took the initiative to attempt a performance of the proscribed prayer ritual (*Salah*), even though they had no knowledge of how to perform the ritual other than through media depictions. Here the reported discomfort can be attributed the unfamiliarity of the rituals and the perceived taboo in trying to replicate them in a game context, and thus both being socially out of place and potentially performing an act of disrespect. This intervention is one of several options we could chose to include or not in the playthroughs, as there are ethical dimensions to provoking players to perform an unknown religious ritual, but in both circumstances the context and knowledge of who the players were made it seem like a reasonable call. However, there is little doubt that this event in other circumstances could be interpreted and experienced not just a playful transgression, but as an actual, profound transgression (Jørgensen and Mortensen 2016). However, for the sake of understanding the boundaries of what can be tackled in a gameplay context, we were willing to explore this even though this may stir some controversy both among researchers and larp designers.

Playing as Government Officials

Whereas the experience of playing an asylum seeker were dominated by waiting and the occasional socializing with other asylum seekers, interrupted by uncomfortable and stressful interviews, the players taking the role of government officials were kept busy and stressed at all times. According to the player taking the role as “Bad Cop” in group 1:

“It would have been more uncomfortable for us too, if the game had lasted longer. You get so tired after a while that you can’t process the information. The longer it lasts, the worse we would be at our job” (Bad Cop 1).

The experience is reflected by the player taking the role as “Good Cop” in the same group, who started feeling the effects already during the first round of interviews. The experience also prompted “Bad Cop” in group 1 to reflect on the position of those who do this in the real world as part of their job:

“It must be really confusing for those work with this. It was very confusing for me, at least, to process all this information, and constantly looking for lies. It was exhausting, and really hard” (Bad Cop 1).

The players playing government officials also experienced confusion and stress as they felt their character positions shift toward the opposite perspective. In both playthroughs the players who played the interviewers felt a sense of realignment during play. In particular the “Good Cops” in both groups 1 felt that their sympathies with the asylum seekers started fading, because of the fact that the game objective forced them to make a choice and accept no more than three asylum seekers. In the words of one of them: “They started to become more names on a paper, and not real persons” (Good Cop 1). The second “Good Cop” were even stronger affected as she felt “psychologically influenced” by the Bad Cop, and felt that everyone was lying and that she had to expose them. Further, for this player the sense of realignment ran completely counter to her actual personality, as she considered herself a liberal and tolerant person:

“The further into the role-playing we got, I noticed that I only got pissed off by listening to you. All of you talking about how much you would like to stay here, and all I could think was ‘assholes, assholes, assholes, assholes’”(Good Cop 2).

Not just the “Good Cops” experienced a realignment of positions. One of players taking the role as “Bad Cops” reported started feeling empathy with the applicants, thus moving closer to the position of the “good cop”: “I felt our roles were reversed” (Bad Cop 2). It appears that the bleed effect (Waern 2011) that otherwise would blend together the emotions of the player and the character operates in a different way here. Although the players report a realignment or reversal of roles, this does not mean that there is no bleed effect. Instead, this may instead be explained as an alienation process, where the players distance themselves from the human aspect of the situation as a coping strategy because they know they are required to treat the asylum seekers objectively and without the bias that emotion may add.

A similar kind of alienation strategy on part of the player can also be identified in the different situation. Over time, “Good Cop 1” felt that there was a shift from discomfort to the routine in the interview process. This sensation that what first appears uncomfortable may become dull or boring when overexposed is in psychology known as desensitization. While psychology and media studies have discussed whether desensitization to media violence can be attributed to a higher tolerance towards violence in media and beyond (Gentile 2003, Ramos et al 2013, Bennerstedt et al 2011), in this game desensitization appears instead as a coping strategy to be able to endure an emotionally distressing situation, not unlike real-life bureaucratic processing of asylum applications.

Through both debriefs the players reflected on the emotional impact or influence of the game, as well as the realism. Good Cop 1 anguished over how he was supposed to interview a traumatized youth, and this is a sense of discomfort that makes the experience more real for the participants, and it ties the game world experience to a real-world seriousness (Jørgensen 2014). The connection between this discomfort and the experience of realism was mostly left unspoken by the players during the debriefing, but both were an issue they returned to. And their visible discomfort and engagement with the game fiction was evident through the play session, and seemed to stay with them for the debrief as they started to relax and reflect. This is particularly true with the older more experienced role-players of Group 1.

Asylsøklarane as a Game Experience

When designing this to be an uncomfortable game, we also intentionally included specific ludic aspects. We wanted the larp to be a system that could somehow be “gamed” and that would have certain win and lose conditions. The fact that some asylum seekers would be granted asylum and other not were one; another was the fact that only three could be accepted. By including these we hoped to inspire competitive and ludic interaction between the players. Or in other words: we attempted to design for what Anders Frank has called *gamer mode*; a mindset where players approach the game as something that can be mastered and won, and where the player focuses on the game’s rules while ignoring its fictional representation (Frank 2012). While the players in our study remained in character and thus did not ignore the fictional setting, some put a clear focus on the competitive aspects of the game. In both groups, certain players in the role of asylum seekers started to gather information about other players to use as bargaining chip in the interrogation room. Others considered their options to outmaneuver the other players: “We were cooperating to play the others out. And when we learned that there would be only two people accepted I did everything to get him on my side” (Group 1). One of the players who played a police officer expressed surprise that they saw little of this: “None of you seemed to be trying to influence us!” (Group 2).

While the groups were eager to point out different uncomfortable aspects of the game, they also highlighted aspects that made the game interesting to play. As a player in the first group put it:

“It was exciting how the dynamics developed, and it was a very special experience. Very educational. And I realized how little I knew about the geography of Syria, which you asked me about” (Group 1).

Despite of the discomfort of the game, the peculiarity of the experience made it into a memorable and for this player also an educational experience. While this player points out that they realized the limitations of their own knowledge, other players stressed that the game provided a valuable glimpse into the conflicts between bureaucracy and empathy in the asylum-seeking process, and also into the fact that being an asylum seeker is a traumatic and distressing situation.

Further, the fact that this insight was connected to a game experience also had an impact upon the situation. Both groups commented on how, in spite of the discomfort and seriousness of the game setting, there was room for laughter and fun. “I didn’t expect to laugh during this larp, but we did. It was really fun” (Group 1), explained one player. Another pressured herself not to smile or laugh: “I wanted to laugh more than I was allowed” (Group 2). This speaks to a tenuous relationship between play and the world around the play situation and the fact that the play situation contributes to a certain framing (Goffman 1974) of the discomfort that the players experience. In the frame of play and games, players can go out of their comfort zone but still explore unfamiliar experiences safely.

CONCLUSIONS

The insights from the players show us that there is still room for improvement for the game. There are indeed additional techniques that can be employed in order to intensify their situation. However, it is also clear that the players found the experience as it is engaging and meaningful. We have discussed them in terms of positive negative experiences (Hopeametsä 2008, Montola 2010), where the players in hindsight consider their experiences in a positive light, even though they were stressful or discomforting. In signing up for games like *Asylsøkjarene* and more extreme games such as *Gang Rape* (2008) and *Fat Man Down* (2009), the players knowingly subject themselves to difficult or distressing situation, with the possible aim of having a meaningful and maybe learning experience. While guidelines for ethical research kept *Asylsøkjarene* from an *extreme* larp experience (Montola 2010), it was uncomfortable for players in the roles of asylum seekers and government officials alike. And this allowed for the game to be a positive experience, or “fun” and “interesting” as it was referred to in the debriefs.

In *Asylsøkjarene*, the negative experience is informed by the players’ knowledge of real-world situations and processes surrounding the refugee crisis and Islamic terrorism. But it is also enhanced by the lack of information and awareness, which is brought out by the interview process, where this lack of information represents and enhances the stress felt by those seeking asylum. We do not claim to have been able to create a realistic or authentic simulation, but we have created a gameplay situation of emotional and physical stress, which hints at the difficult situation that the characters are in and which provides a cue for reflection for the players. Asylum seekers do not actually come barefoot to the asylum interview, but the stress and discomfort created by this simple mechanic makes the players restless and uncertain, and adds a new

emotional dimension to the gameplay by way of the bleed effect that creates an emotional bond between the player and their character in situations of role-play. As the players relate their game experience to the real world situation of the refugee crisis, we can talk of it as play-external seriousness (Jørgensen 2014), where the play activity somehow reflects serious issues in the real world. This is reflected in the players' discussions of how actual asylum interviews must feel to applicants and those who conduct them, of how a child soldier with PTSD can experience the stress of being an asylum seeker, and so on. Likewise we can see how this increases the discomfort of the situation, and that it *feels real* to them. Not just because the gameplay is informed by how they imagine things are in the real world, but because the discomfort that they feel *is* real; and because it reflects an uncomfortable truth. This indicates an experience of transgressive realism (Bjorkelo 2019), where the feelings of discomfort and stress make something feel more real or realistic.

In the end, *Asylsökjarane* proves to be an interesting play experience that would be well served with further development and play, using the feedback from the players to create a game that creates an experience of positive discomfort and transgressive realism.

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Article 3: ““Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic”:
White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*”

This paper explores White Nationalist interpretations of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Games Studios 2011), published in *Game Studies*, volume 20 issue 3.

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"Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic": White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

by Kristian A. Bjørkelo

Abstract

This paper explores White Nationalist interpretations of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) through the concepts of *encoding-decoding* (Hall 1973) and *affordances* (Gibson 1977), using the White Nationalist forum Stormfront as case. The paper shows how *Skyrim* has become a cherished game by the forum's community as forum users find themselves represented by the Stormcloak rebellion fighting against the multiculturalism of the Septim Empire and a free "Skyrim for the Nords". On Stormfront the forum users discuss how their nationalist struggle in the real world resembles that of the fictional Stormcloaks, and how the issues they believe they face in society are mirrored in the struggles in *Skyrim*. In particular they find the racial and ethnic tensions in the game world parallel to their own ideology of conflict. The article explores the fluidity of traditional schemes of decoding texts, as the players on Stormfront debate the intentions and positions of the game developers, while the open world nature of the game may encourage their preferred, racialized interpretations.

Keywords: *Skyrim*, White Nationalism, White Supremacy, Racism, Affordances, Encoding-Decoding, Open World, RPG, Forum study, Stormfront, antisemitism

Introduction

On the gaming subforum of the White Nationalist website Stormfront members of the community discuss the games they love, hate, and that reflect their worldview. These discussions show a perspective on games and gaming culture that is influenced by White Nationalist ideas of racialized power structures, and which can form pockets of resistance against what they consider oppression of themselves. One of the games that has garnered most attention on the forum is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011). *Skyrim* remains a popular game years after its release. This can be attributed to the game being an open world sandbox with virtually endless possibilities for modification and individual stories to be told. There's also the possibility of political, and even controversial, readings of the world of *Skyrim* and its stories. This article attempts to show how *Skyrim* is interpreted as a political game by White Nationalists. How do they play *Skyrim*? How do they justify the game from their political perspective? Using the concepts of encoding and decoding (Hall 1973) and affordances (Gibson 1977), I will shed light on this subject in this article.

Background

The article is born out of an increased interest in how games and gaming culture can fit into this political spectrum. The conflict sparked by #Gamergate and the ensuing discussions showed that games and gaming culture are not exempt from being considered political (Mortensen 2016, Massanari 2015). And while #Gamergate was a

flashpoint of contemporary interest in games and politics, it is far from a new subject. Whether we are talking overtly propagandic games such as *Special Force* (Hezbollah 2003) or *America's Army* (United States Army 2002), or games dealing with explicitly moral and political topics such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014), *Bioshock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia 2007) or *SpecOps: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), games have always dealt with the political, and the discourse about games is political. There are also several examples of games made by White Nationalists for the consumption by White Nationalists (Selepak: 2010), and some have argued that games and gaming culture, alongside the Internet, are contributing parts of the racial, and racist, discourse, especially in the United States (Daniels 2012, Daniels and LaLune 2012, Hawley 2017).

When dealing with racism, White Supremacy and the extreme right, game studies have mostly focused on games as text and purveyors of racism. Such is the case with David Leonard's articles (2003, 2006, 2009) on *Grand Theft Auto* arguing that the series provides presumed white players with an opportunity for Ghetto Tourism and that the series promotes White Supremacy and reinforce state authority and violence against minorities. Others, such as Andrew Selepak: (2010) have focused on racist games and mods that are produced, distributed and, we assume, enjoyed by White Nationalists. Jessie Daniels and Nick LaLone (2012) compare the games made by and for the far right with mainstream games and media expressions, in the context of online culture. The argument is that games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2015) or *Saint's Row* (Volition 2006) portray race in ways that lend themselves to racist interpretations, even when with comedic or satiric intent. They "are a primarily white interpretation of African American culture for white people to play" (Daniels and LaLune 2012, 13). These analyses are paralleled by studies of representation and racism in online games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) with its background in primarily European, and thus white, fantasy (Higgin 2009, Ritter 2010). What all these have in common, is their focus on textual analysis of games, and with few exceptions exclude the interpretations by the target audience themselves, whether the game is made by the extreme right or are mainstream titles. Contrary to this approach, the main concern of this article is how *Skyrim* is interpreted by White Nationalist players. To be able to respond to White Nationalist discourses, it is important that we understand how self-described White Nationalists relate to, interpret and appropriate mainstream popular culture. In his analysis of a fascist interpretation of the *Judge Dredd* comic books (Barker 1997), Martin Barker shows how a fan finds justification and affirmation of his self-ascribed fascism in the comic books, in spite of the fact that it can more easily be read as anti-authoritarian and anti-fascist satire. While the Judge Dredd character is presented as a rabid authoritarian serving as judge, jury and executioner in a dystopian police state, Barker's informant sees of the work as a strong man and a strong society dishing out justice to those who transgress, reaffirming his belief in just and efficient fascism. Likewise, as this paper shows, White Nationalists can and will interpret a game in light of their own beliefs, depending on how easily the game affords this interpretation.

What meaning does White Nationalists make out of *Skyrim*? This paper parallels Richard King and David Leonard's (2014) analysis of Stormfront users' relationship to gaming and its racial aspects, finding that they enjoy playing empowered white people and narratives that reinforce their worldview. Like this article, King and Leonard's analysis is based on Stormfront users' own postings about the game, providing insights into the White Nationalist movement and how they consume popular culture. This gives a valuable insight into how players will interpret a game and its affordances differently, contingent on their life world, ideology, past experiences and current situations. The strength of both these approaches is its focus on player experiences with games, is that they provide much of the nuances in available interpretations, that may be missed in a primarily textual analysis. This paper aims to catch some of these same nuances.

Alongside Barker (1997) and King & Leonard (2014), this paper demonstrates that creators of media products have little control over

who uses their product, and why, or how they perceive the product. Stuart Hall (1973) proposed an influential model of encoding and decoding media content, where the audience could decode from three different positions. Adrienne Shaw (2017) has shown how well this intersects and merges with James Gibson's (1977) concept of how technology *affords* different uses. Important for both these approaches is that interpretation and uses of media products are *negotiated*; they are not determined by the producer. The cultural studies tradition of Hall has always focused on the power dynamics involved in encoding and decoding, putting the audience in the position of the decoder whose power derives from producing meaning and interpretation. Nowhere is the political aspects of popular culture and its reading more apparent than in the political fringe, where truly everything is political. Such is the case with the White Nationalists on *Stormfront*, where they often discuss current events and popular entertainment. In this article I conduct a textual and discourse analysis of how they discuss *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), and the ethnic conflicts and representations in that game through the lens of White Nationalist ideology.

White Nationalism

White Nationalist (WN) is a blanket term for the ideology of groups and people who support either White Supremacy or White Segregationism (SPLC 2018, Zeskind 2009). This is usually coupled with racism and antisemitism; there are exceptions, but the term is often used to disguise racism and Nazism as a more benevolent and marketable nationalism or right-wing identity politics. The term covers groups like Ku-Klux Klan, different Nazi orientations and more. White Nationalism springs out of a particular American context, where skin colour stands in for race and ethnicity, and has later spread to other parts of the world. White Nationalism is a fluid term encompassing much of the racist far right, now also referred to as the somewhat less incendiary alt right (Hawley 2017, Swain 2002, SPLC 2018). The Storm front community refers to themselves as White Nationalists, and I will maintain this moniker in this article.

It is a common stance among White Nationalists on Stormfront that the term "racist" is used to persecute those who want their people and nation to be free of "outside influence". They will say that they don't hate other people; they only love their own. In this perspective, they are not on a mission to oppress or exterminate other races, but to liberate the "white race", and prevent its extermination at the hands of the Jews and other forces moving in on their nations. The Jews are in a particular position in this ideology, and antisemitism is a particular form of racism that has been an important part of extremist ideologies. Antisemitism predates the rise of fascism and nationalism, and posits that Jews are an insidious force that conspire to undermine the societies that allow them to settle (Cohn 1967). Antisemitism portrays Jews as both perverted subhumans and as powerful and intelligent manipulators. The classic example of this being *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated work that lays the blame for virtually everything on the Jews. Despite having been discredited time and time again, the *Protocols* are still used as an argument by anti-Semites today (Cohn 1967). In White Nationalist circles one finds the term ZOG, or Zionist Occupation Government, that expresses much of the same idea: That Jews are the ones that are really in control. They will point out members of the media and corporations that are Jewish, to prove their power and influence. In this worldview, there is nothing more insidious and dangerous than the Jews. Whatever bad happens in the world, the Jews are involved (Berlet 2004). ZOG and their control of mainstream media discourse is important, because it hides the "truth" from people, and it is a common belief among White Nationalists on Stormfront that the truth is hidden from most people, that anyone would be a White Nationalist if they only knew the truth. According to White Nationalists, "ordinary people" need an ontological shock to see through the conspiracies and lies, to understand what is good for them. This is a recurring theme on Storm front and it also becomes a part of the White Nationalist discourse on *Skyrim*.

The White Nationalist movement appears to have had an upsurge in the 2010s, and perhaps culminating in the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017 (ADL 2019), but even though there has been strong backlash to this, parts of the movement seems emboldened. And as modern White Nationalism seems intrinsically tied to the web, so is gaming culture, and we could see the two intermingle during #GamerGate. And in 2019, Branton Tarrant used gaming references as part of his anti-muslim terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand (Björkelo 2019).

Skyrim: Land of the Nords

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is currently the latest single player computer role playing game in the very popular Elder Scrolls series. With some exceptions, *The Elder Scrolls* is a series of first-person role playing games set in a fantasy world, in which one creates a player character (PC) from one of several available cultures or races, such as the cat-like Khajit, the reptilian Argonians, Orcs, and different elven and human nationalities. They all have their special traits and abilities, and the world's different cultures are filled with prejudices between the different groups. The PC travels through an open world, and the player can choose to follow the main questline, or go off the rail and do side quests and explore the world as they see fit, developing the PC's skills as a crafter, warrior, rogue, mage, and more. In these explorations the PC will encounter thousands of monsters and non-player characters (NPC) in a simulation of a living world. The game even allows the PC making a living being a crafter or trader, get married and set up a home themselves.

The *Elder Scrolls* games are filled with several lines of conflicts; religious, political and ethno-nationalist. The different groups have long histories of conflicts and fertile ground for hate and prejudice. These ethno-nationalist tensions come to the fore in *Skyrim*, where a group of nationalists called Stormcloaks seek independence from the Empire and the freedom to worship their old Gods.

The people of *Skyrim* are humans called Nords; they are tall, muscular, with blonde hair and blue eyes, and Scandinavian sounding names, like Ragnar, Thorald, Sissel, Sigrid, and so on. Their architecture is reminiscent of the historical Norse building style, and they are an honour-based society that value strength and steel. Everything is designed to represent Viking culture. The central plot revolves around the return of dragons and the Stormcloak rebellion against the Imperials. The player must defeat several dragons to progress the plot. The player can choose to ignore the rebellion, or join forces with either the cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Empire or the nationalist and xenophobic Stormcloaks.

It is not a far reach for the White Nationalists to identify themselves with the Stormcloaks and the Nords, or their struggle against the Septim Empire -- a multicultural institution, that unite people of all races and creeds. This struggle is referenced in several places in the game, such as the *Age of Oppression*, song by Stormcloak friendly bards in the game (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, a). The song salutes Ulfric, the leader of the Stormcloaks, promising the imminent end of Imperial occupation. The words of the song like "With our blood and our steel we'll take back our home", is reminiscent of the Nationalist Socialist rhetoric of *Blut und Boden*, blood and soil, so popular among White Nationalists. The counter version to this, *Age of Aggression* heralds the death of Ulfric (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, b), and is song by those friendly to the Empire.

The land of *Skyrim* is portrayed as a contested space, as the Stormcloak rebellion and the ethnic conflict is frequently referenced and pressed upon the player by the NPCs in the game. Several dialogue trees and quests reference the conflict, and the roots of the conflict are ever present in the game's lore as found in books and conversations. It becomes the inescapable backdrop of the game, no matter how the player intends to play the game. The Nords are portrayed as a fiercely independent and traditionalist "race" of humans who appreciates strength and staying true to the Old Ways; they have grown to resent the rule of the Septim Empire and its laws repressing the traditions of the Nords. These rules have been imposed

upon the Empire after losing a war against the non-Elven alliance called the third Aldmeri Dominion, spearheaded by the shadowy Elven sect, Thalmor. This situation only makes the Nords resent the Aldmeri presence in Skyrim that much more, and the Thalmor becomes an easy enemy to make in the game.

This lore is visible in several quest lines involving the Nords, as well as the Stormcloak rebellion, and they appear designed to create sympathy for the Nord underdog and their struggle, but at the same time the Nord ethno-chauvinism and even racism are also clearly represented in these same quests and dialogue trees. As is the convention of open world role-playing games, it is left to the players how they wish to relate to the conflict; join the racist Nords or the oppressive Empire and the shadowy Thalmor, or choose to ignore or fight either side.

The game design not only allows the player to pursue a racist or ethno-nationalist agenda, it is even possible to argue that the player is pushed in that direction by the game. The player's sympathy for the freedom fighting Stormcloaks is primed already in the game's opening sequence when the PC is to be executed by the antagonistic Empire. The choice to follow the Stormcloaks once the execution is thwarted by a rampaging dragon seems the obvious choice, and the player is given directions to meet up with a Stormcloak contact. If the player instead decides to follow the Imperial questline at the beginning of the game they soon find themselves into higher level territory that is more dangerous and obviously not meant for low level players. The Stormcloaks, on the other hand, can be found in low level areas of the game, where the player is more capable of dealing with the encounters early on. This way the design pushes the player towards the Stormcloaks.

Although certain parts of the questline appear to invite the player to take sides with the Stormcloaks, other aspects of the game do not support a particular bias. As an open world game, the player can pursue their chosen goals and motivations, but the game design does not recognize the player's motivation for their actions. For instance, when the player decides to carry out criminal actions such as going on a killing spree, *Skyrim* does not discriminate between whether this killing spree is ethnically motivated or not. The consequence is the same as with any other illegal action -- a bounty, a fine or even jail time. This repercussion is dependent on the player being observed -- killing someone in the woods with no witnesses has little consequence. The game doesn't reward these actions, other than through increased experience points and loot; rather the game punishes such actions. While the game on a representative level is all about ethnic tensions, the simulation is "colour blind" and does not respond differently if the player exclusively kills characters of a certain race or faction. These racial and ethnic tensions are mainly found on the representational level, and not on the level of gameplay. In simpler terms, the game's simulation allows for killing everyone without discrimination, regardless of skin colour.

Authorial intent

We cannot say for certain what the creative team intended their message to be, but as a mainstream game marketed towards a broad audience and released by a major publisher,

we can be fairly certain that they did not intend for the game to be a White Nationalist propaganda tool. In 2017 Bethesda came under criticism on social media (Baker 2018a, 2018b) for their use of anti-Nazi slogans in promoting the latest instalment of *Wolfenstein*, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (MachineGames 2017) which they were the publishers of. In an interview with Game Industry, Pete Hines, VP of PR and Marketing, was adamant that the company was against Nazis:

"[...] We aren't going to shy away from what the game is about. We don't feel it's a reach for us to say Nazis are bad and un-American, and we're not worried about being on the right side of history here" (Hines in Batchelor 2017).

But he also insisted that the games they make are not consciously intended to comment current politics:

"[...] Bethesda doesn't develop games to make specific statements or incite political discussions. We make games that we think are fun, meaningful, and immersive for a mature audience" (Hines in Batchelor 2017).

As an open world role-playing game, *Skyrim* belongs to a genre that fosters the idea that a game should allow the player to explore any moral, as well as political, position within the game. This is one of the factors that makes discussion of the designers' intent difficult, or even a debatable point. *Skyrim* is a sandbox game, where players make their own meaning out of the game. But for some Stormfront users interested in what they believe is the "true" message of the game, the intentions of the designers and publishers become important. For this analysis, however, the assumed authorial intent serves as an anchor for positioning interpretations of the game.

Stormfront: Land of the White Nationalists

The Stormfront website originated in 1996, after having started as a bulletin-board system (BBS). Stormfront has had many functions and sub-pages over the years, but the core of it has always been a gathering place and resource for the extreme right wing, not just in the US, but the world (Bjørkelo 2012). Stormfront is not only a famous White Nationalist site with thousands of users, it is also open for all to see and read, and even has a section devoted to allow non-members to interact with the users and ask questions about the site and White Nationalism. The site has thousands of users every day. And is easily the largest and longest living discussion board for White Nationalists and the extreme right on the web (Daniels 2008, Daniels 2009, Bjørkelo 2012), and includes sub boards for different topics, such as gaming. Some of these subforums can arguably be considered communities in and by themselves in particular those dedicated to geographical areas (De Koster & Houtman 2008). Parts of Stormfront have been under academic scrutiny, like the Women's subforum (Castle & Chevalier 2011), and the gaming discussions were sourced by Richard King and David Leonard (2014).

Stormfront is headlined with a simple introduction, and links to a four part thread to introduce readers to Stormfront and "Pro White Nationalism", and this is mostly about the latter, and the Jews -- whom they blame for their predicaments. The variety of topics discussed in the open forums on Stormfront are pretty varied, from the "trivial" such as food, music and games, to the personal such as relationships and life experiences, and of course politics and current events, all analysed from the racialized perspective of a White Nationalist.

Discussions tend to boil down to how to be a "good white man" (and sometimes woman) and how a situation illustrates the problems of Jews, race mixing or multi-culturalism, or how White Nationalism is a solution. White Nationalism is a perspective to see the world through, and a tool for fixing it. The users of Stormfront tend to shy away from the most blatant racist terms and incitement to violence, but it is always there under a very thin veneer of respectable discourse.

The gaming sub section of Stormfront is active, but the activity is infrequent. A normal month will see about 4 or 5 new game-related threads, many of these will have only a couple or no comments, while others will have between 20 and 50 replies, some more -- such as those about popular games deemed relevant -- such as *Skyrim*. The discussions here cover a variety of games that are not particularly political or biased by White Nationalism. The gaming subforum is headlined with instructions that in order to post, the poster must sharpen their wits and perform 50 sit-ups and 20 push ups a day. This rule, if a bit tongue in cheek, cements stereotypes that the White Nationalist is a warrior in top physical condition, who does not engage in trivial activities such as play and games. This is how the forum users would like to see themselves. They predominantly play the same AAA games that "everyone else" plays, as there are very few made by and for White Nationalists, in spite of the increasing ease in

making simple games today. The classics of White Nationalist gaming are *Zog's Nightmare* (Ramm 2006) and *Ethnic Cleansing* (National Alliance 2002) and their sequels, and the more recent *Muslim Massacre* (Vaughn 2008), are discussed but not with frequency or activity level as *Skyrim* and other mainstream games.

On the Stormfront gaming subforum, the "what are you playing" thread is frequently bumped and has been going since 2012. Like with most of the threads, Stormfront game discussions are remarkably similar to discussions about games on other boards -- until references to race relations or European heritage are intermingled with the discussion. Users complain about non-white protagonists in games, while other games are lauded because the protagonist is white and shows some important part of white history or culture. Sometimes forum users discuss whether or not the producers are Jewish or Muslim. Some threads ask the simple question: Can a White Nationalist play this game in good conscience? The atmosphere of Stormfront's gaming subforum can be summed up in King and Leonard's words;

"As with other forms of popular culture, white nationalist consumption is rife with ambivalence and even disdain for what are seen as harmful influences. That is, mainstream games, those that reflect the values of a multicultural and morally corrupt America, have turned whites into zombies." (King and Leonard 2016, p. 112)

The main thread about *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* on the Stormfront discussion board has more than 720 individual posts discussing the game. Additionally there are a dozen separate threads that discuss the game and the parallels between the game and the real world, as well as several mentions of the game in threads about other games -- such as *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012) and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008). Characteristic for discussions of *Skyrim* on Stormfront's gaming subforum is the idea that the game might help open people's eyes to the "truth" of White Nationalism. There is a question of whether or not the game can be used for propaganda or recruitment. The game, as certain forum users see it, allows for people to ask the right questions about nationalism, because of the struggle of the Nords, *Skyrim's* white Nordic people. It's a short step, according to one user, for anyone who "isn't an idiot", to start thinking in terms of the Nords protecting their homeland from invaders and outside influence, and then to think that this might be true for white people too. Stating that if the Nords can rally for the nation's freedom, why can't they do so in the real world? And while we cannot say that the game itself initiates these thoughts in those who are not already adherents to this vein of thinking, it is however something that can fuel the arguments of the White Nationalists who are trying to convince others.

Seeing how White Nationalists express justifications for playing different mainstream games, recommending them to each other and discuss the game's merits and flaws in light of their political positions on the Stormfront forum made me ponder how White Nationalist players decode games, and what position they take to mainstream media, and what affordances modern games provide White Nationalist players. In particular a popular game like *Skyrim*, with millions of players around the world, featuring a grand open, single player, fantasy world with an ethnically diverse cast of characters.

Data collection

For the research presented in this article, I searched for all mentions of *Skyrim* on the Stormfront website, which I gathered in a database coded according to the subject matter. For context I added posts from other forums where *Stormfront's* relationship to *Skyrim* has been discussed. This added up to 126 separate facsimiles of web pages in the database which formed the basis of my analysis.

The data collecting process reveals some of the ethical dilemmas involved in using online archives that date back in time, where data is publicly available, but informed consent is difficult or impossible to obtain, and the material is politically sensitive. The safest option,

unfortunately, is to *not* do the research or collect the data, or, as some have suggested, to anonymize and paraphrase to the extent of fabricating the data (Lüders 2015) to keep it ethically sound. I find the latter very problematic for reasons relating to research validity and reliability, but it is currently the standard approach of the national guidelines of research ethics in my country of employment (NESH 2014, 2018; NSD.no). Arguably, the pseudonymity of Stormfront forum use provides enough anonymity for its users, which theoretically enables far right extremists to speak more uninhibited (Carter and Kondor 2020), but pseudonymity is not equal to anonymity, and text on open forums are easily searched and found through search engines. I have also taken extra steps to ensure the anonymity and privacy of the specific users. The topic of White Nationalism is sensitive, and protecting the anonymity and privacy of the communities investigated is important, due to the potential of harm being done to any user identified (Carter and Kondor 2020); social, mental and physical.

While the identity of the forum is relevant, I have removed the user names and other identifying information, and have paraphrased comments in situations where they could be identified through a simple forum search. This is complicated, as it requires the paraphrasing or re-writing of violent, racist and antisemitic content, with the possibility that some of the meaning might get lost in the process. By anonymizing the individual participants in the discussion, but not the forum, I have chosen a more moderate path than national ethics guidelines require, arguing that the forum is a public space and the discussion of academic and public interest. I am aware that this approach does not make it impossible for someone to track down the specific discussions used, but I also believe that being open about sources is important, and allows for counter arguments to be made. Stormfront isn't just technically public; it seeks public attention in order to recruit, and has thousands of visitors every day both registered or not. And while this does not automatically available for free use by researchers, there is the additional consideration of the public good and interest. I believe that it is in the public interest to know about the activities on Stormfront to further our understanding and knowledge about the extreme right.

Encoding and Decoding of *Skyrim*

Central to Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding is the idea that the interpretation — or decoding — of a message is not determined by the message and its origin alone, but by the specific context, knowledge, and perspectives of those on the receiving end. Encoding-decoding is according to Hall a complex process, where the dominant-hegemonic or preferred message is shaped by the cultural context and situation of the sender, and the receiver's interpretation of the message is equally shaped by cultural context and situation of the receiver (1973). Hall suggested three positions for decoding a text, and these positions have become "academic canon": the dominant position that follows the "preferred meaning" of the sender; the negotiated position which "acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground-rules, it operates with 'exceptions' to the rule" (Hall 1973, 17); finally, the oppositional position, where the message is decoded in a counter-hegemonic way opposite of the "preferred" or dominant position of the often corporate sender. These are far from rigid categories, and Hall understood them as suggested categories (Hall 1973), and any one person could, and probably does, shift between different modes of reading, depending on context and useful in the current situation. This fluidity of positioning towards the text is very visible in Stormfront's reading of *Skyrim*, and makes a rigid categorization difficult, if not impossible. It does however allow us to see how the Stormfront community appropriates the game for themselves, and acquires a sense of power over its message.

There's a power difference between the sender and the receiver that can be negotiated by how the receiver decodes it. Hall's model is one that empowers the audience, showing their ability to negotiate or even oppose hegemonic ideas and messages, and to adapt cultural

and media product to their own needs. And when the Stormfront community discusses *Skyrim* they do so in a way that favours their White Nationalist worldview. The Stormfront community decodes the play within their own cultural context, and within the framework of White Nationalism, but this process is not arbitrary. The decoding is always influenced by how the message was encoded, and not just the political and cultural context of that process, but also the technological context. Being an open-world role-playing game, *Skyrim* is bound by the genre conventions to allow the players freedom to roam and interact with the game world. The design itself is therefore intended to give the players freedom to interpret the world, as the Stormfront community has done. We can speak of this in terms of the game's *affordances*.

The Affordances of *Skyrim*

James Gibson (1977) introduced the concept of affordances as an important part of how we perceive objects and the world. Affordances are the properties of an object that allows us to interact with them. As such they can be understood as action possibilities or a set of potentials relating to what the object can be used for or mean for the people observing it. As psychologist and interaction researcher Donald Norman specifies, an affordance is something that happens in between the object and the user, and it is the aspects of both of these that make up the affordances (Norman 1988). This can be transferred to videogames, allowing us to think about what a game allows us to do, but also what meanings a game allows us to take from it and our actions within the game world. In its strictest sense, we speak of affordances in games as what aspects of the game are available for us to manipulate -- such as walls to climb or blow up, flowers or gear to pick up (Jørgensen 2013, 81-84), but we can also speak of it in a broader sense as game are texts that invite possible actions. As game scholar Adrienne Shaw points out, games are interactive technologies and we can use the concept of affordances to understand what "actions these texts invite and how players actually use them" (Shaw 2017, 597). She proposes a model that focuses on "the encoding/decoding of designed affordances to better account for power, resistance, and interactivity in digital media environments" (Shaw 2017, 593).

An open-world role-playing game can be described as a game that contains a vast multitude of possible actions (Majevski 2018). Such games are often valued on how much freedom they allow, and how many different actions you can engage in. As the player explores the world of *Skyrim*, they build the skills that they use the most, whether the player is oriented towards fighting with a variety of weapon types, magic of different types or crafting different useful objects. The player can even make a decent living working in a lumber mill. These are some of the many affordances of *Skyrim*; and by extension a player may interpret the games in the light of that activity being important to them.

In neither Hall's encoding-decoding model nor Norman's theory of affordances are the interpretations determined by the sender, but this does not mean that they are arbitrary. The interpretations and affordances are made available to the audience and user within the boundaries set up by design and the cultural hegemony. The user is free to play and interpret, restricted only by the object itself. When Stormfront forum users find a sense of belonging to the nationalist Stormcloak rebellion, this is because of the affordances in the game design. The Stormcloaks are designed not only to be ethnocentric, white, blonde nationalists, which is an ideal to real world White Nationalists playing the game, but also to act like their ideal White Nationalist warrior that discriminates and even commits acts of violence for their cause. Thus, the game world presents situations that allow for the interpretation that the Stormcloaks are like *themselves*. When the player chooses a side in the conflict, and starts acting for that side, the opposing factor becomes hostile and will attack the player character. The design allows the player to take sides in the conflict through their chosen actions. While the intention of this design can be called into question, this is secondary for the analysis, because what matters here is the interpretation by the players as they are the

chief negotiators of the game's meaning, and those who make use of its affordances. A game that allows the players to choose sides in an escalating national and ethnic conflict, creates affordances for different political actions and interpretations. This includes actions that are not necessarily intended or thought of by the designer. Such actions can in Hall's terms be considered an oppositional position or decoding; or in terms of affordances an *imagined affordance* (Shaw 2017). Imagined affordances are possible uses imagined by the user, but not intended by the designer (Nagy & Neff 2015, 5).

Although affordances are concerned with what a game allows the player to do in terms of gameplay, this is also closely related to how gameplay is represented. In *Skyrim*, this means that the player doesn't only witness ethnic conflict, but can also take part in it. The Nords are fighting a war to "liberate their Homeland" through violence. Beyond witnessing this struggle, the player can come across fights or prisoners of war being transported and choose to liberate them. And if the player chooses to join the Stormcloaks' struggle by following their questline, they will lead the group to victory through several quests of conquest. The game design encourages this kind of engagement with the world; furthermore, it allows players who are so inclined to act out their own political and racist fantasies by killing of non-white or non-Nord NPCs in *Skyrim*. With the notable exception of children, the game allows the player to kill everyone, but the player can also choose to selectively kill only those who don't conform to their ideology -- and it is in this the imagined affordances lie. The ability to join a racist revolutionary movement is a designed affordance, but acting out being an actual White Nationalist depends on imagined affordances.

Playing the Nords

The discussions on Stormfront on *Skyrim* mainly focus on gameplay, starting with speculation as they eagerly await the game's release, and later more concrete discussions about the gameplay. In this section of the article, I explore these discussions, and how they reveal the White Nationalist readings of *Skyrim* and its affordances. The forum users aren't reading the gameplay as separated from White Nationalist ideology. Several users tell tales of how they go out of their way to kill coloured NPCs, or non-Nord NPCs, or Imperials, or Elves and other non-human characters. One user bluntly states that the NPCs get angry and try to kill him for attacking their chickens and "their blacks". They proudly display their in-game genocidal intent, of keeping Nord clear of foreign influences. It's unknown whether or not this is something they actually do in their game, or the telling of this is a performance of ideology and stance within a community where they know this will be lauded. This is Stormfront after all, and while this sub board focuses on games and the playing of games, the games and the activity are seen through the prism of the political perspectives of the players.

White Nationalism in the Land of *Skyrim*

Even though many of the Stormfront users discussing the game agree that there is a parallel to the real world in *Skyrim*, exactly how remains open for discussion. There are numerous posts trying to assign real world nationalities and ethnicities to the races and species available in *Skyrim*, arguing not just for physical similarities, but historical and cultural parallels. As any other fantasy work, *Skyrim* lends material from a mix of real-world history, so many such parallels can be found. It is clear that there isn't just one reading of *Skyrim* available to the members of Stormfront; it is rather a resource bank of possible interpretations and meanings (Fiske 1989). The members are able to decode the game from different positions.

In *Skyrim*, the Stormcloaks' struggle for independence and a racially pure *Skyrim*, a "Skyrim for the Nords", echo the Stormfront users' own calls for a monoethnic and monocultural society, without the influence of other races. Especially the Jews who in the traditional White Nationalist narrative are to blame for multiculturalism and the decline of white nations. The contributors on Stormfront's gaming forum predominantly discuss the game world of *Skyrim* in terms of race and ethnic conflicts. They feel they are well represented by the

blue-eyed blonde Nords in the game. One user says he cannot bring himself to murder innocent whites, but "as a White Nationalist, I play as a Nord, doing good and helping people by killing non-Nords and dark-skinned characters to the best of my abilities" (paraphrased by the author).

Even before the game was released, Stormfront users posted images of the people in the game, discussing what "real world race" the different characters resembled or emulated. There was some conflict here, as some felt that Nords were represented as too "negroid", but this doesn't seem to shift their allegiance away from them. The discussions show, however, how important race is to the White Nationalists of Stormfront, as they start making plans for how to play the game as true Nords.

The racist parallels made between *Skyrim* and the real world is perhaps never clearer than when one user suggests that the Thalmor Elves are "Jews with pointy ears and gay magic". This notion becomes an important part of understanding *Skyrim* as a White Nationalist narrative, to paraphrase one user: "I just realized how the Thalmor resemble Jews, and the Stormcloaks us", another stated, and that the games is shockingly similar to the real world as "the Thalmor (Jews), stand on the sidelines growing stronger while the Empire and Stormcloaks fight each other" (paraphrased by the author), spoiling the fact that also the Stormcloaks are being manipulated by the Thalmor/Elves, but also underlining the perceived insidious nature of the Thalmor-Jews entity in both *Skyrim* and the White Nationalist worldview.

Some forum users also call out the xenophobic and prideful aspects of Nord culture, and the Stormcloaks as parallels to their own ideology. One user summarizes it easily; if the Khajit and Argonians can have their own native homeland, why can't the Nords? And why can't White Nationalists in the real world have their own nation? The user further states, with support from others, that the game could be used to open the eyes to the conditions of white people and to the need for White Nationalism. One would have to be a "moron" not to see this, he explains. Another user expresses surprise that the game so closely represents their own world view and ideological narrative, and some question whether this may have been the designers' intentions. Others point out that that the game's developer Bethesda obviously has not intended this interpretation (see below). Bethesda is even owned by a Jew, one user claims. To these users it becomes ironic that the game obviously caters to their ideological interpretation.

Rather than understanding the intentions of the developer, how the game can be played and interpreted is more important to most of the users. No matter the intention of the developers, the game is interpreted as close to the White Nationalist "reality". One user writes that they first thought people were reading too much into the game until he played it for himself and realized that the game was "frighteningly" close to his nationalist view of reality.

Assimilation or resistance

Stormfront users discuss the assumed intentions of the designers and publishers of the game, because they are interested in whether they intentionally created a White Nationalist game. This is important for the forum users, partly because some don't want to buy products by companies perceived as anti-white. There are those who are not willing to give the game a chance because of the assumed "Jewish ownership" of Zenimax, Bethesda's parent company, while others argue that the game is harbouring some secret pro-white agenda. One user suggests that there might be one or two White Nationalists working on the team. The majority however seems not to engage with Bethesda's intentions, and focuses on the text itself and the meaning of it.

Like Barker's (1997) fascist fan of Judge Dredd, the White Nationalists of *Skyrim* use the game to reaffirm their politics. As in the case of the youth in Devane and Squire's (2008) study, the players on Stormfront interpret, or decode, the game and game world in ways that fits their life world. This interpretation does not happen without resistance

though, as their relationship with mainstream culture is strained by their antagonism to society.

Nationalist Decoding of *Skyrim*

Using the Stuart Hall's suggested positions for decoding of a sandbox game where gameplay is exploratory and the producers' intentions for this reason are secondary creates a confusing schemata. If we consider Hall's original theory, we can argue that a hegemonic, preferred reading of the game that supports what we can call an established, accepted worldview would lead Stormfront users to reject the game as "multi-cultural" and "Jewish. However I find that the forum users express that the game design support their worldview. This is particularly true when focusing on the Nords and the Stormcloak quests; here they find affordances in the game design that can be interpreted to support a White Nationalist worldview. The affordances of open world games bring to the fore the difficulty of categorizing the readers' positions in decoding a text, emphasizing its fluidity.

When *Skyrim* is a parallel to our real world for Stormfront, it appears as an idealized version of it. It is a world where *Skyrim* can truly be for the Nords, and where they have the chance to actually be the masters of their own white domain. In *Skyrim* they are not only the true heroes, they are able to affect changes without the real world consequences that their actions would provoke. This includes going on a killing spree or merely fighting for their people and marrying a blonde white person. This is partly a quality of the decoding of the game; it is how these White Nationalists read and play the game. They can perform the role as White Nationalist warriors because the affordances of the game allow it, and this lends itself to support their reading of the game. This is a position that requires some negotiation by the Stormfront users, and relies on a focus on the Nords and the Stormcloak quests. Few would consider this a dominant position given the game as a whole, but this narrow focus helps in their reading. If one draws these parallels to real world Nationalism -- and grant the context of the game as a whole as well as the assumed intentions of the designers -- one could perhaps consider this an oppositional reading. In this reading, the commodities of a multi-cultural society can be used against it, and where the nationalist bad guys of the game's narrative become the good guys when played by White Nationalists.

However, it is important to stress the fact that although the Stormcloak questline supports a White Nationalist perspective, this perspective is not dominant in the remainder of the game. For this reason, I argue that the Stormfront users' supportive reading of the game can be considered a negotiated reading. A negotiated position involves making the game their own and reinvent *Skyrim* as a White Nationalist playground. A negotiated reading would imply that the player understands or sees the intended message, but allows himself the freedom to re-interpret it. *Skyrim* might be pushing the same multicultural agenda, or Bethesda might even be owned by a Jew, but through mods and subversive gameplay the White Nationalists manage to make the game their own. With this negotiated reading, they tell a somewhat different story. This negotiation means that they have to accept aspects of the game that are not in line with their own vision of the world, and which they cannot change through mods.

It is useful, here, to remember that Hall's proposed positions were suggestions and hypotheticals allowing us to work out an understanding of how audiences can oppose hegemonic power. While a negotiated position is a good enough categorization for how Stormfront decodes *Skyrim*, it is perhaps better to see it as a sliding scale or a matrix of positions that will vary with the content we're discussing. Stormfront's interpretation of *Skyrim* is not a united one, but it has enough of commonality to create a discourse of "pro-white" readings of the game and the plight of the Nords as an imagined parallel to that of White Nationalists. The scale slides from a dominant reading in line with the Stormcloaks being White Nationalists to a wilful undermining of the assumed author in order to appropriate the game world for White Nationalism. Most of all, it lingers in between; in

that ambivalent space of negotiated reading that most consumption of popular culture will be found.

Conclusion: Who has the power in *Skyrim*?

Hegemonic power plays an important part in the encoding-decoding model. Power is not equally distributed between the sender and receiver of a message (Hall 1973). It is from this unequal distribution of power the divergent decoding positions arise. Power relations play an important part in understanding an object's affordances as well. An object is made and designed with an intended use, but may allow for different uses, as imagined by the user. "What counts as a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional use is intrinsically linked to who has the power to define how technologies should be used" writes Adrienne Shaw (2017, 599) in her attempt to join Hall's model with affordance theory, and highlighting its political potential. Designed artifacts are political (Winner 1980), and there is power in the freedom of use and interpretation of artifacts. The designer does not determine an object's use, only creates affordances for use, and how this is used depends not just on the design, but on the users and their politics. It is fully possible to use an artifact for a different political purpose than the designers intended, so when white nationalists find a "home" in the fictitious world of *Skyrim* and a belonging with the rebellious Stormcloaks, they are simultaneously appropriating the gameworld and narrative of *Skyrim* and resisting the assumed intent of the producers.

This leads to the question of what constitutes subversion of intent in an open-world game with so many possible actions and interpretations. If an action is designed to be possible, is it a subversive result of an oppositional reading by the player? Or should it be considered a dominant or preferred reading, as the game indeed allows for it, and may not even discourage this reading by punishing certain actions through game mechanics? The intent of the designers may not matter at all if we focus on the mechanics of a game. Every designed possibility could be considered "intentional", even if not consciously intended by the authors or rewarded by the game mechanics. And when dealing with complex open world systems, it is hard to say what is "intended" by the authors and not. And it isn't really that relevant, as we are dealing in the domain of imagined affordances.

Imagined affordances concern how people actually use objects and systems regardless of the designers' intentions. They are based on the "fears, expectations and their uses, as well as those of the designers" (Nagy & Neff 2015, 4). The opposite is also true; a discussion of affordances should also take into consideration the expectations of the designers (ibid), but they are made less relevant as long as they have designed a game that allows for a multitude of interpretations and action possibilities. This is particularly relevant when the game world engages closely with a White Nationalist worldview, allowing the gameworld to be easily integrated with their own world. To rebel against the expectations of the implied player is to rebel against the game and its designers, and it shifts the power from the game and the designer to the player. This power shift is an important implication of this analysis, using both Hall's model for encoding-decoding and affordances to highlight how the player can take "ownership" of a game world through their interpretations, using the affordances that are designed as part of a game.

These perspectives empower the user, highlighting their opportunities to resist the dominant hegemony and the role of implied player. As it stands, the White Nationalist interpretation of *Skyrim* is as valid as any other decoding of the game. The affordances created by the intersection of the game and of their political position, allows the game to be experienced as a White Nationalist power fantasy, potentially strengthening their narrative and position. But as this interpretation is dependent on an existing White Nationalist framework of thought, it is still an open question of how well the game proselytize the White Nationalist cause. The parallels between the game and White Nationalist ideologies can, however, perhaps be used in constructing an argument for their cause in meetings with people familiar with the game, but not White Nationalism, and this is

suggested by users on Stormfront. This does however require further investigation.

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Article 4: “Feminazis playing games: Understanding the nuances of a gendered slur in gaming culture”

This paper explores the usage of *feminazi* as a slur in gaming forums. Conditionally accepted by *Games & Culture*, and revisions pending. Presented here in its unrevised version.



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