# THE TABOOS OF GAME STUDIES

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**JOURNAL ESSAYS**

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# Introduction
## Locating the Taboos of Game Studies
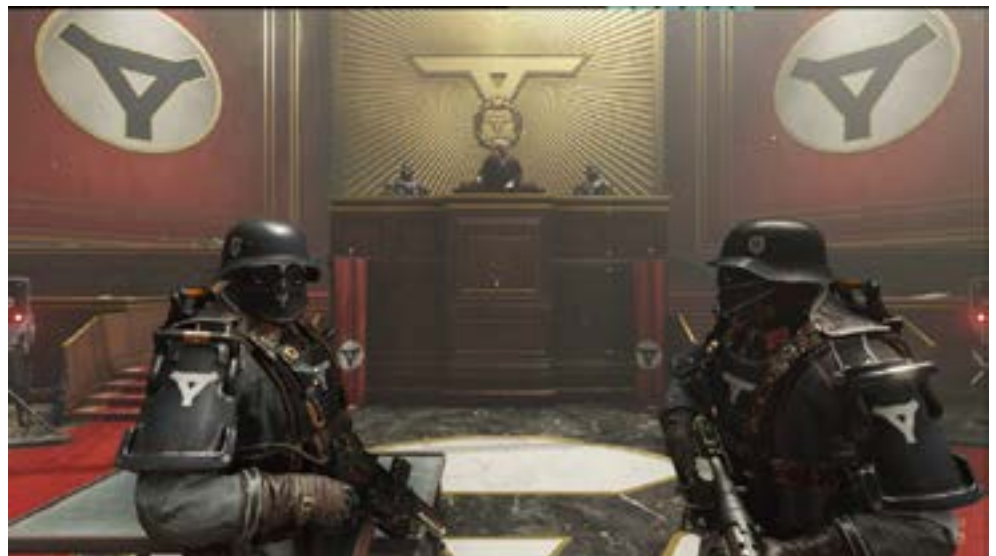


Source: Screenshot from *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*.

What are the taboos of game studies, and is it even possible to identify taboos in a highly interdisciplinary field like game studies? And how are games and game studies tackling topics that are considered cultural or social taboos? This special issue is taking a stab at these questions, tracing both the disciplinary controversies of our field, as well as debating specific taboo topics and the theoretical and methodological approaches through which they have been addressed.

This collection discusses taboos in game studies, ranging from research into taboo subjects to the taboo methods and approaches. Game studies is still a young field, and while specific paradigms may not have yet settled, it is likely that the areas that are deemed taboo for researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds will contribute to crystallize certain research paradigms or shift the focus of inquiry on specific issues. In this volume, we aim to tease out the taboos of game studies by looking at subjects and fields that researchers dare

not venture into, and by studying how games treat topics that are commonly believed to be inappropriate for games and play. We also discuss scholarship that relates to other societal taboos, such as research projects involving people associated with criminal environments. We hope that this collection will contribute to a better understanding of the field of game studies by providing insight into topics that are rarely addressed but potentially create large divisive gaps between research traditions in game studies.

According to dictionary definitions, a *taboo* can be understood as "a prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure" (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Taboos are topics or acts that are off limits, often for reasons based in social conduct, convention, or norm and associated with morality; in most cases these are unspoken agreements and expectations that one has come to learn through socialization and engagement with a community. Although there are certain taboos that appear to be virtually universal and thus also implemented into the juridical system, such as incest, cannibalism, and murder, taboos are also changing with culture and time (Lambek, 2001).

Taboos can be found in all parts of society and guide our practices in many ways. In research, talking about taboos may seem counterintuitive as an ideal common to all research is a fundamentally critical disposition where researchers question assumptions and accepted truths in order to understand a phenomenon as thoroughly as possible. In cases where there is disagreement about the interpretation of data or the phenomenology of a subject matter, this could certainly be controversial, but would be considered a source for academic debate rather than a taboo as such. However, this does not mean that research is void of taboos.

On an overarching level, we can find the taboos of science and research are closely related to the norms and restrictions regulating research practices. As society's primary producers of knowledge, research and science have a social responsibility and are held accountable for scientific rigor and validity. Scientific taboos that span disciplines from mathematics and medicine, to philosophy, law, history, sociology – and indeed game studies – are

practices that break our ability to confide in the results presented. Fabricating data, dishonest or "creative" interpretation, misquotation and plagiarism are thus obvious, largely universal taboos in the academic community. Closely related are the violation of research ethics. Experiments and tests that do harm to participants, in particular when carried out on non-consenting or unaware subjects, are examples of this (Carlson, Boyd & Webb, 2004).

However, if we consider the taboos of a specific research field, we must look for *issues that go against the norms or established truths of that field*. A glance at our own

practices of game scholars indicates that finding universal taboos for the field may be challenging due to its interdisciplinary nature. This indicates different perspectives that may sometimes stand in stark contrast or opposition to each other. While researchers may cherish the research paradigms and methodologies of their native field, they are confronted with colleagues of different persuasions, while simultaneously experiencing pressure from culture and society about the ways in which games *should* be addressed. This indicates that what may seem controversial in a certain field may not be so in another. As game studies grows into maturity, the field has been through several debates, spanning the disputes about effects and learning, the so-called narratology vs. ludology debate, to the discussions about how to respond to the #gamergate controversy.

In his article, Frans Mäyrä takes an introspective view where he discusses disputes of game studies by adopting the perspective of a broader intellectual history. He describes current game studies as taking part in a "charged intellectual and political landscape" that seems to increase the differences rather than build bridges in the field. While admitting that descriptions of academic differences often tend to appear as more polarized than they may actually be, he describes today's situation as dominated by two traditions; one "formalist" tradition and a "politically committed" tradition. He traces these traditions back, not simply to the narratology vs. ludology debate, but further to the history of thought brought forward by the idealist and empiricist positions of epistemology. In the contemporary climate of culture wars, this also resonates with the current polarization between right-wing and conservative activists and progressive and feminist intellectuals that were at the barricades in the #gamergate controversy. Addressing the political and theoretical polarization of the field, Mäyrä argues for need to banish taboos in discussing the topic, arguing that while setting up clear dichotomies might serve educational and analytical purposes, it is ethically important to remember to acknowledge both the value and limitations in (ostensibly "value-neutral") formalist as well as in (politically committed) contextual, critical and cultural studies positions in the game studies field. Mäyrä's piece uncovers many of the issues that are disputed in the field of game studies, and by doing so he points out some of the areas in which the taboos of game studies can be found. He suggests that one of these perceived taboos is the realization that a formalist approach to game studies appears unable to tackle some of the pressing issues in gaming culture relating to misogyny, racism, and homophobia, and the attacks by #gamergate.

The fact that games and game culture may be oblivious to their own ignorance of racial issues can in itself be understood as a product of one of the taboos of the field of game studies. In his essay, Aaron Trammell is addressing the relationship between blackness and games by investigating the connection between play and torture. The article engages with the important thought that

games and play are not always safe, consensual, and fun, and that the link between torture and play is an important one in understanding black experiences of play. The author takes us on an uncomfortable journey through the history of play as torture in the black experience. This peculiar configuration is traced back to American slavery and reminds us that play often goes hand in hand with more sinister practices, and that it is our duty as game scholars to shed light on this fact.

While Mäyrä and Trammell's essays offer viewpoints on what can be considered taboos in game studies, addressing overarching issues on how we think about knowledge production in our field, and how we construct the ontology of play, we can also look at *how game studies deals with topics that are considered cultural or social taboos*. Public debates about games have revealed the existence of certain topics that tend to be perceived as inappropriate for games. Chapman and Linderoth claim that games appear to have a trivializing effect on subject matters because they simplify and thus risk representing issues in a disrespectful way (Chapman & Linderoth, 2015). For this reason, some are of the assumption that games cannot deal with topics that need to be handled with sensitivity. Two of the papers in this special issue discuss how games deal with World War II. While the popularity of military conflict in games hardly makes the topic a taboo in itself, war in games is generally sanitized in the sense that everything that would remind the player about the problematic aspects of war is removed (Pötzsch, 2017). This means that war games tend to avoid civilian causalities or war crimes. In their piece, Eugen Pfister and Martin Tschiggerl discuss how videogames navigate the representation of historical taboos relating to World War II and analyze the moments where games and players violate these taboos. While World War II is a shared European cultural and historical trauma, the authors reflect on how its representation has been the subject of different regulations and interpretations in different cultural contexts and on the impact of this process on the idea of authenticity in historical representations. They discuss the peculiar situations that occur when game developers attempt to work around national regulations such as the German banning of Nazi symbolism in entertainment, which sometimes result in a paradoxical exposure of the taboos that the regulations are trying to protect. The authors also discuss how the idea of authenticity creates taboos in game culture, illustrated by debates on how the presence of female soldiers in historical games is perceived not only as inaccurate but as a transgression against a shared historical reality.

A debate about the representation of taboos would be incomplete without a discussion of the Holocaust, an event whose *visibility* has been a major preoccupation for philosophers and historians in the XX Century (see e.g. Didi-Huberman, 2003). While this is an issue also in Pfister and Tschiggerl's piece, it takes the center stage in Tomasz Z. Majkowski and Katarzyna Suszkiewicz's paper.

Rather than discussing how games deal with the representation of the taboos of Holocaust, Majkowski and Suszkiewicz are investigating how the design of a game about Holocaust can be both a pedagogical tool as well as a way for game scholars to better understand the affordances of games in communicating culturally and historically sensitive matters. Thus, the piece is both asking how games as well as game studies can deal with taboos. The paper documents a boardgame design workshop organized by game scholars, historians, and Holocaust educators during which high school students designed a board game that would raise awareness on the Holocaust history of the Polish town of Radecznica. While the design workshop itself is an innovative and even radical way of dealing with sensitive issues, the aim is not to break taboos or make the students engage in transgressive practices. Instead, the authors' aim is *de-tabooization*: a refusal of the idea of the Holocaust as a taboo that games cannot address and a demonstration that games can tackle this historical trauma in a respectful way, allowing the student–designers to take an active role in the meaning-making process relating to their local history.

The last paper in this special issue concerns a common but often neglected topic for many fields in social research: the fact that research sometimes intersects with crime and criminal environments. To study games and game culture is generally a safe endeavor unless the researcher gets involved in issues that provoke online harassment campaigns (Chess & Shawm 2015; 2016; Mortensen, 2016). For Hanna Wirman and Rhys Jones, however, a research on Hong Kong arcades, or "amusement game centers" (遊戲機中心), put them into a situation where they became engaged with environments with a perceived relation to organized crime. While the respondents in Wirman and Jones' studies report that local arcades are dominated by cartels, this is also a taboo in the sense that it is obviously not on any public records. At the same time, the simple – and without doubt real – possibility that such as link exists, creates a number of issues for researchers. In addition to the potential threats towards their own safety and the fact that simply researching arcades can cause reactions by the cartels, this situation exposes a number of fundamental questions concerning methods and research ethics, including to what degree researchers themselves are willing to - or should - break not only social norms but also the law, in their pursuit of knowledge.

As a concluding remark it is worth bringing up a possible elephant in the room – whether we have at all been able to address the *actual* taboos of game studies. A problem about taboos is that they are by definition that which should not be spoken about, and for this reason simply addressing them would in itself be socially unacceptable and potentially lead to social stigma. Research is by its very nature investigative and based on curiosity and the willingness to challenge the establishment to understand all aspects of a topic, which implies that even taboos should be challenged and broken. At the same time, research is also a

part of the social world where issues such as social stigma is real, and it is thus unlikely that there should be no taboos in research. For this reason, it may seem like a paradox to discuss the taboos of game studies and comes as no surprise that identifying the taboos of a research field may be difficult.

While we do not claim to have exposed all taboos in the field of game studies, what we have done is to take a first stab at identifying areas of research in which the taboos of game studies can be found. The papers in this special issue have been able to identify both certain disputes inside game studies that involve some of the taboos of our field, as well as providing in-depth discussion of how games and game studies tackle topics that are considered taboo in culture and society. This is important for the maturation of the field: It is only through exposing the taboos of our field that we can start having an informed scholarly debate about our taboos, and about the ways in which they may hinder the progress of our field by reducing the space for dialogue.

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# Game Culture Studies and the Politics of Scholarship:
## The Opposites and the Dialectic



Source: Author's photograph and elaboration.

**ABSTRACT:**
This article explores the early history (and even some prehistory) of game studies from a perspective that is informed by an analysis of claimed opposition between "objective" and "politically committed" research. There is a well-documented and long intellectual history of fundamental disagreements that have set apart the various idealist, rationalist, positivist, empiricist, and constructivist orientations in academia, for example. However, the contemporary climate of "culture wars" has surrounded such disputes with a novel, often toxic framing that aggravates confrontations and erodes possibilities for reaching agreement. This article tracks the charged prehistory of contemporary game studies on one hand into the rise of poststructuralism and the "theory wars" of 1970s and 1980s, and then moves to discuss the heritage of literary studies for game studies. The special emphasis is put on formalism as a strategy of manufacturing authority

and objectivity for arts and humanities-based disciplines. The key argument in the article is that this history of intellectual warfare hides from us an alternative history – a dialectical one, which has quietly grown to become arguably the mainstream of (cultural) game studies today. Rather than isolating the formal and cultural, or aesthetic and political dimensions of game cultural agency and meaning making, the examples discussed at the end of article point towards the strategic value produced by such a dialectic approach for game studies.

## INTRODUCTION: THE EARLY DEBATE

One of the hotly contested areas in the contemporary climate of culture wars is located where different conceptions of "objectivity" and "politically committed research" clash. In game studies, the ongoing conflicts have been perhaps more openly available and more escalated than in some other fields of art and culture studies – for multiple historical reasons. This article is part of an ongoing effort to unravel some of the underlying roots and genealogy of current conflicts, and also to make a case for a certain kind of dialectic that could open productive directions for this field. As such, the argumentation may not appear immediately relevant to the contemporary study of games, but I feel that we need to capture this bigger picture, before dealing with more specific contemporary issues. It should be noted that this exploration is indeed a work in progress; at this point the emphasis is on historical contextualisation of some key developments in intellectual landscape that have had major impact on the emergence of 'game culture studies' as a certain kind of orientation in the wider field of game studies. The dialectic described in this article is provides also a rationale for the establishment of The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies in Finland, and the particular conception of game studies that it embodies; this will be discussed in the final part of the article.

The overarching argument underlying this inquiry is based on view that while there has been multiple veins of intellectual history that have contributed into the apparently fundamental separation and opposition between elements such as 'gameplay' and 'narrative' or 'representation', the construction of such opposition is based on limited perspectives and has been detrimental for the development of game studies. The "alternative history" put forward this article is aimed at overcoming this kind of historical splintering – and as such can be seen as complementary to some recent efforts, such as the feminist and affect theory approach (see e.g. Anable, 2018) aiming to bring more coherence and unity in game studies. Hopefully, this account can also suggest why it should no longer be a "taboo" to speak about fundamental differences underlying the contemporary game studies; rather, such excavations should be seen as necessary, and therapeutic.

Starting from a wider look at this landscape, it is obvious that while attacks against politically committed or 'progressive' or 'leftist' intellectuals are particularly known from the North American and English-speaking context, there are also European countries – such as Poland – where gender studies or

feminism in particular have been put under particularly large-scale conservative attacks (Graff, 2014). For feminist scholars studying games, the everyday reality has for a long time been one that includes denigration, attacks, and rape threats. Like Mia Consalvo writes, each such incident is troubling enough when taken in isolation, but when linked together into a timeline "demonstrates how the individual links are not actually isolated incidents at all but illustrate a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position" (Consalvo, 2012).

It is a regular element in the rhetoric of right-wing activists and political conservatives in particular to attack the reliability and value of scientific research on grounds of academics being blinded or biased due to their political affiliations or sympathies. There is even evidence that among certain circles "there is a palpable hostility toward the basic concept of higher education, as if college attendance made one part of a liberal conspiracy, and professors have come to be viewed as the embodiment of what many resent in American culture: political correctness, diversity, willingness to look to science for answers, secularism, feminism, intellectualism, socialism, and a host of other 'isms'" (Cuevas, 2018).

There are probably at least dual notable main roots in this debate, but they often become confused in the academic context. One is academic, the other one political and populist. The academic side of the discussion has focused on themes that are often categorised under the scientific realism (and "positivism") versus social constructionism themes. The aggressive, politically loaded tone this old debate has taken, however, is somewhat novel. The epistemological roots of the disagreement go deep in the history of thought. It is useful to remember how the classic positions were formulated in this context. Already Plato saw human capacity for real knowledge as limited, as his famous cave metaphor also underlines (*The Republic*, Book 7). As an "Idealist", Plato thought that everything that we base on our empirical observations – the world of senses – is not producing real knowledge, just opinions. Only the timeless forms or the world of Ideas is the domain of universal and true knowledge. In contrast, Aristotle can be positioned as an early "Empiricist" thinker, who did not believe in the innate world of pure forms or ideas, but rather emphasised that people arrive a bit like empty slates when born, and can construct knowledge and concepts about the surrounding reality only through experience, observation and interaction with the world (Aristotle, *On the Soul*).

The philosophical divide or opposition between idealism and empiricism has taken many forms since, including the tradition of philosophical "rationalism", which holds that one should not trust senses but rather rely on logic to find truth. And on the other hand, following Aristotle to the birth of modern empirical sciences, there is the tradition of empiricism, which holds that all we know is gained through experience, and that careful testing and observing can improve our knowledge. In the field of game studies, one could position

formalist and empirical approaches to the study of games and play as inheritors of this classical dualism.

The reference to the classical opposition about the epistemological fundamentals is not in itself enough to explain the politically charged undertones that face the academics working today. The intellectual and political developments that took place during the twentieth century are also something that should be taken into account, including also several traumatic historical episodes, including the legacies of multiple world wars, holocaust, colonialism, slavery, and struggles of conflicting political systems taking place within the worsening ecological catastrophe in a global scale. Some of the crucial steps in the development of the intellectual conflict underlying the contemporary game studies emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. It was during this time when the so-called "theory wars" took their current direction. There is an acknowledged, special relationship between literary studies and game studies' emergence (see e.g. Aarseth, 1997; Murray, 1997; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008; Mäyrä, 2008), and it was literary theory which was perceived to be at the cutting edge in development of new theoretical discourses and approaches in the 1980s. Drawing from earlier, 1960s and 1970s poststructuralist thought particularly in France, the American translations, discussions and adaptations developed the thought of Jacques Lacan into "Lacanianism", and writings of Jacques Derrida into "deconstructionism", for example. While bearing witness to the impact of such "continental thought" on wider international audiences, the growing popularity of such, theoretically and conceptually complex approaches also faced increasing resistance and provided some of the foundation for later conservative attacks on what they would call "postmodernism". The role of this moment of history for the present discussion of game studies is crucial, as it represents an important moment of awakening into more nuanced self-awareness in human sciences – and one that would later underlie the epistemological–political tensions that would charge the landscape of early game studies.

**FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES: DERRIDA AND SEARLE**

The conflict that emerged in the early 1970s between Derrida and John R. Searle, an American analytical philosopher, is indicative of the future of such "theory wars". To summarise the complex debate to what I consider to be its core issue, Derrida was both praising the Anglo-American "speech act theory" (initiated by John L. Austin in the 1950s) in expanding our understanding of the effects of language on our thought and relationships with the reality, but also criticizing the approach for a limited and "normative" view on how language operates. As is typical for Derrida's strategy, he emphasises the impossibility of using language precisely, as there are always surprising and unintended effects to all expressions – which is particularly central in artistic and fictional contexts of language use, which Austin had described as "parasitic" and non-serious and thereby something to be excluded from any consideration

in his language and communication theory (Derrida, 1988, p. 19 [orig. 1971]). John R. Searle published a response to Derrida in 1977, basically arguing that any, even written reproductions of oral speech acts still retain their link with the intention, and thereby their authority and force – as is evidenced by a priest pronouncing two people as "husband and wife" – is real; or, as Searle writes "there is no getting away from intentionality, because a meaningful sentence is just a standing possibility of the corresponding (intentional) speech act" (ibid, p. 26). While both philosophers come out of the debate as genuinely interested in "How to Do Things with Words" (the title of Austin's famous posthumous 1962 book on speech act theory), they were fighting for different priorities and different strategic and political consequences for philosophy. As it is likely that there is always both an element for misunderstanding and play, as well as an element of real-world power in any use of language, it appears that both philosophers are committing a bit of violence towards this complexity, in order to make their points. And this intellectual violence is exactly what Derrida directly addresses in the "Afterword" to *Limited Inc* (the 1988 edition collecting most of this debate in a book form):

> The violence, political or otherwise, at work in academic discussions or in intellectual discussions generally, must be acknowledged. In saying this I am not advocating that such violence be unleashed or simply accepted. I am above all asking that we try to recognize and analyze it as best we can in its various forms: obvious or disguised, institutional or individual, literal or metaphoric, candid or hypocritical, in good or guilty conscience. And if, as I believe, violence remains in fact (almost) ineradicable, its analysis and the most refined, ingenious account of its conditions will be the least violent gestures, perhaps even nonviolent, and in any case those which contribute most to transforming the legal-ethical-political rules: in the university and outside the university. (Derrida, 1988, p. 112.)

It is in such ethical grey areas, strategies, and in the political consequences of science, scholarship and "theory" where the important differences and significance of this conflict for the current discussion can be identified. While both Derrida and Searle can be positioned as late modern thinkers in how they both appear as highly aware of how language, words and the structures of culture we remain embedded into, will always affect the manner in which we exist and act in the world, they perceive the responsibility and accountability of academics differently. In carrying out his work in "weak social constructionism", Searle (1997) focuses on the structure of social and institutional facts, and how such social facts make certain statements true, or not. As such, if taken as an "apolitical", disinterested or liberal science and scholarship project, such approaches may also be turned into effective use by various authorities of institutional power – a fundamental characteristic of any form of "disinterested" science and scholarship.

The tactic of Derrida and other "poststructuralist" thinkers is different, as their strongest contributions can most often found in the manner how they question any claims of objectivity and neutrality and highlight how various socio-historical or textual contexts have an effect on how such "power discourses" operate. As such, they might be less useful in unravelling the "reality" of things, but more helpful in strategic efforts to question and change such realities – in educating us to improve our critical mindset. It could be claimed that perhaps the most significant weakness of the poststructuralist, high theory discourse in its utmost form relates to the love for convoluted language and apparently over-complex argumentation, which is often evident in some of these fields. While this way of writing might be tactically useful in providing emerging young fields the shield of intellectual rigor and a "place of its own" in academic discursive landscape, it also makes such forms of scholarship vulnerable targets for malicious attacks, such as the infamous "Sokal experiment". This was a publication hoax carried out by Alan Sokal, a physics professor by submitting a nonsensical, jargon-filled paper into *Social Text* journal, and getting it published in 1996. Similar attacks (or, if more playfully taken, "trolling projects") have been carried out afterwards against cultural, queer and gender studies, for example (see "The Grievance Studies affair", a hoax paper project created by Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay and Peter Boghossian; Schuessler, 2018). It is worth noting an interesting deconstructive reading of the "Sokal Affair" in this context: in her analysis, Clare Birchall (2004) suggests that there actually exists a largely unexplored productive interpretation of these kinds of wilful offensives; that it is possible to produce sense as well as nonsense from this kind of text actually demonstrates in practice the power of many poststructuralist arguments about the undecidability around legitimacy and knowledge. Rather than restoring everyone's faith in the final authority of science and fundamental truths, this kind of hoax studies can be used to spread awareness and highlight how the production of knowledge rests on a particular kind of system involving trust and authority – and how such systems of knowledge production can rather easily be broken. In a late modern (or, postmodern) condition, the "discursive authority" can always be questioned, thus also motivating the postmodernist strategies of writing in a manner that is always *sous rature* – under erasure (which is, in Birchall's sense, a necessarily paranoid, political strategy).

While it can be argued that Derrida and deconstruction as a project, or strategy, has had certain political consequences or stances (see McQuillan, 2007), this field of scholarship has favoured complex and critical argumentation that appears most suitable for application in exposing contradictions and "aporias" in all systems of thought, rather than being positively committed for any single cause. On the other hand, the legacy of another Frenchman, Michel Foucault, has been particularly central for analyses of power, discourse, agency and body – all central concerns also for game studies, when the research perspective is opened to take into account questions of gender, ethnicity and inequality in

societal and global scale. If the traditional continuation of the Enlightenment project in ("progressive") academia for a long time relied on Marx and Marxist thought (putting emphasis on class, economic power and, on those grounds, to solidarity towards oppressed and suppressed voices), Foucault both complicated matters and also opened up new directions for critical inquiry. While being suspicious towards traditional political movements (young Foucault had his negative experiences in a Stalinist-style communist party), Foucault carried out historically and philosophically informed analyses that complicated the traditional picture of power as merely repressive, authoritarian element in culture and society. Rather, Foucault emphasises that development of modern societies has also meant internalisation of various techniques of social regulation and control, to the degree that the awareness of perpetual "surveillance" is internalised by individuals to produce self-awareness in manner that is essential for the modern subject (Foucault, 1995). In addition, he continued to analyse the construction of social reality and agency through various forms of "disciplinary power" and "bio-power" (Foucault, 1990) – arguing that the "exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 52). Foucault particularly warned that "modern humanism" is mistaken in "drawing this line between knowledge and power" (ibid.). This can be seen as a comment directed towards more Idealist (or: Rationalist) style projects that see themselves as apolitical pursuits for neutral and objectively verifiable kind of knowledge. The legacy of this tensioned phase on late modern scholarship can be further analysed next with a look into the early stages of emerging game studies.

**THE BIRTH PAINS OF GAME STUDIES**

There are multiple roots underlying the rise of contemporary game studies (as witnessed, e.g. by the opening issues of journals *Game Studies* in 2001, and *Games and Culture* in 2006), and looking back at the above discussion, it can be said that the new research field or emergent discipline (depending on perspective) was born into a charged academic landscape. On one hand, it was faced with the considerable existential struggle of both proving that (digital, computer, video, mobile, etc.) games were a valuable topic, or a "serious" area for scholarship, worthy of investment of time and resources. One argument that was often used at this point was to make reference to the considerable economic significance of games as a field of digital content industry; also, the demographic and behavioural shift was highlighted as a reason to invest into the new, game studies discipline: hundreds of millions of people had started playing these new kinds of games (e.g. Aarseth, 2001). At the same time, academics were entering this new field from some older, established disciplines, and the study of games remained surrounded – and possibly in the end was destined to be assimilated – by other fields (Aarseth, 2001; Deterding, 2017). The infamous "ludology vs. narratology debate" (Frasca, 2003) was then an early

instance when the views about the direction and "content" of this field being contested. Thus, the struggle at the "external boundaries" in the field definition are to a certain degree mirrored in struggles on "boundaries / division lines within" the field. In a rather Foucauldian turn of events, it was this "biopolitics of definitional debate" that has served as a sort of educational tool, focusing on what kind of ontological and epistemological claims the game studies as a field or discipline is based on, what are its proper subjects of study, correct methodologies, and who is able to define such fundamentals. For example, in her response to Frasca's account of the "Debate", Celia Pearce (2005) objects to the act of naming such "two camps": "The very act of bestowing the suffix '–ist' is a kind of spell–casting exercise that only serves to reinforce the so–called false polarity that Frasca attempts to critique". It would be relatively easy to pass on the entire debate on one hand, and the requests to return into a boundary-free state of game studies on the other, if this conflict would not be potentially unearthing some deeper conflicts within the "game studies project".

Patrick Crogan was one among few scholars who were writing early critiques of 'ludology', suggesting that while there is certain analytical value in the ludological approach, in its "purist" form it is also deeply problematic in narrowing down the subject of study in what could even be considered a nonsensical manner. Crogan (2004) points towards the early work by Markku Eskelinen, Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth in particular. More recently, Tom Apperley (2019) for example has argued that game studies' focus and attention on ludology (in the shape of "ludology vs. narratology debate") is even harmful: there is an "unarticulated anti-theory stance of ludology", which means that entering the field of game studies through this angle will also expose young scholars to ways of thinking that are hostile to feminist theory specifically. It is worth pausing to reflect, why this would be the case – and what would game studies be without central attention and scholarly focus put on ludology, in particular? In the context of this discussion, it is worth considering the early ludological approaches as a certain kind of narrowly formalist exercise – that also comes with the long history of formalist claims for power as well as for scientific or scholarly authority. As many early "ludologists" were trained in literary studies, and in literary theory, we can take our lead from the longer history of how that field (or discipline) evolved, while featuring certain similar tensions and tendencies in relation to formalism.

## FORMALISM: THE HERITAGE OF LITERARY STUDIES

While there are elements in contemporary critical thought in literary and textual theories that go all the way back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, or the classical rhetoric teachings on "effective and persuasive communication" (studies of tropes, or figures of speech, for example), much of the stage for modern criticism was set in the early decades of the twentieth century. While the traditional style of scholarship that focused on analyses of different kinds of texts was scat-

tered in multiple directions of the evolving, early modern academia, a large part of these traditional approaches was rooted in philological studies of words and comparisons of different text versions, and in the history of "great men" style biographies. The early formalist approaches – the "New Criticism" movement in particular – rebelled against this, arguing for more sophisticated and scientific methodology to study literature as works of arts, rather than as extensions of a person in the biographical style. New Criticism is commonly known for putting emphasis on "close reading" as a careful unravelling of complex poetic devices, while aiming to understand works of art as autonomous wholes.

Another aspect of this movement was the rejection of authorial intention, which American scholars William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley popularised in their article "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946; note that this has an interesting parallel in the "death of the author" discussion, initiated in France in the 1960s, see Barthes, 1978). It is the text and form itself which should be the source of meaning, not the thoughts, lives or ambitions of the original author. The complementary version of this idea was titled "Affective Fallacy" (also discussed in an article by the same authors; Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949). To quote: "The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*), a special case of epistemological skepticism [...which...] begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism [with the result that] the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear" (ibid., p. 31). Thus, for formalist approaches, neither the author or the reader/user of the text matters – only the "pure" text or work of art itself. This separation of text from contextual conditions for meaning making, and from experiential, historical and bodily realities of real human beings is something that several non-formalist approaches rose to question in the latter parts of twentieth century.

Formalism became the *de facto* reigning philosophy that underlined many strands of humanities-based scholarship during most of twentieth century – arguably from hermeneutics to structuralism and to deconstruction(ism; e.g. Culler, 2008). One could perhaps suggest certain kind of trauma or unresolved ambiguity that derives from the accusations of impressionism or of being guilty of overtly-emotional, subjective criticism in literary and art studies, as being part of the reason why these fields in academia have been driven toward direction that is arguably the closest counterpart of "hard science" we can find in the domain filled by human meanings and relational negotiations of signification. Though, one should note that as a general trend the move towards formalism can also be rooted in the increased professionalism and specialisation of science and scholarship: there are institutional and structural reasons why academia is generally tilted towards formal and seemingly neutral "systemic" approaches (e.g. O'Neill, 1992).

If we interpret early ludology as the formalist version of game studies, we can set within a certain kind of interpretative framework also such extreme claims as this often quoted one by Markku Eskelinen:

> The old and new game components, their dynamic combination and distribution, the registers, the necessary manipulation of temporal, causal, spatial and functional relations and properties not to mention the rules and the goals and the lack of audience should suffice to set games and the gaming situation apart from narrative and drama, and to annihilate for good the discussion of games as stories, narratives or cinema. In this scenario stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy. It's no wonder gaming mechanisms are suffering from slow or even lethargic states of development, as they are constantly and intentionally confused with narrative or dramatic or cinematic mechanisms. (Eskelinen, 2001.)

As an author and a literary theory educated scholar in particular, Markku Eskelinen is here effectively arguing for formalist criticism that is focused on studying the "essential form" of games in the "mechanisms of gaming", while simultaneously promoting rejection of those elements of game form that are already studied by established disciplines – as for example in the case of games' storytelling dimensions, which is a topic area that can to a certain degree addressed from perspectives opened up by literary, media, drama and film studies. However, in the above quote there is also an interesting implied extension of the "ornaments" or "gift-wrappings" into everything that is not a part of (formal) "game components", that would in the future discussions take the purist position of ludology even further.

This move is related to another notable moment in the early days of modern game studies, where the abandoning of storytelling dimension of games was extended to the visual or representational aspects of games. Furthermore, the shape this "rejection of representation" argument took is politically highly symptomatic, particularly when analysed through the "(female) body does not matter in games" argument as made by Aarseth:

> The 'royal' theme of the traditional pieces is all but irrelevant to our understanding of chess. Likewise, the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently […]. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see thorough it and past it. […] It follows that games are not intertextual either; games are self-contained. (Aarseth, 2004, p. 48.)

It should be noted that Aarseth was by no means alone in arguing for a "non-representational focus" for early game studies. A similar argument was made for example earlier by James Newman (2002), who argued that while

playing video games, "appearances do not matter" as "the pleasures of videogame *play* are not principally visual, but rather are kinaesthetic."

A decade later, Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2014) commented on Aarseth's claims in an article published in the *Game Studies* journal, paying attention to the political and gendered manner of representation's exclusion:

> Here, it is the seeing in order to unsee that is important, as Aarseth chooses Lara to make this point, rather than a masculine or gender-neutral target. Aarseth's argument would not have the same impact were it to contain the name of Max Payne, Bioshock Infinite's Booker (Irrational Games 2013), or Trevor Philips from GTAV (Rockstar, 2013) (who spends a vast percentage of the game without a shirt on, often resetting to this default despite previous scenes where the player has chosen to clothe him) inserted instead. Drawing attention to Lara as immaterial simultaneously points to her irrefutable position as a woman already considered out of place. This is supported by the continuing attention given to female protagonists, who are still usually introduced in a fanfare of novelty, and often highly scrutinised for their suitability within the games industry. (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014.)

Already in the context of the original (interactive) *First Person* book project, Stuart Moulthrop had reacted to Aarseth's claims and warned against cutting off the study of game from the study of their cultural contexts, saying that one would only end up with a sterile, dogmatic discipline. In a way, Aarseth during online dialogue actually agreed with this warning, but also stated (in his online response) that while one would be a "fool" – or a "fundamentalist" – to disagree with Moulthrop, he also claimed: "But fundamentalism has its uses. In academic discourse, a clear, uncompromising, radically different position can be invaluable simply by forcing the rest of the field to do more critical thinking" (Aarseth, 2004[1]). While congratulating ludologists on creating debate, Patrick Crogan (2004) titled this strategy in his discussion under an ambiguous heading of "theory game" – a concept which he did not take further in his discussion, but which can even imply that a purist position involves a potentially ethically questionable element of "playing games" with the academic community or its academic standards.

This is a crucial point when we are discussing the commitments and underlying aims of game studies. Taken in a positive spirit, one could envision a ludological version of game studies as a playful, sometimes a bit trolling, or "unserious discipline" (as in Simon, 2017). However, like Audrey Anable (2018) and others have claimed, when initial game studies was built on the formalist opposition between rules and representation, with dominance of the former dimension, it was also left "ill equipped to address issues like racism, homophobia and misogyny in video games and gaming culture" (ibid., p. xvi). Importantly, formalism was also not able to provide game scholars any solid foundation for responding to the #GamerGate attacks, as they moved to target

**1.** See the online response at: https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/espen-aarseth-responds-in-turn

feminist and cultural studies game scholars, in addition to female game designers, players, and game journalists (cf. Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2018).

## THE POLITICS OF TEACHING GAME STUDIES

It is also worth having a moment of soul-searching at this point. I am myself an author of one of the textbooks in the field of game studies (Mäyrä, 2008), and the director of The Centre of Excellence of Game Culture Studies (2018- ), and from this perspective it is important for me to ask firstly, how has game studies as applied in the education of students and in the creation of ambitious research structures been positioned towards the "purist" ludology position, as discussed above?

Looking back today at my early textbook, *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, I can see many points where I could have clarified particularly the practical consequences of certain theoretical choices. Also, the entire contemporary "culture wars" situation had not yet emerged (most of the book was originally written in 2006) in the shape and condition that later made so visible the consequences and political affiliations of certain cultural and analytical positions. For example, the ambiguous status of detailed digital representation as something that was both celebrated (as an evidence of digital games advancement) and strategically dismissed at the same time (when feminist critique highlighted the blatant sexism and stereotype-filled character of mainstream games and gaming) is something that, in hindsight, I could had dedicated much more thought in the book. Saying that, it is important to note that the basic position that I opened this book with, is one emphasising the situated and contextual character of meaning-making: we cannot erase the player, as the focus of game studies should be in the *interaction* between the game and the player (ibid., p. 2). I do discuss the question of analytically separating "gameplay" from "representation" in games, and for purposes of simplification (this is a textbook, after all) present the schematic illustration (see Figure 1, below).
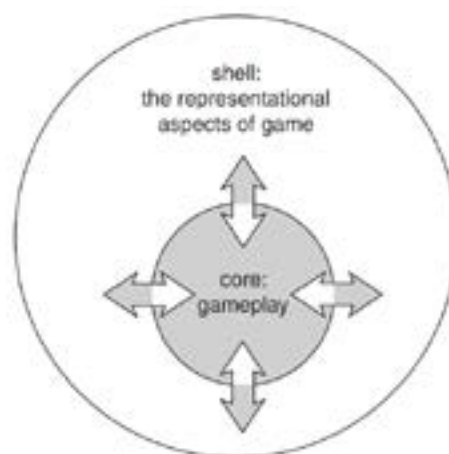


Figure 1 – "The dialectic of core and shell, or gameplay and representation in the basic structure of games" (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 18).

It could perhaps be interpreted as a politically questionable choice to set the gameplay as the "core" of games, as there are certainly game genres, styles of play, and players with preferences that clearly and strongly prioritize representational or storytelling dimensions of games over the dynamics of gameplay (which, in contrast, can also be minimal, non-challenging, or highly repetitive and uninteresting part of some games). The main intended message in the framework of this book was, however, to discuss how this "dialectic" or interplay between the representational aspects and gameplay dimensions is something that is essential to consider while addressing the "basic structure" of games. This interplay is also embedded in cultural, societal, economic and political frameworks to the degree that all studies of games should also be informed by studies of players, their (real-life) contexts, as well as by studies into the contexts of production and consumption of games – for studying *games as culture* (ibid., p. 2). This basic critical, dialectical and inclusive position is something that I am still happy to stand behind, also today. As the possibilities (and limitations) for identification and identity construction in gaming and regards to game characters was also discussed (ibid., pp. 69, 86, 107), one could say that if this one textbook would be a representative example (which I am not sure it is), then the "purist" ludological position would not be the one that has been dominantly adopted in game studies education. While the real state and evolution of game studies curricula in academia has not yet been comprehensively analysed, to my knowledge, it should be noted that such other early books as *Rules of Play* (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2008) and *Perceiving Play* (Mortensen, 2009), all of them also used in game studies education, do all in their different ways address the cultures surrounding games and play, thus by no means limiting game studies into the formalist analysis of "ludic forms".

In spirit of dialogue and dialectic, one can then put forward the question whether all formal analysis is then suspect – of hiding some questionable (conservative) political agenda behind its objective-looking surface? It is indeed perfectly possible for politically active researchers to criticize their less-societally-active colleagues for not doing enough, and not being committed enough to make any real change in areas where inequality and social wrongs rule – thereby actually becoming "accomplices for the oppressors". Positively taken, this kind of discipline-internal critiques can serve as valuable wakeup calls, and as invitation for further self-critical soul-searching: are we aware of our blind spots and biases? In the areas where the study of games and games in cultures intersect, this is a particularly important issue, since the tensions related to aesthetic forms and meaning production processes interact in these areas in a particularly powerful manner.

One classical objection to "mixing politics with science" is that a politically committed foundation for research will lead to bad science: the results are a pre-given starting point, rather than the neutral and objective final outcome, goes

this argument. On the other hand, it is a part of the everyday reality of everyone who applies for research grants that the "impact" of research is presented as a key criterion for successful science and scholarship. The high-quality academic work is expected to directly engage with the surrounding society and help in some ways to solve the problems we are facing. In their article discussing the "academic/activist divide" Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca (2006) quote Sara Bracke, an activist with European network NextGenderation, claiming that "the division between doing and thinking is very racialised and gendered […] and that has worked against women and ethnic minorities who are entreated to act in the name of revolutions which are thought through by white male others". Bracke insists that "critical theoretical work is a crucial part of political work", although "it can never replace the other kinds of political activities we need to be doing to transform social reality". Some of the examples Eschle and Maiguashca feature from their own research with feminist anti-globalisation activists, working in locations such as India, point to the use of games as an effective means for bridging the divide from abstract thought into lived experience.

**THE POLITICS OF ORGANISING GAMES RESEARCH**
When practical decisions about the direction of research are made today, the traditions of thought and debates discussed above will form some of the background for strategic decision-making: how can, or should, we study games, play, players and their applications in different cultures and societies? As suggested by the line of argument running through this article, there are multiple scholarly-political alternatives that have been open for conducting game studies, since early on, and largely derived from the intellectual roots of related academic approaches. When we make strategic decisions about doing game studies today, one could start by picking sides in a clear-cut manner in the polarised academic landscape, and thus avoid any potential internal conflicts or disharmony. The example of the establishment of The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE-GameCult, 2018-), which I will discuss in the final part of this article, is based on a different, alternative strategy, and one that I believe is more productive for the field one in the long run.

In practical terms, one of the key research-political questions for establishing more sustained and large-scale research efforts in the academic field of games and play studies (or indeed any field) is funding. The question of funding is then related to the institutional structures and mechanisms that facilitate scientific and scholarly work. Under the broader international trend of funding cuts hurting the university sector (cf. Oliff et al., 2013), there are limited opportunities for establishing a new academic discipline, such as game studies, without simultaneously cutting down resources of some other, established fields. It is also important to acknowledge that fundamental or basic research, and applied research are also differently situated in this kind of tensioned environment. While fundamental research is based on the rationale of expanding the field

knowledge, without any immediate promises of commercial exploitation, the applied research can claim to have much more direct links to the short-term economic needs of society or industry.

There were specific opportunities and threats facing the study of games in the late 1990s and early 2000s academic environment, and I have described some of the operations and strategies we applied at this time in Finland in earlier works (Mäyrä, 2009; 2017). One key strategy involved using applied research funding opportunities to simultaneously further some key theoretical and methodological, basic research interests, while also staying agile enough to regularly reorient the research to address interesting emerging phenomena, such as location-based gaming, the free-to-play business model, social (media) gaming and the various societal impacts of gaming. The aim to understand better the changing target – what games, play and game culture are, and mean, for different people – was the one constant, underlying imperative in this process.

One notable feature of such "agile" academic work is that it easily becomes highly multi- and interdisciplinary. Rather than being committed into any single theoretical tradition or even methodology, research of games, play and related societal and cultural phenomena can easily appear almost omnivorous. For example, in several of our Tampere University Game Research Lab early research projects and publications, the key concepts and research methods often featured a highly hybrid approached, derived from an intermixture of humanities based art studies, psychology of virtual environments, human-computer interaction (HCI), and several other academic fields, all set into a dialogue with some select ludology-inspired, games' art-form related questions (Mäyrä, 2009, p. 322). This approach on the one hand allowed the language of game research to resonate with multiple academic, expert audiences, while the interdisciplinary approaches also contributed to wider applicability of research findings; we were addressing such topics as digital play in social contexts, gameplay immersion, violence and games, learning in games and money gaming, or gambling. There were thus multiple benefits derived by strategically interpreting academic game studies in a very wide and loose manner. At the same time, all genuine interdisciplinary work is based on dialogue, and this means also understanding and transparently acknowledging what one's own, fundamental position is, in these kinds of dialogues. Game studies could not only continue as an "inter-discipline", but it needed at least some unifying elements and continuities, in order to have a basis for accumulation of knowledge, and for implementing informed critique of its own project.

These earlier histories informed the design and fundamental goals of the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE-GameCult), as it was established as a particular kind of site and environment of game studies. Together with my core team of colleagues – Raine Koskimaa, Olli Sotamaa, Jaakko Suominen – we created the Centre as a flexible and interdisciplinary site that should allow creativity, innovation and learning to take place. But we also

wanted our Centre to have a clear enough focus, and an underlying philosophy and a mandate that would allow organic growth in certain, articulated and sustained directions. As such, the centre would be supportive of interdisciplinary dialogue and encourage diversity in game studies, yet also be founded on a particular vision of *cultural* game studies. This would be one that is informed by work done in formalist as well as non-formalist research traditions, and that would not play down the value of either empirical, real-world situated people engaged (or otherwise affected) by games and ludic elements in cultures and societies, nor those structural dimensions of games and play that can be uncovered by formal analytical approaches.

It should be highlighted that while based on principles of openness, respect and inclusivity for conducting research in multiple, fundamentally differing and maybe even incompatible ways, the strategic principle chosen for the Centre is *dialectical*, which goes beyond simple interdisciplinary dialogue or co-existence. A true dialectic process includes recognition of differences and engagement in a process where the initial conflicting positions are both elaborated and developed further, with an overall synthetic aim that does not aim to suppress conflicts but rather use them as dynamic drivers for change (McKeon, 1954).

In the case of CoE-GameCult research agenda, two overarching research questions were chosen, to facilitate creation of such dialectic: (1) What are the key processes and characteristics of meaning making that are significant for understanding changing game cultures? And (2) How is cultural agency being reshaped, redistributed and renegotiated in games and play, and in their associated societal contexts? These two broad questions (or, more appropriately, research agendas) were then further framed with the help of a particular version of the "circuits of culture" model (Johnson, 1986), which we adapted so it would support a comprehensive and analytically multidimensional game cultural research strategy. This would strategically connect with both the forms of games, practices of play and cultural contexts surrounding both of them, while also addressing societal structures of power, production and consumption – all aiming to create an environment with maximal amounts of potential contacts for researchers working with some specific aspect of this complex whole.

Consequently, we also did not want the Centre to be limited into any single type or aspect of games, but rather aimed at an environment that facilitates multiple interconnected studies that are informed by several interdependent moments in the "life cycle of a game". When combined with the critical perspectives opened by inquiry into meaning making and agency, the four key thematic areas for study – creation of games, meaning and form of games, players of games, and the societal frames of games – are both specific and overlapping enough so that they direct the multiple research teams both to focus, specialize, as well as to better explicate the multidimensionality, complexity and various problems associated with contemporary games and their developing cultures (see Figure 2, next page).

Figure 2 – The organisational model of four key thematic research areas into the study of game cultures, in the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies.

During the early years of Centre's operations, the surrounding "culture wars" and "science wars" have probably rather aggravated than eased off. In Finland too, there have been Twitter wars and political campaigning that have put into question the "political bias" of academic research, and there has been demands for scholars to restrict themselves into conducting only neutral and "pure" science. It is a sign of the underlying confusion that the same conservative voices have also asked for academic research to be held accountable for the actual value and impact of public research money universities have been given. These populists do not appear to understand that such demands can be most efficiently answered by socially and politically informed and committed research, which is not "disinterested", but rather strongly committed and engaged in improving the society. It should be noted that all major research funding organisations are today interested in such societal impact, and also our Centre of Excellence is expected to produce "Impact Narratives", where we are required to outline the societally committed nature of our research work. Derived from analyses of emerging game cultural phenomena and their underlying tensions and power conflicts, the first period of work from the Centre has produced and reported efforts in following areas: inclusive game creation, exploring play in public spaces, examining (e)sports in relation to physical, mental, and social well-being, and promoting "demoscene" as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Research in all these topics has involved multiple methodologies and contextual framings, rooted in understanding how both the expressive forms and real-world agency of variously empowered and disempowered people interact and contribute to situations and meanings in game cultures. This work

has profited from perspectives opened by many pioneering works into "situated knowledges" and related critiques of simplified objectivity claims (e.g. Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Haraway, 1988).

### FINAL NOTE: FROM CONFLICTS TO DIALECTICS

The short historical overview presented in this article hopefully serves at least a dual purpose. Firstly, it is educational to notice that there has always been fundamental disagreements in how research should be conducted, what is valuable (or not) as a subject for research; it is just sad to note that the related disagreements are today perhaps even more aggravated and visible than before. Game studies has emerged into a charged intellectual and political landscape and is by no means immune to such fundamental disagreements and conflicts. Secondly, and on a more optimistic note, it should be said that there have all the time also been multiple ongoing efforts to build bridges between various opposing factions, and to learn from the interplay of diverse modes of inquiry. The above discussion about the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies highlights a certain strategy for producing a multi-voiced, dynamic and dialectic environment for conducting cultural game studies, but this Centre is by no means alone in the pursuit of such goals. The dramatic oppositions, conflicts and war-derived metaphors are just too often getting disproportional amounts of attention in the historical analyses and synthetic overviews of the scholarly landscape. It is worth remembering that the dialectic between opposing views and coordination when faced by contradictions is a fundamental part of science and also a key philosophical method that has a long and sustained history, reaching to Hegel, Plato, and elsewhere (Maybee, 2019).

Finally, it is evident that the tension between more abstracted forms of intellectual formalism and the subjectively experienced and bodily situated meanings of games and play was addressed already at the very earliest stages of game studies and is thus informing its philosophical roots. It can be claimed that this conflict is even exactly the reason why already Friedrich Schiller, a German philosopher and poet, having experienced the consequences of such divide in the eighteenth century, developed his ("proto game studies") theory of "play drive" to identify the area where our idealist and rationalist processes ("form drive") and sensuous, emotional and bodily dimensions ("sense drive") could be set into productive equilibrium. Schiller argues that being able to both be receptive of the world and also to liberate ones reason, a playing human will be able to have a twofold experience simultaneously, "when he was at once conscious of his freedom and sensible of his existence, when he at once felt himself as matter and came to know himself as spirit" (Schiller, 1796/2004, p. 73 [Letter XIV]). The final conclusion of Schiller was articulated in the famous dictum: "For, to declare it once and for all, Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing*." (Ibid., p. 80 [Letter XV]). It is both ironic and fitting that Schiller's dated and gendered language

carries an ethical and epistemological message that has perhaps its strongest contemporary heirs in the areas of feminist and queer game studies with their ambitious explorations on the affective, bodily and historical foundations of games and play in culture (e.g. in Anable, 2018; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, and elsewhere).

Indeed, such ambition, bridge-building and synthetic vision is something that is also needed in the field of game studies today. When approached from the dialectic perspective promoted by this article, formalism and cultural or critical approaches into game studies are not actually "opposites" at all. Various forms of scholarship, like all human thought and practices come with implied or explicit political consequences or tendencies that can indeed be oppositional, but like the lessons in poststructuralist though have taught us, none such discourse remains completely under its authorial intentions as it operates in culture and society. Formalist tools of game analysis can very well be used (and have been used) to carry out feminist, queer or politically subversive readings of games. It is only when various approaches are kept in isolation, unaware of alternative perspectives, with their associated alternative experiences and values, when the limitations of such approaches start to aggravate.

The precept of dialectical game studies could be to remind us how no form of scholarship is an island – none of them are sufficient in themselves, but all of them can play their role in helping us to analyse, understand, and generate impactful ways to act on basis of that understanding. In the end, it should not be a taboo to say that we need theoretical and methodological work that not only acknowledges the multiple "knowledge interests" (Habermas, 1972) that are all relevant for game studies today, but also undertakes to carefully produce deeper, dialectic understanding from the conflicting and intersecting perspectives they open.

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# Torture, Play, and the Black Experience



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**1.** I invoke the phrase "descended from slaves" because this essay argues specifically that torture—as a trauma that is passed down from one generation to the next—is a unique part of this specific subset of the Black experience in North America. I mean this to be an entry point into a larger discussion about trauma within communities of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) globally who have faced racial discrimination. Although this particular experience is a key part of the analysis this essay performs, I want to be explicit that I do not feel that being descended from slaves is either an essential part of the BIPOC experience in North America or globally. Yet this tradition is the one I was raised within, and so I feel driven to speak to it as a way to reconsider a definition of play.

## ABSTRACT

This essay considers how the experience of Black folk descended from slaves in North America helps us to rethink a definition of play that has been largely informed by scholars and philosophers working within a White European tradition.[1] This tradition of play, theorized most famously by Dutch Art Historian Johan Huizinga, French Sociologist Roger Caillois, Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget, and New Zealander Brian Sutton-Smith reads play in a mostly positive sense and asserts that certain practices, namely torture, are taboo and thus cannot be play. I argue that this approach to play is short-sighted and linked to a troubling global discourse that renders the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) invisible. In other words, by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds an epistemic bias towards people with access to

the conditions of leisure. Indeed, torture helps to paint a more complete picture where the most heinous potentials of play are addressed alongside the most pleasant, yet in so doing the trauma of slavery is remembered. In rethinking this phenomenology, I aim to detail the more insidious ways that play functions as a tool of subjugation. One that hurts as much as it heals and one that has been complicit in the systemic erasure of BIPOC people from the domain of leisure.

## INTRODUCTION

This essay considers how the experience of Black folk descended from slaves in North America helps us to rethink a definition of play that has been largely informed by scholars and philosophers working within a White European tradition. This tradition of play, theorized most famously by Dutch Art Historian Johan Huizinga, French Sociologist Roger Caillois, Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget, and New Zealander Brian Sutton-Smith reads play in a mostly positive sense and asserts that certain practices, namely torture, are taboo and thus cannot be play. I argue that this approach to play is short-sighted and linked to a troubling global discourse that renders the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) invisible. In other words, by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds an epistemic bias towards people with access to the conditions of leisure. Indeed, torture helps to paint a more complete picture where the most heinous potentials of play are addressed alongside the most pleasant, yet in so doing the trauma of slavery is remembered. In rethinking this phenomenology, I aim to detail the more insidious ways that play functions as a tool of subjugation. One that hurts as much as it heals and one that has been complicit in the systemic erasure of BIPOC people from the domain of leisure.

There is presently an urgent social imperative for this work. The Black Lives Matter protests that were staged globally in the summer of 2020 speak explicitly toward how the erasure of BIPOC people from White social spaces in North America continues to subjugate entire communities through the threat of torture, violence, and worse. Practices that divide and exclude only exacerbate the issue. For this reason, I argue that it is crucial to rethink the politics of play in our present moment. Approaches to play that misconstrue it as an innately good or positive activity play into this problematic as they ultimately intone that those with access to leisure time engage in activities that are generally positive, constructive, and wholesome. We must urgently rethink the very definition of play so as to make space for those it has oppressed as well as those it has elevated. By doing this we recognize how the politics of play have also set the conditions for toxic communities to thrive within the space of the alibi it provides. After all, gamergate, the alt-right, steroid use in sports, and hazing rituals of all sorts all owe something to play as well. The tradition of Black people descended from slaves specifically shows how we might use these tragic moments of play to consider a more inclusive and also reparative definition of the term.

The road toward a more inclusive study of play has been a bumpy one. To this end, I find it useful to disambiguate studies of games from the study of play. Game studies, a younger area which draws on many canonical studies of play, has been more proactive in addressing inclusivity. I concur with Kishonna Gray's assessment of the problem, "a focus should be placed on how technology is mobilized to fulfill the project of white masculine supremacy" (Gray, 2020, Introduction). Technology here is implicitly theorized as games. Games allow players to flirt with the pleasurable aspects of White Supremacy by granting them the agency to engage in what Lisa Nakamura terms identity tourism (Nakamura, 1995, paragraph), and what David Leonard considers digital minstrelsy (Leonard, 2006, p.87). For these scholars, and others like Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm who see an immediate and direct correlation between the textual content of games and the everyday politics of gamers, representation matters (Malkowski and Russworm, 2017, p.3). But what if these theorizations that address inclusivity as a problem of gamers, games, and gaming are too specific? This essay aims to consider how these insights from the intersectional analysis of games and gamers might be considered if they are applied first and foremost to the practice of play.

The problem of inclusivity in games that the above scholarship engages with is symptomatic of a larger problem in play studies that the above scholarship draws upon. In order to address the problem of inclusivity in play studies, this essay will engage in yet another taboo—it will attempt to challenge and decolonize White European thought through the theory and language used by White European critical theory. Although I admire the work of theorists like Samantha Blackmon and Treaandrea M. Russworm who show how the language of the "mix tape" can be used to recenter Black women in the narrative around games that seeks to decenter their importance (Blackmon and Russworm, 2020, paragraph 11), I choose to challenge White European scholarship from within by addressing how a theory of torture may prompt us to rethink a popular, yet tautological, definition of play. The unfortunate consequence of this decision is I spend less time in this essay discussing contemporary games and contemporary work on inclusivity in game studies as would be typical, because I will be focusing specifically on amending the work taken up by a lineage of White European theory that has historically excluded BIPOC on its own terms. Consider it a personal conceit of my own, that I, a Black North American philosopher and historian, might find engaging in this particular avenue of argumentation important.

At the heart of my argument lies the premise that theories of play that see it as a constructive and positive form of leisure must work to reconcile this point with the fact that play is often hurtful, toxic, and haphazard. Historically this theorizing has taken place in several domains. Johan Huizinga neglects gambling in the entirety of *Homo Ludens* because of its associations with the amoral

connotations that were associated with the activity at the time (Huizinga, 2016). Roger Caillois uses the term "corruption" to discuss forms of play that he finds troubling or unpalatable (Caillois, 2001).[2] Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev Vygotsky's (1966) entire theory of play—and the educational theory of constructivism that follow—are predicated on the idea that play is precisely the mechanism that structures learning. These ideas have been tremendously important in game studies as well. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's influential reading of Huizinga's magic circle (2004) has been so often uncritically cited as a way to explain games as a positive activity that it prompted Zimmerman to clarify his position in an op-ed for *Gamasutra* entitled, "Jerked Around by the Magic Circle." (Zimmerman, 2012). A host of scholarship on games and learning, serious games, and games and literacy builds on Piaget and Vygotsky's theory of play and cognition. But play is not always constructive, it can also be oppressive and traumatic.

Some theorists have worked to reconcile these radically different aspects of play. Brian Sutton-Smith argues (1997) that play is a term which holds a variety of valences, and is thus used to achieve a variety of rhetorical ends. He argues that play is often used to advance a perspective that assumes playfulness relates to progress (learning through play), fate (play of chance), power (the play of sport and contest), identity (rituals of group identity), imaginary (play and creativity), the self (playful hobbies that result in individuation), or frivolous (play as an idle, leisurely activity) (pp. 8-11). In approaching play through a rhetorical lens, however, Smith treats all of the above rhetorics as equal in impact. I differ from Smith, however, as in this essay I argue that play itself is a power relationship. The moment one engages in what Judith Butler (1990, p.xxxiii) terms a performative act and plays, or terms an activity play, they are conjuring the power of play. As this essay will explain in detail later, this act is an uneasy and violent grammar that casts the player as a subject and the game and all other players in it as objects. A radical phenomenology of play centers on how it can be productive of pain (as opposed to pleasure) in order to recenter the BIPOC narratives that center around the traumatic and violent aspects of games and play.

The trauma of slavery in North America is not only remembered through story, it is also memorialized in some forms of play. Amongst the most mythic and controversial games that young Black children played in the antebellum—or post Civil War—United States was "Hide the Switch." In this game players would root around for a hidden switch and once found the finder was granted free reign to flog the other players while they parried. Historians considering the game's persistence within slave culture have been somewhat challenged by it as play of the game seemingly reinforces the martial conditions of bondage. Many explanations have been offered. Some say that the game allowed children to practice avoiding punishment, and others suggest that the game allowed enslaved Black children a brief moment of liberation—allowing them to role-play being the "master" (King, 2011, pp.117-8). Both explanations are ultimately uncomfortable as they work to reconcile the violence of the experience of Black

**2.** It is worth noting here Rosa Eldepes' historical work that reveals a critique of Roger Caillois by Theodore Adorno for holding "cryptofascist tendencies." Adorno was contended that Caillois was uncritical in how he often defaulted to a sublime notion of the "natural order." (Eldepes, 2014, p.9) Although I agree with this critique, I take an ambivalent stance toward the political beliefs of the Caillois and the other play scholars described in this essay. I believe that the theorizing of play done by these figures is problematic only insofar as they adopt a moral stance toward the concept. By recentering the ways that play can be torturous, "corrupt," or even painful in our collective knowledge, we curb fascist, racist, and sexist tendencies that set White culture or "civilization" against a "barbaric" natural order.

folk descended from slaves with the inevitable lighthearted connotations of play. Violence, specifically torture, is either reduced to a carnivalesque inversion of power dynamics where the victim becomes the oppressor or violence is reduced to discipline—a tactic for living within its inevitability.

I define torture within the Foucauldian tradition. As a practice, it is a long-term form of discipline that uses coercive techniques to subjugate people. This definition is a key part of this essay's argumentation. I argue within this essay that it is a mistake to view other more "innocent" connotations of torture— tickle torture, BDSM—as anything other than the above. For even in the most innocent and pleasurable acts of play, we subtly discipline those around us to engage in unspoken rules. Relatedly, I define pleasure in an affective sense. Thus, pleasure is that which drives desire. Pleasure is often juxtaposed against pain, another affect, or that which is torturous. Torture and play are both practices. They produce pleasure and/or pain, which are affects.

In this essay, I gesture toward brutal, disciplinary, and militaristic torture, because I feel they are undertheorized and taboo in the study of games and play. The relationship between torture and pleasure, on the other hand, has been better theorized in work that analyzes social practice within BDSM communities worldwide. J. Tuomas Harviainen's work shows how BDSM might be considered play (Harviainen, 2011), yet it—and other similar analyses—stop short of including military and disciplinary torture within their definitions (Weiss, 2011, p.211). This because BDSM is theorized here as a form of consensual play. I feel this definition is putting the cart before the horse, an approach to torture that understands it as that which is always disciplining would read consent itself as a technique of mitigation against the barbaric tendencies of torture.

This essay argues that we must theorize how military and disciplinary torture with its connotations of pain and not pleasure (and not pleasurable pain) should by understood as play in an argumentative grammar that allows torture in the BDSM scene to be understood as play. What's more, I advocate for an approach to defining play that overcomes what I see as a fundamental taboo: play is allowed to be pleasurable, but not torturous. Yet so much of play is torturous, from BDSM, to memorizing long lists of rules, to exhausting one's physical limits, to simply playing Monopoly. This seeming paradox—that torture both is and is not play—can be resolved. Torture *is* play, and it reveals a good deal about how play works to subjugate and discipline people.

An approach to play that recognizes how it is often experienced as torture might help us to better understand how the application of the term has been historically used to exclude BIPOC, women, trans, and non-binary folk from historically White and masculine spaces of play as well.[3] When play is only theorized as pleasure, minoritized people are made to act as killjoys when they describe how their experience was torturous instead.[4] An inclusive phenomenology of play must contend both with how play includes (through pleasure) as well as how play excludes (through torture).

**3.** Mahi-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt and Thomas Apperley have argued that approaches to inclusivity in gaming often involve assimilation into a problematic heteronormative male status quo. I would add to this that the assimilative norms of inclusivity frequently suggest that Black folks should assimilate to a White supremacist status quo as well. (Butt and Apperley, 2018, p.39).

**4.** Russworm makes this point well in their essay on game history that explains how the history of games is itself a White supremacist enterprise (or in their words "White. White. White.") The stories of BIPOC people, developers, and designers are often occluded in historical projects that center White designers and developers of games. (Russworm, 2019).

Although the above example can be interpreted through any of Smith's rhetorics of play, the discomfort I noted within the example relate to the relationship between play here and cultural identity. "Hide the Switch" predominantly exists within an oral history of slavery passed down through generations of Black folk, and is kept separate from the play space of today's playground. It is best pondered as an artifact of a bygone era better left in the past. The social repression "Hide the Switch" is both a process through which the dynamics of play are culturally controlled and regulated. Similar to the hyper vigilant policing of Black people in early 21$^{st}$ century America, Black children's games are also repressed and policed. Small and invisible, this policing of play of contributes to the cultural erasure of BIPOC today. Thus in play, because the brutality of slavery cannot be shared, we are left with a concept that relates to torture only in so far as it is pleasurable.

The provocations above can only hold if we concede that torture is a form of play. This problem is philosophical, not categorical. Because there are many reasons that disciplinary torture might or might not be categorized as a form of play, the first half of this essay is dedicated to addressing these reasons and developing a logical framework for its inclusion as a form of play. The second half of this essay considers the relationship between torture and the experience of Black people descended from slavery, and what this might add to our understanding of play and games today.

**TORTURE IS PLAY**

Ten children walk in a playground casually speaking to one another. One of the kids, reaches out to another and cries "You're it!" The tagged child lunges at another in a desperate bid to rid themselves of the stigma. Soon the group scatters as a melee ensues. The game is tag, and its very grammar suggests that even innocent play may well be a violent activity. The game divides players into subjects and objects. Once a player is tagged they are moved to reconcile this by tagging another. The very basis of this engagement is that one player has been reduced to the status of an other, an object even, in the game's vernacular—like it or not, they are "it." "It" implies less than human. "It" has been fundamental to the lexicon of bigotry and White supremacy in America since before the American Revolutionary War in 1776. The very basis of "it" equivocates human-ness with object-ness as it strips "it" from the fundamental rights granted to other subjects—namely consent. One does not consent to play tag, nor does one offer their consent to become "it" in tag. In this, the simplest of play, it is revealed that play is not a relationship between subjects. Instead, it is a relationship between subject and object.

The critical hinge upon which the relationship between torture and play swings is the question of consent. Play, as many contemporary game design theorists have argued, is a fundamentally consensual relationship (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p.474; Stenros and Bowman, 2018, p.417). Because consent is

central to many definitions of play, we are left with the paradox explained in the introduction where consensual torture satisfies a definition of play while non-consensual torture does not. The examples given to justify this distinction are almost always formal. They speak more to a desire of what play *should be* rather than from an observation of what play *is*. Is consent negotiated when we play with a computer or when we play with ourselves? Play mediates in ways that are not as straightforward as they may at first seem. In fact, it forces us to reconcile the violence that lies at the heart of innumerable social relationships.

The consensual relationship structured by play often works by way of another term—that play is negotiated. As Miguel Sicart (2014) explains, "We play by negotiating the purposes of play, how far we want to extend the influences of the play activity, and how much we play for the purpose of playing or for the purpose of personal expression" (p.16). Here, Sicart nests the idea of negotiation within the concept of play, building on the prior work of Jesper Juul who sought to locate the idea of negotiation within the concept of the game instead. For Juul, all games have negotiable consequences, negotiation being a key differentiation between what is a game and what is war. In either case, whether negotiation is considered fundamental to play or games, it reflects a broader understanding of either phenomenon that is consensual. To negotiate assumes that the player respects the other player's ideas, positions, and sovereignty. When players negotiate, they treat one another as fellow humans, and not as objects. Yet, so often play is not negotiated. David Leonard argues that in sports video games where the presumed White player is invited to take on the role of Black athletes, without being forced to live through the trauma of Black experience, play is not negotiated (Leonard, 2004, paragraph 5). The Black community has not consented to this form of identity tourism, yet this sort of minstrelsy is an unfortunately common form of play. And to the larger point of this section, negotiation is more of an ideal than an observed reality of games and play today.

Others concur that not all play is consensual. I want to signal an appreciation here of work that acknowledges how the assumed norms of consent that are hailed by the "magic circle of play" are often transgressed by White men. In her autoethnographic writing on the topic, Emma Vossen explains, "Unfortunately, because of contemporary practices surrounding game play, most video game play that I have participated in has contained practices that were not consensual or enjoyable, such as harassment, gender-based insults, or trash talk" (Vossen, 2018, p.206). To better appreciate how play is wielded as an instrument of power, we must begin by recognizing those accounts of play, which would otherwise be lost to a definition that foregrounds its voluntary nature.

My argument relies on three premises. First, drawing on the work of Johan Huizinga (2016), I argue that play is voluntary if you are the player (p.7). Second, building on the work done by Miguel Sicart recently, and Cifford Geertz historically, I concur that play is a way of being (Sicart, 2014; Geertz, 1972). And third, I am moving from the proposition laid forth in Roger Caillois' (2001)

work, that play is not necessarily voluntary for the played (p.52). And therefore based on these premises, if play is voluntary for the player, but not necessarily voluntary for the played, then play is a subject-object relationship and not a subject-subject relationship. Following this, if play is a subject-object relationship, then torture is a form of play even in its most brutal and disgusting forms.

### Play is voluntary (for the player)

The first point that must be addressed is the voluntary nature of play. The idea that play is voluntary has been part of play theory since Johan Huizinga penned *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga (2016) writes:

> "First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could be at best a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process. It is something added thereto and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment. Obviously, freedom must be understood here in the wider sense that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism. It may be objected that this freedom does not exist for the animal and the child; they *must* play because their instinct drives them to it and because it serves to develop their bodily faculties and their powers of selection…Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom." (pp.7-8)

Here when Huizinga argues that play is always and essentially a voluntary activity, he finds himself considering animal and child play. He considers these categories specifically because, as he articulates them, children are yet to develop the rational faculties we attribute to adult humans. He is wary that the subjectivities of children and animals may be different than that of adults, and thus they may be driven to play by instinct. It's worth noting here that comparisons to animals have long been a White supremacist tactic used to dehumanize BIPOC. I make this comparison, because as I will argue in more depth later, the experience of Blackness holds remarkable similarities to the experience of play. We can find these similarities here—albeit in a different shape—in Huizinga's comparison of children and animals.

Despite these comparisons, it's important to note here that Huizinga is situating voluntarism within the assumption that every participant of a game is a player. But what if someone decides they don't want to play? Say in the example of tag posed earlier. In this example, if one acts as a spoilsport and chooses not to play after they are tagged, they still become "it." The suggestion that play is voluntary neglects all the instances where for individuals play is not voluntary. It presents a radically subjective vision of play instead of one that is always already constrained by a shifting set of social relationships and experiences. The spoilsport still engages in play even if they don't engage with the game.[5] By recognizing that play is only voluntary for the individual initiating play, we

**5.** In his reading of Huizinga, play theorist Peter McDonald describes the figure of the spoilsport as being key to understanding the free and liberating dimensions that Huizinga wanted to theorize within in play. For play to be truly liberating, in Huizinga's philosophy, one must have the freedom to transgress the rules and spoil a game (McDonald, 2019, p.257).

demystify the spoilsport by showing how their violence toward the game may a result of another player's violence toward them and their feelings.

Play is not voluntary for those who are subject to it. Yet, in all cases here—that of the child, other, and animal—pleasure is offered as the primary explanation for what drives individuals to play. In pleasure we find a common link between the actions of subjects and the actions of objects. If we are to understand how objects play, we must consider, as Miguel Sicart does, the relationship between play and pleasure.

### *Play is a way of being*

Moving away from an instrumental understanding of play, which defines play as an activity, Miguel Sicart (2014) posits instead that play is a way of being which exists (to some degree) within all activity (p.6). Sicart's work is a sharp turn away from Huizinga's approach to play which, pioneered by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, p.95), suggests that play thrives in ritual spaces marked distinct from everyday life. Although the opacity of the magic circle has been questioned by many, these questions provide what is perhaps the best proof of Sicart's philosophy. Play exists within all things, but is often focused during events, within play-objects (like games), and in particular spaces.

Sicart's radical philosophy of play prompts a rethinking of questions that have long excited curiosity about the field. It makes no sense to oppose labor and leisure if we can locate play within both concepts. Similarly, it helps us to rethink definitions of game like those proposed by Jesper Juul (2005) which though comprehensive also show how many exceptions and grey areas exist in the word's common usage. Sicart suggests that games are "play objects" and are thus objects that relate to others in so far as they are played with.

Then, in defining play, Sicart suggests several characteristic that this mode of being takes on. Play is contextual he argues, varying in degree by circumstance. It is also carnivalesque, a way of challenging traditional understandings of status and power. Sicart also argues that play is appropriative, suggesting that it can latch on to almost any circumstance and transform it. Finally, and most salient to the arguments in this essay around torture, Sicart (2014) argues that play is pleasurable:

> It is pleasurable but the pleasures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happiness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not playing. Let's not talk about play as fun but as pleasurable, opening us to the immense variations of pleasure in this world." (p.3)

The substitution here, of pleasure and fun, is a helpful way to understand how play exists in the world. If we look to pleasure as opposed to fun, we turn away from the rhetoric of play as progress that tends to see play as a positive

activity. This thinking helps to explain how some forms of play, like BDSM, which is not always fun, is also a form of play. Following this line of reasoning, should brutal, disciplinary torture also be considered play? Some might draw the line here. Yet, I feel these approaches to play are naïve. Although there is a strong sentiment amongst many that the phenomenology of play is wholly positive, we know from the feminist accounts such as Vossen's above that this is far from the truth. Thus, I argue that brutal, disciplinary torture is always, unfortunately, a form of play—I maintain that this is wholly consistent with Sicart's definition of the term. In order to argue this, I draw a distinction between play*er* and play*ed*. This distinction is significant in so far as it begs us to rethink how we classify others in multiplayer games.

### Play is not necessarily voluntary for the played

The distinction between player and played has been an invisible and substantively policed distinction in play scholarship. It is best brought to focus by Roger Caillois in the introduction to *Man, Play, and Games*, as he considers the historical circumstance of Huizinga's work. Caillois attributes the curious omission of games in Huizinga's work on play to the somewhat sordid connotations they had in early 20th century society. As Huizinga sought to construct a theory of play that would show how all civilized society related to the concept, he was forced to omit games because of their close connotations to street life and gambling. Caillois (2001) argues that if Huizinga was to include morally dubious games in his theory of play, he would undermine his assertion that all civilization springs from play (p.5). Hence, the morally grey act of gambling itself undermines the idea of civility that Huizinga's play is premised upon. In other words, games—or as this essay considers them: the played—are taken to be an invisible and thus inconsequential part of the play phenomenon.

Caillois' work continues this mode of policing. In making a case for how war functions as a game, Caillois acknowledges war's most brutal and amoral characteristics with a caveat. War is a game, Caillois (2001) argues, but when brutal, it is play that has been corrupted:

> Various restrictions on violence fall into disuse. Operations are no longer limited to frontier provinces, strongholds, and military objectives. They are no longer conducted according to a strategy that once made war itself resemble a game. War is far removed from the tournament or duel, i.e. from regulated combat in an enclosure, and now finds its fulfillment in massive destruction and the massacre of entire populations. (p.55)

Play is not necessarily voluntary for the played. Caillois was aware of this, in these remarks he argues that brutal moments of war is a "corrupted" form of competition. Where Huizinga reserved that moments of grotesque and extreme warfare ceased to be play (Huizinga, 2016, p.9), Caillois' recovers a conversation about play and games free

of what he considered somewhat arbitrary delineations about what could not be play in Huizinga's work. For instance, gambling.

The object of massive destruction in the game of war does not volunteer. Nor does the object of abuse in "Hide the Switch." In both examples, play has turned grizzly and corrupt. Although there have been attempts to make invisible the violence of play, I argue that it is important to recognize that play is not always a voluntary activity. When we neglect what Caillois refers to as the corrupt aspects of play, we participate in an act of policing that aims to remove BIPOC from discourse around play and games.

### Play as a subject–object relationship

The above has been an attempt to justify three premises which lead to the conclusion that play is a subject-object relationship. I argue that play is voluntary for the player (but not the played), that play is way of being in the world (and not an activity), and that play is not necessarily voluntary for the played. For these reasons, I feel there is a strong case to be made for how play constitutes a subject-object relationship.

One concern that one might have at this proof is that the played does not necessarily occupy and object position and so therefore play is not necessarily a subject-object relationship. For example, if both participants in tag willingly engage one another in the game, play is then a subject-subject relationship, and therefore a consensual relationship.

This counterexample is important as it highlights a simple way that this argument can be misunderstood. I am not arguing that either player in this example loses a sense of subjectivity when played with, or an ability to consent, I am instead arguing that neither characteristic is necessary to a definition of play. On the other hand, it is necessary to a definition of play that locates play as a fundamental part of being to recognize that play is not necessarily a relationship that invokes consent. When we play, we transform others and the world around us into play-objects. The destructive and violent aspects of play must be contended with if we are to understand the term.

The definition of play as a subject-object relationship leaves us with a new paradox to contend with. If play is a subject-object relationship, then how should one reconcile their own subjective experience with the fact that through play they will be treated as an object? In order to answer this question, we must turn to philosophy that concerns itself the phenomenon of double-consciousness and the Black experience.

## TORTURE AND THE BLACK AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in an attempt to explain the unique experience of Black Americans. He explains Blackness by offering the metaphor of the veil as a way to understand the Black experience, where an individual must reconcile their identity through two lenses—a projection of how

they appear within society (how the veil appears to others) alongside a historic and communal understanding of the self (life behind the veil). He refers to this as double-consciousness, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." (p.5) The depth of experience to which Du Bois refers is a result of the dehumanization wrought by slavery and its consequences. In America, even today, Black folk are constantly negotiating stereotypes that conspire to reduce them to objects. The Black American experience, that of double-consciousness, is thus one where one must occupy and negotiate positions of both subject and object.

In order to show how the experience of torture relates to the Black American experience, we must consider torture on both a societal level and an individual level. By exploring torture within these two modalities, this essay prompts a discussion of play that recenters Black people within our conversations around play and games and nods toward a radical reconstitution of torture within all of our understandings of play and games.

### State Sponsored Torture

Torture, as part of the institution of slavery, is a disciplinary mechanism in this project of dehumanization. Just as Huizinga and Caillois' thought on war categorized certain forms of destructive and barbaric play as corrupt (or not "civilized") the philosophy of torture contends with these same boundaries. William Schultz (2007) notes them when defining torture in his collection *The Phenomenon of Torture: Readings and Commentary*:

> Somehow inflicting pain on a creature is less acceptable, less "civilized" than doing away with them altogether. That is why we go to great lengths to make sure that the process of capital execution is as sterile and painless as possible. If we actually appeared to be enjoying another's suffering, if we indulged too openly that part of us that revels in revenge on those who do us wrong, we would see something about ourselves mighty important to keep hidden. The State is meant to be a projection of our values, a mirror of our best selves, and hence, though the State may do away with criminals, it may not gloat in their demise. (p 8)

Of course this critique relates mainly to state-sponsored torture, such as that performed by U.S. military personnel on Iraqis in the detention camp at Abu Ghraib. Although these boundaries are often transgressed, in warfare, even torture is policed. Just as Huizinga and Caillois sought to exclude games that would turn violent or exploitative against vulnerable populations, Schultz and Méndez illustrate how torture is similarly policed in definitions of warfare. All pretenses of civility in matters of both play and war must be abandoned when torture is invoked. Despite this unfortunate conclusion, the practice of torture lies at the heart of both.

Michael Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* begins with a discussion of torture. The book, often remembered for its discussion of panopticism, opens with a vignette of a man being drawn and quartered in mid 18th century France. The act is described in detail, "Then the executioner, his sleeves rolled up, took the steel pincers, which had been especially made for the occasion, and which were about a foot and a half long, and pulled first at the calf of the right leg, then at the thigh, and from there at the two fleshy parts of the right arm; then at the breasts" (pp.3-4), precisely to invoke a contrast between the seen and the unseen. Torture, which used to be an act of public spectacle, used to exert a social and behavioral pressure upon social bodies, had by the time of his writing in the late 20th century been rendered invisible in most Western societies.

The critical takeaway from *Discipline and Punish* is that although it's been made invisible, the threat of torture lingers within a variety of social institutions as a mode of social control. Just as the spotlight of Bentham's watchtower shines upon prisoners in order to occlude shape of the guards monitoring their behavior (Foucault, 1977, p.201)—and by extension the ever-present threat of torture—we must consider whether games also act as a similar disciplinary apparatus, concealing the possibility of torture within their play. Is it possible that when we challenge or begin a game that a faint hint of danger lies beneath the supposed connotations of fun? After all, if the object of the challenge were to decline, they might be labeled stubborn, or a bad sport. Some games, games related to the experience of Black people descended from slaves in North America like "Hide the Switch."

### Intimate Torture

Of course, Foucault's writing on torture is not limited only to thought on the state. He returns to the idea in the *History of Sexuality*, where he notes that torture is used in tandem with and alongside confession as a way of understanding another body's sexuality. Torture and confession are mechanisms for extracting truth from people, "Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied [confession] like a shadow, and supported [confession] when it could go no further: the dark twins." (Foucault, 1978, p.59). For Foucault truth in this sense relates specifically to the truth of one's sexuality. Du Bois also contends with torture in this more personal, intimate sense. He explains how torture was used as a method for extracting the truth from slaves. Intimate torture relates specifically to the ways in which truth is gathered from people seen as objects—as less than human.

The slave's body is seen as an extension of the master's body, explains Du Bois, when relating the phenomenon of torture to the Black American experience. In his essay, "Torture and Truth," he draws on an Aristotelian construction of torture in order to show how Black slaves were reduced to an object status through the apparatus of torture:

The slave is a part of the master—he is, as it were, a part of the body, alive but yet separated from it. (Politics 1255b)

Thus, according to Aristotle's logic, representative or not, the slave's truth is the master's truth; it is in the body of the slave that the master's truth lies, and it is in torture that his truth is revealed. The torturer reaches through the master to the slave's body, and extracts the truth from it. (Du Bois, 2007, p.14)

Through Aristotle's writing Du Bois shrewdly points both to the association of the slave (and therefore Black people generally) with the body—the body which is made an object through a traditional understanding of the Cartesian dualism—and its intimate relationship with the master. The slave is the object (body) in a relationship where the master is the subject (mind). This understanding of torture and truth is mirrored in the player-played relationship where the player takes the role of subject and played takes on the role of object.

As to what truth is extracted through the intimate relation of torture (and play), BDSM becomes an interesting practice to consider in so far as the truth derived from practice is that of one's sexuality. BDSM play, as theorized by many within the game studies community,[6] is far removed from the experience of Black people descended from slaves. Within the tradition of Du Bois, it is difficult to locate an example of torture that has been similarly recuperated. Torture, according to Du Bois, is always a violent expression. Practices around safe words within the BDSM community allow players the space to practice torture—albeit a softer and more socially appropriate form of torture than that which is practiced by the military—without accidentally harming one another. This essay reads interventions such as safe words as an intervention intended to blunt the dangerous, toxic, and harmful potentials of play. Importantly, in the spaces of toxic game play highlighted by theorists like Vossen (2018) and Gray (2011), no safe word exists to extract minoritized people from abusive conversations with White men. Yet, sadly, I feel that this only furthers the points above that play is not a voluntary activity, and that by getting in touch with its traumatic aspects, we engage in the work of repair that must acknowledge shared histories of pain.

## RECENTERING BLACKNESS IN GAMES AND PLAY

One of seminal voices of Black feminism, bell hooks, begins the essay "Understanding Patriarchy," with an anecdote about a game of marbles. In the story a four-year-old hooks asks repeatedly to join her brother and father in the game. Her father repeatedly scolds her and tells her "no," until the pressure mounts to a point where her father breaks a board from the door and beats her repeating "girls can't do what boys do" (hooks, 2010, p.2). Of course, the story here is an illustration of the intersectional nature of oppression and how what hooks terms "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" is internalized even by Black folk. For the purposes of this essay, hooks' story reminds us of exactly the kinds of stories that are lost to the White European definition of play that

**6.** As noted in the introduction, "dark play" and the often-related BDSM play have been a fascination of both game studies scholars and some contemporary scholars of play. These accounts of play generally share the common premise that play is voluntary and consensual. As Jaakko Stenros observes, the very category of "dark play" is predicated on the premise that most play is "positive." (Stenros, 2019, p.13) My account of play aims to deepen this work on by suggesting that play is rarely voluntary. For more on this see The Dark Side of Gameplay (Mortensen, Linderoth, and Brown, 2018) and Transgression in Games and Play (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018).

sees it as productive of pleasure and not pain. hooks' experience is an earnest retelling of how play can produce affects of trauma, pain, and abuse. In a sense, it is a reminder of how the continued and shared trauma of slavery continues to haunt the Black community today.

Let me offer another example of how a definition of play that embraces its fraught and painful tendencies helps to recenter the experience of minoritized people. Jeremy O. Harris' play "Slave Play" is a story about a trio of inter-racial couples who are engaging in sex therapy because the Black partners are no longer attracted to their mates. The play brings race to the forefront of the conversation by foregrounding the discomfort of the White characters in referring to their partners' race, and, perhaps even-edgier, having the White characters take the role of the masters or mistresses in literal BDSM slave play (Harris, 2019). In one performance, the "Black Out" performance, Harris requested only Black identifying people attend the play in order to subvert the affluent White norms of Broadway. He explains to *American Theater*, "For me it was about Black work begetting Black work and Black audiences" (Tran, 2019, paragraph 15). This decision immediately attracted controversy from the conservative theatergoing community—the presumably White identify-ing National Review critic-at-large Kyle Smith quipped "It would be illegal to refuse to sell tickets based on this or that race," evidencing the very discomfort with discrimination that all BIPOC are well acquainted with (Smith, 2019, paragraph 2). The themes of role-reversal and trauma sharing that are imposed here upon White theater audiences help drive home the point that recentering how play intersects with the experience of BIPOC people will rarely produce the same pleasurable affects that games like *Mario Kart*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* build into their core gameplay loops.

When Clifford Geertz (1972) wrote "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" he argued that cockfights, no matter how violent and brutal they appeared to outsiders, were a way for the Balinese to understand themselves as a culture. He gestures to the Dutch occupation of 1908 to show how the violence of colonialism brought with it European customs which forced the cock-fight—which had previously been situated in the center of all village life—to the margins of society. Similarly, slave games, have been forced to the edges of our society. They exist now in a handful of history books and through the oral histories shared by the descendants of slavery.

White Supremacy conspires to make Whiteness invisible, and likewise, make Blackness shameful. Kishonna Gray shares how the experience of black gamers today involves the pain of disclosing their race online. She ex-plains how the question "Are you black?" in a gaming session of *Gears of War* prompted one gamer to play down their Blackness, shooting back "Why? Are you white?" Things only devolved into race-shaming from this point on, with taunts of "nigger, nigger" accenting the trauma, that the gamer's blackness was shameful in the eyes of the other players (Gray, 2011, pp.267-8). Approaches

to play that read gaming sessions like this as constructive of socialization and learning, while suggesting that the racism occurring in chat alongside the game is somehow separate are complicit in White Supremacy. The approach to play suggested by this essay is anti-racist because it foregrounds how the most painful dynamics of play often exist alongside its most pleasurable aspects.

Play reduces humans to objects because play is violent. Accepting this allows us to recenter and better appreciate games that exist primarily at the margins of Western society. We give in to colonialism and White supremacy when we assume that play must always be productive of affects of pleasure. Despite the violence of play, something important might be recovered by a closer analysis of its more dangerous tendencies.

"Hide the Switch" forces game scholars to reconsider what and who has been left out of spaces that curate games and play. It shows how the traumatic memory of Black people descended from slaves cannot be read as play as it is often theorized, and so therefore cannot be fit into White memory institutions like museums that aim to celebrate play. We expect our games to be safe and consensual, but in this turn we have forgotten that games are not always safe and consensual. In fact, it is a privileged position that assumes that games are safe and consensual. Play is often violent. Play forces us to contend with the truth that we must always negotiate our own experience with that of others. This is what the brutality "Hide the Switch" reveals. It shows how torture is as mundane a phenomenon as play, and that all are capable of its cruel pleasures. To forget this is to aestheticize the experience of play, and to resign to ourselves to the cultural norms of White supremacy.

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# "The Führer's facial hair and name can also be reinstated in the virtual world"[1]

## Taboos, Authenticity and the Second World War in digital game



Source: Screenshot from Through the Darkest of Times

**ABSTRACT**

History is not only the construction of a past, but is also its interpretation. In this paper we study examples of taboos in historical representations of World War II in digital games as sources for contemporary collective identities. To this end we analyze two distinct phenomena: legal and cultural taboos determining

what can be shown and what can be said in these games.  We will show how a cultural and political paradigm shift has occurred in Austria and Germany in recent years. Thus, the portrayal of the Holocaust is no longer only understood as a taboo but also as a necessary part of our culture of remembrance. In a second part, we will look at how taboos are not only discussed but also co-constructed within the gaming community on the occasion of authenticity debates.

## INTRODUCTION

In popular culture, history functions as a reliable selling point: historical novels, historical films, historical Netflix-series abound (cf. Samida, 2014; Cauvin, 2016). Many digital games are likewise advertised by promoting their historical authenticity and there seems to be an ongoing demand for historical content among users (Pfister, 2020). History here is not only the construction of a past, but is also its interpretation. Through this interpretation, history functions as a building block for our collective identities; it communicates values and norms (ibid). In order to illustrate this, we will use examples of taboos in historical representations of World War II in digital games as sources for contemporary collective identities. We will first explain which taboo concepts we are dealing with, in order to later analyse how they are imposed upon and received in digital games. We will investigate two distinct phenomena: First, taboos surrounding the production of the games as well as the product – the games themselves. Here, we are interested in the representation and successive way in which the use of Nazi symbols in this media and the Holocaust in digital games has been taboo over the years. To this end, we have selected games that in their representation of the Nazi era, have caused controversy: *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, *Call of Duty: WW II* and *Through the Darkest of Times*. In a second step, we will investigate taboos surrounding the reception of digital games that have World War II as their main theme. For this purpose, we have selected two games that have also triggered discussions in recent years due to their depiction of the Nazi era: *Battlefield V* and the grand strategy game *Hearts of Iron IV*. This reception is examined in the form of a critical discourse analysis. (Wodak et al, 2009, Jäger, 2011). Consequently, we have evaluated particularly popular threads on the social medium Reddit and in the forums of the gaming platform Steam with regard to the handling of taboos.

In our everyday use, we mostly understand "history" as the unchanging sum of all the past. In scientific understanding, however, the term takes on a different meaning. We understand history as a narrative construction of the past in the present (Tschiggerl/Walach/Zahlmann, 2019, p. 138). The depicted events (similar to a story) are shown as motivated (there is a comprehensible causal connection), and become a meaning, a world explanation (White, 1973). As such, history is always bound to the dispositives of its respective time of origin. In our modern societies, history plays a crucial role in communicating

meaning and identity, not only in academia but also – and especially – in popular culture. The representation of history in games communicates worldviews and common values and is thus a good source with which to better understand our contemporary societies. We recognise taboos as social limitations of what is sayable in the broadest sense. They socially and culturally regulate what may not be said, done or shown, whether in principle it could be said, done or shown. Here, we are influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of "discourse" as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 2013, p. 54). Discourse governs what is considered as truth and what as lie, what is considered right and what is considered wrong. In this way, discourse not only creates meaning, but in fact constructs our reality. Discourse must thus be thought of as a social practice that is socially constructed, on the one hand, but is also socially determining, on the other (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 8). Taboos are areas of discourse that are the most affected by disciplinary measures and bans on speaking and acting. Put very simply, taboos are an effective means of defining what a collective defines as 'good' and what it defines as 'bad', and taboos, by their very nature, are intended to prevent unacceptable behaviour. The Second World War as a quasi-global *lieu de mémoire* is of central importance in the collective memory of our western post-war societies. This is why narratives of the Second World War are also full of cultural and political taboos. There are different ways to ensure that these taboos are observed. The most obvious being practices that are effectively regulated by law, as for example, denial of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes, which is a criminal offence in Austria and Germany. The same applies to various forms of re-engagement in National Socialist activities and the use and reproduction of anti-constitutional signs (e.g. the swastika and SS-runes) in Germany. Apart from legal forms of regulation i.e. the criminalization of taboos - which are the exception rather than the rule, especially in the case of historical representations - taboos tend to be enforced within society itself through peer pressure and exclusion and without jurisdiction. When politicians - as has been the case recently with actors from the Austrian and German Far-Right - violate these taboos, they are usually rebuked by their parliamentary colleagues, in the media but also by the public in general. They lose social status and are excluded from certain events.

Just like discourse itself, taboos, however, change over time and things that were previously unspeakable, untouchable, and even unthinkable can gradually become part of social communication. Especially in historical research and representation we can find numerous examples of such shifts in discourse.

In the following paragraphs, we will therefore take a closer look at three distinct forms of taboos concerning the depiction of World War II in games. For one, there is the political taboo, which extends to making it illegal to reproduce Nazi symbols. Deeply interlinked with this is the cultural taboo, which makes it unthinkable to use images of the Shoah in an entertainment media. In the

sense of a critical history of ideas and conceptual history, we will diachronically examine the discursive taboo strategies at work within public debate. To this end, we will look at examples of individual reactions of journalists and cultural critics to perceived breaking of taboos. A comparison of reactions to the TV-series *Holocaust*, the feature film *Schindler's List* and to digital games such as *Wolfenstein: The New Orde*r *and Through the Darkest of Times* should enable us to recognise historical continuities or breaks in how these taboos have been dealt with. We are not interested in a comprehensive survey of all public reaction, but rather in identifying historical patterns. To complete this first impression we will finally reverse our initially adopted top-down approach and analyse taboos from the bottom up from the perspective of the individual players themselves through an analysis of how they receive them.

**"YOU DON'T PLAY WITH THE SWASTIKA!" - A FAILED POLITICAL TABOO?**

It is impossible to cleanly separate cultural taboos from legal taboos. Austria and Germany are – for obvious historical reasons - the two countries with the most restrictive legislation regarding the memory of National Socialism. In Austria, the provisional post-war government passed the so-called "Verbotsgesetz" as early as 1945, a constitutional law which banned the Nazi-Party. In its present form it became applicable in 1947 and prohibits Holocaust denial as well as the denial of other of crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime. The "Abzeichengesetz", enacted in 1960, also prohibits the use of uniforms and insignia of forbidden organisations. The German equivalent are the sections 86 and 86a of the German Criminal Code (Strafgesetzbuch StGB). These cover the prohibition of the "use of symbols of unconstitutional organizations" outside the contexts of "art or science, research or teaching" (Trips-Hebert, 2014). The intention of these laws was not only to make any form of political continuity of Nazi ideology impossible but also to prohibit the use of all insignia of the Nazi regime for the future. These were to be effectively erased from everyday life. The impulse for the ban is understandable, as it was intended to make any habituation impossible (Dankert & Sümmermann, 2018, p. 6). Any use of swastikas is a taboo that was thus enshrined in law.

However, it is important to note, that there were exemptions to the ban: the so-called "Sozialadäquanzklausel" (social adequacy clause) in German law states that the use of Nazi symbols is permitted if it serves the arts, science or political education (Trips-Hebert, 2014, p. 17). The use of Nazi symbols in historical movies became so widespread that practically all films were permitted to use them (the only exception being posters advertising the films). This was not the case with digital games. In 1998, the Higher Regional Court of Frankfurt am Main ruled "that no signs of unconstitutional organisations may be shown in computer games" (Dankert & Sümmermann, 2018, p. 6). The judges understood that computer games were neither art nor history books and disallowed the social adequacy clause in their case. Up to now, the highest state youth

authorities have been guided by this ruling; developers and publishers have not been permitted to submit games to the Unterhaltungssoftware Seltbstkontrolle USK (the German Entertainment Software Self-Regulation) that contain the swastika symbol. But, what is more, before the court ruling almost all game distributors had already decided to remove all Nazi symbols in the German releases of their games (Pfister, 2019, p. 275). In the German localisation of the Lucasfilm game adventure *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) all swastika symbols had already been covered by black bars. It is difficult to communicate a taboo more clearly.

There are three well-known cases of World War II games that were put on the German 'Index' in the 1990s, a list of media banned by the German government. This ban, however, was not because of the prohibition on the use of unconstitutional symbols in Germany. The inhuman game *KZ-Manager* – which gained notoriety in the early 1990s, not least because of a report in the New York Times – was put on the German "index" under the Youth Protection Act (Bundesanzeiger, 2014). Next was *Wolfenstein 3D*, the first first-person shooter to be set in World War II. The reason for the decision of the Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Schriften – BPjS (Federal Department for Writings Harmful to Young Persons) later renamed Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien – BPjM (i.e. Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors) was — contrary to popular belief — not the historical setting but the glorification of 'Selbstjustiz' (vigilantism) and the excessive violence of the game. *Panzer General* was also placed on the "index" in June 1996, but this too had nothing to do with paragraphs 86 and 86a because the game developers had renounced the use of the swastika and had instead chosen the Balkenkreuz (the military cross used by the German army) to identify the German troops. The game was placed on the index because its content was deemed to 'kriegsverharmlosend und kriegsverherrlichend' (downplay and glorify war), since it failed to show the consequences that the war had on the population and because it trivialised Nazi ideology (Celeda, 2015, p. 67).

The pre-emptive and superficial removal of Nazi symbols, however, did not automatically lead to a more critical depiction of the Nazi regime in digital games. On the contrary, the replacement of the swastika symbol by the "Balkenkreuz" or other symbols was understood by most publishers as sufficient distancing and thus led de facto to a continued and uncritical representation of the Nazi regime because the subject had been depoliticized (Chapman & Lindenroth, 2015, p. 146-147). In *Hearts of Iron IV* for example, players can micromanage the German Reich to German marching music for hours without having to deal for even a moment with the inhuman ideology of the simulated state apparatus (Pfister, 2019, p. 275-276). Indeed, the example of *Hearts of Iron* shows an unintended counter-effect of the ban. The problem is that the Prohibition Act was not understood in its intention, especially outside Germany. The following commentary on Steam shows that German legislation has been

misunderstood on more than one occasion internationally as being a general ban on talking about the crimes of the Nazi regime: "a lot of it probably also have [sic] to do with German law. there's a reason why his [i.e. Hitler's] picture is blurred in the German version. if they censor that they will for sure censor a game that actually "shows" the holocaust".[2] Such misunderstandings or misinterpretations were and still are quite common, as can be read, for example, in the recently published memoirs of Sid Meier. He believes, for example, despite his own experiences with German legislation, that the mere mention of the name Hitler would be punishable (Meier, 2020, p. 122). Another example for the ineffectiveness of superficial erasures can be found in the multiplayer mode of *Call of Duty: World at War*: players winning a match on the German side will see no swastika, SS runes or skull insignia, but a speech by Adolf Hitler to the German party youth can be heard offstage (Pfister, 2019, p. 275-276). The political taboo behind the banning of the symbols thus did not stop the insensitive handling of the historical event effectively nor prevent a possible habituation among players, but merely caused cosmetic changes.

There is one last, in our opinion, especially problematic example of misunderstood self-censure from the recent Austrian and German past: *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus.* While the international version propagates a conscious antifascist narrative (Roberston, 2017) and shows swastika symbols as insignia of an evil ideology, these have been removed on behalf of the publisher for the German version along with Adolf Hitler's moustache. The historical narrative of the game has also been rewritten to reflect the completely fictional background of the German version. Hitler was renamed "Heiler" and the word "Jew" was replaced by the word "Verräter" (traitor). The industrialized, racially motivated murder of 6 million people thus became, in translation, the murder of political opponents. This removal of the Holocaust, in the German version, led de facto to a rewriting of history. A subsequent debate in the German media showed a decreasing support for the Verbotsgesetz (Schiffer, 2017). A central danger of the political taboo is that it could not be discussed politically, and thus made a public discussion on the topic impossible (Steuer, 2017, p. 688).

This became particularly clear when the taboo was, in effect, broken in 2018. When the German Classification Board "USK" decided after a process of internal discussions – also in response to the self-censorship in *Wolfenstein* –to take account of the social adequacy clause in the future when rating games by age and to permit the use of Nazi symbols in individual cases, there was an immediate political outcry. Both the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and Franziska Giffey, the Social Democrat (SPD) Minister for Family Affairs promptly attacked the decision. "Mit Hakenkreuzen spielt man nicht" (i.e. You don't play with swastikas), Giffey declared ("Mit Hakenkreuzen spielt man nicht", 2018) and was seconded by the DGB. This public expression of indignation came immediately following the USK's announcement, and as Minister Giffey explained on her Facebook page a little later, too hastily: After playing the

game *Through the Darkest of Times*, which is clearly opposed to the Nazi regime, Giffey admitted that the application of the social adequacy clause would be justified in this special case (Giffey, 2018). This is also where we find an explanation for the vehemence of her initial reaction when Giffey writes: "As Minister for Family Affairs, my concern is to create the framework for children and young people to learn how to use games in an age-appropriate way" (ibid.). A helpless and supposedly easily influenced population group had to be protected. The interesting thing about taboos, as can be seen here again, is that their defenders usually consider themselves immune to the dangers from which the taboos are supposed to protect. But this also means that those who stand up for and those who oppose a taboo both consider themselves to be unaffected by its effects.

The reaction of the German press and the ensuing decision of the USK showed however, that the taboo had at this point already been broken. This is not least related to a paradigm shift that had already occurred years earlier concerning an interrelated cultural taboo surrounding the Shoah.

**TO WRITE A GAME AFTER AUSCHWITZ IS BARBARIC - A CULTURAL TABOO**

Parallel to the symbols of the Nazi regime becoming a political taboo, after the Second World War there was also an ongoing discussion among cultural actors whether and how the crimes of the Nazi regime - especially the Shoah - could be depicted in works of art. In this context, Adorno's dictum "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno, 1977, p. 30) is regularly quoted, most often interpreted as a dogmatic ban in the tradition of a religious "Bildverbot" (i.e. ban in images. cf. Krieghofer, 2017; Hansen, 1996, p. 300, 306). According to this interpretation, it would forever be impossible to adequately describe the suffering of millions of people in a poem. However, this interpretation of Adorno's statement, which he himself relativised later on, could also be read as criticism of a culture that is inherently barbaric (cf. Lindner, 1998, p. 286). Nevertheless, from this moment on every medialisation of the Holocaust was met with the fear of trivialisation. For a long time, then, it was considered inconceivable that the Holocaust could be treated in a television series or in a feature film - the entertainment media par excellence (Pfister, 2019, pp. 269–270). Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, US, 1993) – despite or perhaps because of its success (Classen, 2009, p. 78) – was criticised massively at the time of its release in a similar way to the TV-Series *Holocaust* (Chomsky, US, 1978). Fifteen years earlier, Chomsky's TV-Series led to a heated public debate, particularly in West Germany. The journalist Sabina Lietzmann, for example, criticised how history had become a story. (Lietzmann,1979, 39). The writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel was also appalled: "I am horrified by the thought that the Holocaust could one day be measured and judged by NBC television production." (Wiesel, 1979, 29). We will encounter similar if not the same arguments in relation to digital games.

A decade later, Spielberg's film met with similar criticism. Claude Lanzmann, director of the *Shoah* documentary rejected Spielberg's film, in particular because of its "fetishism of style and glamour" (Hansen, 1996, p. 296). The American film critic James Hoberman asked: "Is it possible to make a feel-good entertainment about the ultimate feel-bad experience of the 20th century?" (Hansen, 1996, p. 297), and Lanzman declared: "[In Spielberg's] film there is no reflection, no thought, about what is the Holocaust and no thought about what is cinema. Because if he would have thought, he would not have made it – or he would have made Shoah" (Hansen, p. 1996, p. 301). Of course, both the TV series and Spielberg's film also met with a positive to very positive response from the general public. Both were extremely successful with the audience, so successful, in fact, that they led de facto to a discursive paradigm shift. They changed the boundaries of what could be shown and what could be said.

Of interest to us is that similar arguments are found in critiques of digital games: "Where the line of decency is drawn is somewhat dependent on whether you consider video games art, storytelling or a braindead way to kill time, blasting pixels in increasingly gross ways while memorizing movement patterns" (Hoffman, 2014).

The first games that tried to address the Holocaust were problematic for a variety of reasons. First of all, there was a game that brutally and criminally transgressed all norms: The aforementioned *KZ-Manager* (unknown developer, unknown date), an inhuman shareware game that was circulated in right-wing extremist circles in Germany and Austria in the late 1980s (Benz, 1996; Nolden, 2020, p. 188). The game was quickly banned in Germany and sadly gained international notoriety through an article in the New York Times, where Rabbi Avraham Cooper, then associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, said "he believed that the games were neo-Nazi propaganda aimed at influencing youths through a technology that their parents are largely unfamiliar with" (Video Game discovered uses Nazi Death Camps as Theme, 1991).

This troublesome first contact with video games explains the subsequent scepticism of the Simon Wiesenthal Center towards video games depicting the Shoah. The taboo remained in place, which perhaps also led to the failure of the game project *Imagination is the only escape* (Luc Bernard, not published, 2008–2013) due to lack of financial support and the loss of Nintendo as publisher (Sridhar, 2008). The games developer, Luc Bernard, wanted to tell the fictional story of a young French Jew, Samuel, who during the Nazi occupation increasingly fled into a fantasy world in the face of the atrocities he had experienced. While the historical events took place in a monochrome sepia-coloured Paris – with the exception of individual details such as the yellow Star of David and red pools of blood - Samuel's fantasy world was to shine in all possible colours. Bernard ultimately lost the support of his publisher and was not able to raise enough money for the project. "Labeling it a game instantly conjures up the

wrong image," said Deborah Lauter, civil rights director of the Anti-Defamation League in New York. "It devalues the seriousness of the topic" (Parker, 2016). Another example was the mod *Sonderkommando Revolt* which was developed for the then nearly two-decade old game engine of *Wolfenstein 3D*. The leading Israeli developer on the game, Maxim Genis, did not, however, display a particularly ethical approach to the topic. He claimed there was no political intention behind it: "the mod was a plain 'blast the Nazis' fun" (McWerthor, 2010). After an introductory black-and-white still, whose aesthetics are reminiscent of the photographs of the gas chambers secretly taken by Greek naval officer Alberto Errera, the rest of the mod is presented in bright colours and primitive graphics, which are mainly characterised by visualisations of heaped corpses, charred skeletons and vast amounts of blood. Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, who had taken a stand on the game *KZ Manager* twenty years earlier, took an understandably critical view of the game: "What happens if this is the only thing a young person gets to know about the Holocaust or a concentration camp?" (ibid), reminding us of Eli Wiesel's words. In view of the mod, Cooper generally rejected the idea of depicting the Holocaust in video games : "I don't think even the best combination of game developers would ever be successful [at doing so]. This is not an issue that should be reduced to a game" (ibid). Both the American Anti-Defamation League and the Simon Wiesenthal Centre were appalled and the mod was withdrawn. Again, the argumentation used to uphold the taboo was the same as that used previously for television series and feature films. It is interesting to note that the mod was almost certainly inspired by the success of Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (and the resulting public acceptance of the Nazi exploitation genre), which shows that at this time the medium of games was still evaluated by the general public based upon completely different standards than, for example, film.

Considering these negative examples, it is all the more surprising that we have witnessed a paradigm shift in the last two years. The original moment of this shift cannot yet be satisfactorily clarified. What we can establish, however, is that the depiction of a game mission in a camp in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* that can clearly be decoded as a concentration camp met with little resistance in the press, apart from a critical interview about the game in the Times of Israel (Hoffman, 2014). A possible explanation would be that the scene only takes place in the advanced game and was therefore not noticed by the press on release. Of particular interest is that, unlike the mod *Sonderkommando Revolt*, there were no angry reactions from the Simon Wiesenthal Centre or the Anti-Defamation League. However, the game did meet with some criticism. In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the editor perceives a change of paradigm: "Man sollte aus dem Schrecklichen aber nun doch keine Komödie machen – und ein schematisches Ballerspiel vielleicht lieber auch nicht" (i.e. "You should not make a comedy out of terror – and not a schematic shoot 'em up game at

that". Lindemann, 2014). It is difficult to see at this stage why *Wolfenstein: The New Order* was not attacked as sharply as the Israeli mod was a few years earlier. Maybe it was the science fiction setting, or perhaps it was the direct influence of the now seemingly socially acceptable 'Naziploitation' genre, which five years earlier would not have worked (Pfister, 2019, p. 277). To a certain extent, it was the popular cultural exaggeration of the topic in *Wolfenstein* – i.e. robot dogs, moon bases and brain-transplantation in the tradition of the last wave of Naziploitation movies such as *Iron Sky* and *Overlord* – that made it possible to break the taboo. In a way, the appearance of the pulp-fiction genre allowed the game more freedom. The Nazi crimes depicted were sufficiently distorted by their exaggeration not to be taken "seriously". Similarly, in the Japanese strategy game *Valkyria Chronicles*, it is within a fantasy setting that players free "Darkscens" from a concentration camp in a mission. The strategy game, which openly spoke of concentration camps, but in the Japanese tradition of anime relied on scantily-dressed women and exaggerated gestures, was not, to our knowledge, criticised for depicting concentration camps in German-speaking countries or in Israel. But one has to admit that the game, despite its fantastic exaggeration, criticised war crimes more honestly than many games before it. In any case, however, we can discern a change in the sayable and showable around this time. This is particularly evident in the following games: In *Call of Duty: WW II* the picture of a Jewish concentration camp prisoner was shown for the first time (although much too briefly) in a cutscene at the end of the game and in the international version of *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus* the murder of Jewish women and dissidents in concentration camps was openly discussed for the first time as such. It is significant that the game was not criticised in the press for mentioning the Holocaust. On the contrary, the German press criticised the fact that it did not mention the Holocaust at all in the German version of the game: "Dieses Spiel leugnet den Holocaust" (i.e. "The game denies the existence of the Holocaust) was the first sentence of a review of the game in the German newspaper *Die Welt* (Küveler, 2017). When *Through the Darkest of Times* was published internationally at the beginning of 2020, together with *Attentat 1942*, the first game that received an age rating from the USK despite the inclusion of Nazi symbols, the response from the international press was extremely positive. *Time Magazine* recommended the game as "key to keeping World War II Memory Alive". The American historian Robert Whitaker declared in the interview: "The game exposes players to a history most people don't know while the game's mechanics illustrate for the player how difficult resistance to Nazism often was for ordinary people" (Waxman, 2020).

**AUTHENTICITY AND USER GENERATED TABOOS**

After having analysed the production of the games as well as the products – i.e. the games themselves – in the first part of our article, we will now take look at

discursive taboos in the reception of games in the second part. For this purpose, we have examined and evaluated a selection of statements from players in relevant forums on social media using a qualitative discourse analysis. The aim is not to offer a complete view here – there is not enough space for this – but to offer a first insight into the process in which a theme or element becomes taboo on the part of the players, and also to highlight the differences in how taboos are received in politics and the press. The goal of a discourse analysis such as this is not only to analyse the sayable or thinkable in its qualitative range and in its accumulation or all the statements that can be made in a particular community at a particular time, but also the strategies with which the field of the sayable is narrowed (Jäger, 2011, p. 94). From the wealth of statements observed, we have selected those we particularly deem representable for the ideas presented within this article. These statements can be interpreted as hegemonic positions due to interactions made with them (likes, upvotes) and/or their frequency. Since all these statements have been made in public forums and users have done so under pseudonyms, the authors have no ethical or legal concerns in quoting them in this article.

We have observed that both taboos analysed above – i.e. a legal–political and a cultural one – have been internalised by the players in the games. Above all, this applies - as we will show in the following - to the depiction of the Holocaust and the different forms of informal image restrictions (Bilderverbot). But a closer analysis of the players conversations reveals also other forms of taboo. These do not arise from the internalisation of taboos already in place in the sense of a dominant discursive statement, but seem to have emerged from the interaction of the players in these game and the game-specific forums: The deviation from what at least a vociferous element of the game-playing community perceive as "authentic history", is similarly sanctioned by them and is, in effect, made taboo. Especially among those players for whom the act of playing is a central component of self-identification, there is a strong urge to determine the sayable and thinkable in connection with games. These often show a particularly conservative perception of games, in the sense that they believe that games should change as little as possible in terms of content. Our central category of analysis is the discursive construction of notions of authenticity. These become tangible, above all, when players perceive historical representations as "inauthentic" - in other words, it is a negative construction ex post, the concept only emerges when previously implicit rules are broken.

Any deviations from a representation of the Second World War that is considered authentic are perceived accordingly by a small group of players as breaking something that we could call an "authenticity taboo". In understanding this "authenticity taboo" it is important to realize that authenticity is not something that is inherent in a phenomenon - be it a digital game, an action or any kind of object - but rather a product of attribution and negotiation. Like

taboos, authenticity is also a social-discursive construct. Something must be acknowledged as authentic to be authentic (Reckwitz, 2017). The producers of digital games choose different strategies to create authenticity, i.e. to get their recipients to perceive the product as authentic (Pfister, 2020, Tschiggerl, 2020).

In his reference work "Digital Games as History", Adam Chapman makes a fundamental distinction between two types of digital games with historical content: "realist simulations" and "conceptual simulations" (Chapman, 2016, p. 112). These two types, as historical representations, differ not only in terms of different game mechanics and principles, but, above all, in the way they represent history and establish historical accuracy and authenticity. While "realist simulations" - Chapman counts among them mainly third or first-person video games such as the *Medal of Honor* (Dreamworks Interactive et al., US 1999-2012), *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward u.a., US, 2003-2019) or the *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal et al., Canada & France, 2007-2018) series rely on audio-visual narratives in their mediation and thus show, as it were, "conceptual simulations" according to Chapman, primarily strategy games such as the *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Microprose et. al, US, 1991-2016) or the *Total War* series (Creative Assembly, UK, 2000-2019) use the ludic component of complex game mechanics and rule systems to show why it was as it was. Not without mentioning, of course, that these classifications are extreme examples and that there are also plenty of mixed forms (see Chapman, 2016, pp. 82-120). In the following, we will examine an example each of a "realist simulation" and a "conceptual simulation" to see how players address aberrations from this authenticity paradigm, which they often seem to perceive as breaking a taboo.

*Battlefield V*, published in November 2018, shows how strongly authenticity is interwoven with taboos around the "right" representation of history in digital games. The first-person shooter game from the popular *Battlefield* series caused controversy across various social media about the "right" representation of the Second World War in digital games on the occasion of the first release of a trailer. Many users criticised that the trailer showed an apparently female British soldier who was involved in fighting German soldiers, all while using a mechanical arm. The criticism was ignited primarily by the gender of the figure and secondarily by the use of the mechanical arm. Both were - among other things - decidedly perceived as inauthentic. Especially interesting are several threads on the social media website Reddit from the day of the trailer release.[3] We used CrowdTangle to find the threads with the most interactions. The big debates around *Battlefield V* took place mainly in the subreddits r/games and r/battlefield. Due to the 'up and down vote' principle of the website, it is possible to make statements about the popularity of certain posts and certain comments, although it should be noted that these can also be manipulated - for example through the use of multiple accounts and bots. For this analysis, we

**3.** Thread: "[BFV] I'm just going to say it…" posted on Reddit on 23.05.2018 by the user "unofficalmoderator". Online: https://www.reddit.com/r/Battlefield/comments/8lmnrn/bfv_im_just_going_to_say_it/ last accesed on 17.7.2020.

have examined particularly popular comments and responses i.e. the opinion leaders voicing the hegemonic positions.

The most popular commentaries around the appearance online of the first trailer of the game all revolve around the representation of the Second World War which is perceived as inauthentic. While one user states, that the game "didn't look like WW2 at all"[4] another asks: "Seriously, what the hell was that?"[5] and a third chimes in his distaste for the game: "A complete and utter bastardization of World War 2. What a disgrace"[6]. These users' criticism on Reddit mainly take aim at the following: Women as part of the fighting troops, inauthentic uniforms and weapons, a basic mood perceived as being too "colorful" and an "unrealistic" gameplay that does not do justice to the Second World War. Several users complain about a lack of respect for the veterans of the Second World War: "Remember when they revealed BF1 and were all about giving credit to those poor soldiers in WW1. Seems like the soldiers from WW2 don't deserve that." and: "Watching it made me feel like all the respect for anyone that served in that war was completely gone, How disrespectful can a company be?"[7].

The analysis of these individual points of criticism shows that the main complaints are focused on the fact that a British soldier, who plays a central role in the trailer, is female and, in addition, disabled: "Most immersive, authentic WWII game *shows British female soldier on the frontlines with prosthetics* I mean there is being PC and then there is being inaccurate. Women didn't fight mate, certainty not frontline. That's not "anti feminism" it's facts"[8]. "Facts" is a central keyword in this context – the commentators in the different threads repeatedly emphasize that although they have no problem with women in digital games, they wish for a "fact"ually correct portrayal of the Second World War. While some users are sarcastic and mention several times that their grandmothers were World War veterans: "My grandma is a WW2 vet. She was a sniper with a claw arm"[9], others are outraged and see the memory of their ancestors tarnished: "60 million, we lost 60 million brave souls fighting in this war, and we get a childish colorful excuse of a game from it"[10]. One can clearly see from the language how the perceived breach of taboo is staged as the desecration of the fallen, i.e. as the desecration of a sacrifice for the community. The statement made by users that they have basically no problems with women in digital games seems insofar implausible because of the frequency of complaints about the female protagonist. No other point of criticism – be it the colour setting or the very fast-acting gameplay itself – is repeated with such vehemence in the comments we read as the criticism of the soldier's gender. It is, of course, true that women in the British Army were generally not part of the fighting troops – so this depiction is factually incorrect. At the same time, however, one must be aware that digital games about the Second World War are full of "mistakes":

**4.** Ibid. user "stesser" https://www.reddit.com/r/Battlefield/comments/8lmnrn/bfv_im_just_going_to_say_it/dzgqdzy/

**5.** Ibid. user "CheesySombrero" https://www.reddit.com/r/Battlefield/comments/8lmnrn/bfv_im_just_going_to_say_it/dzgq354/

**6.** Ibid. unknown user (user has since deleted his account) https://www.reddit.com/r/Battlefield/comments/8lmnrn/bfv_im_just_going_to_say_it/dzgr08m/

**7.** Ibid.

**8.** Ibid. user "PenPaperShotgun" https://www.reddit.com/r/Battlefield/comments/8lmnrn/bfv_im_just_going_to_say_it/dzgr4zb/

**9.** Ibid. user "st4rgasm" https://www.reddit.com/r/Battlefield/comments/8lmnrn/bfv_im_just_going_to_say_it/dzgr3rj/

**10.** Ibid. user "Reactiveisland5" https://www.reddit.com/r/Battlefield/comments/8lmnrn/bfv_im_just_going_to_say_it/dzgqv4w/discussions/0/1621724915820727618/.

"Real" soldiers couldn't respawn, couldn't regenerate magically, couldn't carry hundreds of kilos of equipment, didn't have a heads-up display in front of their eyes etc. But all these things occur in *Battlefield V* and are necessary for the game to work – it has to be different from everyday reality (Huizinga, 1997). These obviously necessary artistic freedoms in the representation of the Second World War are accepted – and probably not even noticed – by the same players who complain so bitterly about the representation of women in their games because they have this fixed idea how the World War II *really* was.

Any deviation from their hegemonic narrative about the Second World War is perceived as an insult, a breaking of taboos which is therefore sanctioned by ridiculing the game. This indicates a transgenerational identification with the soldiers of the Second World War who are perceived as heroes. A free interpretation regarding the semantic scope of the "Second World War" represents a personal insult to one's own identity and is accordingly antagonized. Critical voices that point out that *Battlefield V* is first and foremost a game to entertain are marginal and only become visible in the discourse if one looks for less popular comments. The hegemonic discourse in the threads studied is clearly negative towards the game and its portrayal of the World War II. Factual correctness, however, is mainly demanded with regard to the gender and the disability of the protagonist. The genre-typical factual abbreviations – war crimes, suffering of the civilian population, genocides etc. are neither mentioned in the trailer nor in the later game in any way – are accepted approvingly. Not surprisingly, the aforementioned basic differences between diegesis and extra diegesis, such as the fact that protagonists survive gunshot wounds without any problems or players being able to simplify the difficulty level of the fight by mouse-click, are not addressed at all – one-armed female snipers seem to overshadow everything. It becomes clear how strongly the perception of authenticity is linked to the visual level for these players: the game must look like they imagine the Second World War to be. For this reason, other deviations – such as incorrect weapons or uniforms – are usually also criticized, but not with the same vehemence as the depiction of women as part of the fighting troops. An interesting aspect of the discussion about the "wrong" portrayal of the Second World War in *Battlefield V* is that many users relate the story directly to themselves and their ancestors. Incidentally, this represents such a hegemonic fragment of discourse in the critique of the game that the game's publisher integrated these negative comments into its own advertising campaign. Under the hashtag "#EveryonesBattlefield" they collected numerous such insults as, for example: "Did my grandfather storm the beaches of Normandy [for this] s★★★?" The controversy surrounding *Battlefield V* is part of a larger debate about representation and identity politics in digital games, which reached its early climax in the infamous "Gamergate controversy" in 2014 and 2015 (Dewey, 2014, Condis, 2018). In this context, the desire for so-called historical authenticity must be seen as a proxy argument of a larger

debate around new forms of representation in digital games which have been perceived as threats by a rather small but very vocal group of gamers who use Social Media to express their anger and disdain (ibid.). Using *Battlefield V* in particular as an example, the players take any deviation from the hegemonic narrative of the correct and authentic depiction of the Second World War as a breach of taboo and react accordingly: with criticism, insults, and ridicule.

While the debate around *Battlefield V* was mainly ignited by the – from the recipients' perspective – misrepresentation of the Second World War, which was perceived as "inauthentic", the pendulum in the debate on authenticity around the game *Hearts of Iron 4* (see above) swings in exactly the opposite direction. Having already addressed the question of how National Socialist symbols, the Holocaust and other crimes of war are depicted in the popular World War II game, we now want to look at how the players themselves react to these exclusions in the game's presentation. We examined representative statements of players in relevant forums in the form of a qualitative discourse analysis and identified the hegemonic accepted statements. To this end, we systematically searched relevant forums for the thematization of our central analysis category "Holocaust" (also for synonyms such as "Shoah" or related categories such as "war crimes" or "crimes against humanity") and qualitatively evaluated the debates taking place there using the method of critical discourse analysis (Wodak et al, 2009, Jäger, 2011).

There are numerous threads on both the gaming platform Steam and Reddit in which, for example, the absence of the Holocaust and other war crimes are addressed. In the forum of the game developer Paradox itself, threads dealing with the Holocaust are explicitly forbidden and will be closed by the mods almost immediately. This is justified as follows: "There will not be any gulags or deathcamps (including POW camps) to build in Hearts of Iron 4, nor will there be the ability to simulate the Holocaust or systematic purges, so I ask you not to discuss these topics as they are not related to this game. Thank You. Threads bringing up will be closed without discussion"[11]. The forum rules also prohibit threads on swastikas, area bombing and all other topics of political significance. Already at this point we can thus see that a taboo is in place for certain controversial topics and is, in this case, perpetuated by the developer.

The discussions on the platform Reddit on this topic are better-mannered and of higher quality than on Steam. This is probably due to a much stricter moderation, on the one hand, and because of the rating system of the comments, on the other. On the Steam forums, for example, comments that openly deny the existence of the Holocaust are not deleted[12]. On reddit, "troll" comments are either deleted immediately or are not visible due to their negative rating.

A recurring misconception in both forums, however, is the widespread assumption that the depiction of the Holocaust in digital games in of itself would violate German law, which is not the case. On the contrary. The taboo attached

**11.** Thread "★★★ HOI IV Forum Rules - Read Before You Post ★★★" posted on Paradox Forum on 08.08.215 by user "Secret Master". online: https://forum.paradoxplaza.com/forum/threads/hoi-iv-forum-rules-read-before-you-post.875352/ last accesed 17.07.2020.

to depicting the crimes of the Nazi state is doubled, in that many of the people posting in the different forums perceive a portrayal of the Holocaust in a digital game as a violation of a social taboo that would be punished. The concerns range from a 'shitstorm' that would be whipped up against the game to a complete ban: "the SJW's don't care how it's portrayed, they see the word holocaust and go beserk"[13] and: "if they put the holocaust in and other things like that then it'd get banned in a lot more countries"[14].

More interesting, however, is the recurring argument that *Hearts of Iron IV* is a strategic war game and that the crimes that the various warring parties committed against the civilian population, above all, the Holocaust, would not be part of the war: "There's no need for that. HOI is a military strategy game, no simulator or something"[15]. In this argumentation, there is often a conscious, sometimes unconscious blurring of two different levels. On the one hand, the suffering of the civilian population and the crimes against them are separated from the apparent warfare, on the other hand, these crimes are also seen as detached from the fighting troops: "Adds nothing to gameplay and remember, at the end of the day this is a game. Further, it's a war game, generals like Rommel were tasked with defending beaches and capturing cities, not doing a politician's job of fixing political dissidents and interning them"[16]. The response to the question of whether the Holocaust should be portrayed in *Hearts of Iron IV* is problematic in several respects. First of all, the user implies that the victims of the Shoah are "political dissidents" – this is of course as wrong as it is dangerous. The European Jews were murdered by the Nazis because they were Jews and not because they held different political positions. (Aly, 1998; Friedländer, 2007, 1997) At the same time, it also perpetuates the myth of the "clean Wehrmacht" (Chapman & Lindenroth, 2015; Pfister, 2020). "Generals, like Rommel" were of course involved in the crimes of the Nazi state, the Wehrmacht was part of the apparatus of annihilation (Wette, 2007). Among those who oppose a depiction of the Holocaust in *Hearts of Iron*, this is a recurrent narrative, which, as mentioned earlier in this article, is part of a long tradition of debates in the successor societies of the Nazi state itself: The war and the fighting troops are seen as detached from the crimes of the National Socialists. The Holocaust is thus wrongly reduced in these games to the actions of a small circle of psychopaths i.e. the elite of the "Third Reich".

There are however also commentators on these forums who advocate an integration of civilian casualties in games: "Honestly, I wished it took into consideration civil casualties. About 3% of the world's civilians died in that war. That's about 60 million and that's no [sic] including Japanese expansion into China in 1933-1939. Now, I'm not talking about adding the Holocaust. Honestly, I think they should shy away from that"[16]. Most of them agree, however, that this should not happen on a ludic level, but that the players should be

**12.** User "God Failed Me" in the Thread: "The holocaust etc", posted by the user "NemoNobody" on the Hearts of Iron IV Form und Steam on 10.06.2018 https://steamcommunity.com/app/394360/discussions/0/1697175413681651071/#c1697175413683043772 last accessed 17.7.2020.

**13.** Ibid. user "MikeY" https://steamcommunity.com/app/394360/discussions/0/1697175413681651071/#c1697175413682101085

**14.** Ibid. https://steamcommunity.com/app/394360/discussions/0/1697175413681651071/#c1697175413681654327

**15.** User "hoi4commander" in the Thread: "Do you think that HOI4 should portray the darker parts of World War II?", posted by the user "ImperatorBevo" on the r/HOI4 und Reddit on 06.12.2016 https://www.reddit.com/r/hoi4/comments/5gpjz0/do_you_think_that_hoi4_should_portray_the_darker/dauj6uy/ last accessed 17.7.2020.

informed about war crimes by events, notifications, counters and info-boxes. A recurring fragment of the discourse is that the goal is to communicate how horrific the Second World War was and what a high price the civilian population, in particular, had to pay.

It is evident here how strongly the representation of the Holocaust in digital games is seen as taboo, not least on the part of the players themselves. Even those who wish for a more nuanced depiction of the Second World War, which openly addresses the historically unique destruction of human life, shy away from including the Holocaust, even as pure information on the narrative level of the game. The reasoning behind this, however, is not so much of a moral nature, i.e. that the horror of the Holocaust in of itself would forbid it from ever being portrayed in a game, but the external effect of such a portrayal: "Holocaust I think not... Just imagine the PR shitstorm"[17]. The debates about the possibilities of depicting the Holocaust, which have already been discussed in detail in this article, are thus also repeated in the reception of the digital games themselves: What can be shown and what not? The question of how it can be possible to depict the crimes of the Second World War after the fact in digital games is indeed a difficult one. However, as our analysis shows, the complete absence of these atrocities is not an adequate solution either. After all, it perpetuates historical revisionist myths such as that of the "clean Wehrmacht" and disregards central aspects of World War II.  Simultaneously, we can also detect a certain need of the players to keep their games free from the horrors of the systematic crimes against humanity that were committed during this period. The taboo of depicting the Holocaust in digital games thus serves to protect a romanticized notion of the Second World War which reduces it to only the strategic warfare of the battlefield.

**CONCLUSION**

In general usage, the term "taboo" is increasingly perceived from a critical standpoint and viewed as something negative. After all, taboos appear conservative, out-dated, and authoritarian: They create a climate in which it is prohibited to speak, to act, or even to think about a certain topic. From this understanding, taboos do not allow for discussion and thus, it can be argued, block change. As we were able to show with our analysis, this is partly true and indeed problematic with regard to digital games. While the origin of the taboos examined here are morally understandable, the extreme restrictive interpretation of German law, for example, did not lead to a critical portrayal of the Nazi regime but rather to its depoliticization. As a result, taboos already consensually broken by society as a whole, such as mentioning the participation of the regular German army in the crimes of the Nazi state, were suddenly reinstated in the games.

The taboo of the Shoah's irrepresentability is a different matter and one must rightly ask if digital games could ever be the right medium to portray the Holocaust. While an answer to this question goes behind the scope of this article, we must keep in mind that it was the survivors of the Shoah, but above all

**16.** User "NotaInfiltrator" in the Thread: "Discussion; Should Holocaust be in the game?", posted by the user "AlphaBravoLima" on the r/HOI4 und Reddit on 04.05.2017. https://www.reddit.com/r/hoi4/comments/696gp8/discussion_should_holocaust_be_in_the_game/dh48mtd/ last accessed 17.7.2020

**17.** User "NotaInfiltrator" in ""Do you think that HOI4 should portray the darker parts of World War II?" https://www.reddit.com/r/hoi4/comments/5gpjz0/do_you_think_that_hoi4_should_portray_the_darker/dau8982/

their descendants, who sought new ways to report on this historical experience. One after the other, taboos surrounding what can be said or shown in regard to the Holocaust have been broken. To a certain extent, it is understandable that digital games, as the most recent medium, are following the examples set by the novel, the film and the graphic novel. Of course, it is hard to imagine how the Holocaust could ever become part of a game that aims to entertain. However, we have shown that exactly the same accusation was levelled at the feature film more than twenty years ago. Games such as *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, *Call of Duty WW II* and *Through the Darkest of Times* have shown what a responsible approach to the memory of Nazi crimes in games could look like in the future.

The breaking of taboos is a particularly important sign for historians of social and political change. That this discursive change does not only come from above, but also from below – it was first discussed in forums before politics reacted – is in a certain sense also a sign of a functioning civil society. For different functional elites are traditionally rather sluggish when it comes to shifts in hegemonic discourses, which often happen through grassroots movements in a constant process of renegotiation from below. The individual examples we have shown do not give us enough information about the extent of this discursive change. They are not sufficient in scope to clarify satisfactorily the exact reasons for the paradigm shift we have identified. But they permit us a first glimpse at different discursive statements. It also gives us insight into the darker side of a so-called gamer community, whose latent misogyny produces new forms of taboos. But here, too, it should be remembered that isolated examples once again offer no conclusion about the diffusion of this thinking.

Finally we must not forget one thing: Taboos are a central component of functioning communities and in themselves are neither morally good nor bad. By clearly marking borders that must not be crossed, they make our coexistence possible. For example, the incest taboo is an almost universal one that can be found in practically all societies for good reasons. (Lévi-Strauss, 1981) We have internalised most taboos in such a way that we no longer even notice them in our everyday lives. The constant change of taboos is also a sign of healthy communities. If, for example, the over-sexualised portrayal of women and/or racist portrayals of certain ethnic groups in games becomes a taboo in the future, this is not a sign of repression but only of a discursive change, just as we can speak openly about sexuality today thanks to the removal of taboos on sexuality in the late 1960s.

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# Cardboard Genocide
## Board Game Design as a Tool in Holocaust Education

**ABSTRACT**

The following paper is a report from a board game design workshop organized by a team of memory scholars, game scholars and Holocaust educators from Jagiellonian University in Kraków for a group of middle school students (age 15-16) from Radecznica, a small village in eastern Poland. The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness and facilitate reflection on local Holocaust histories through board game design. To that end, a two-day design event was organized and conducted, to help the students develop personal bonds with the local Holocaust history. Due to the workshop's success, we believe the board game design proved to be an effective tool in the Holocaust education. The workshop results are discussed with regard to the Holocaust absence from game culture and considered in the context of the ongoing struggle to detaboo

the involvement of ethnic Poles in the destruction of Jewish communities in Poland during the Second World War.

One day, we invited a group of teenagers to gamify the Holocaust with us. The above sentence, though factually true, looks rather inappropriate when put on paper, at least at the moment of writing this article. The memory of the greatest tragedy of the 20th century is off-limits for gamification or the game culture in general – and the involvement of middle-school students gives our enterprise an additional scandalous quality. Yet, the same game design workshop for teenagers in a small Polish village proves that games can be a useful tool to explore systemic aspects of Holocaust and to allow participants to create more personal and empathic relationships with the hurtful memories of local Holocaust histories. This paper discusses interactions between the workshop findings and the way Shoah is portrayed (or not portrayed) in game culture and game studies. We start with a short review of existing Holocaust-themed games in order to move on to a more theoretical consideration of the Holocaust-themed game possibilities and reasons behind the scarcity of such games. Then, by presenting our workshop, we consider games' usefulness the preservation of Holocaust memory and address the long-standing Holocaust taboo of game culture.

**HOLOCAUST AS A TABOO OF GAME CULTURE**

The Holocaust remains one of the major taboos of game culture: it is a topic rarely even mentioned in games – moreover, the few existing game portrayals of the genocide are met with outrage. There has to be a special reason for that, given the fact digital games feature numerous difficult and hurtful historical subjects, such as Transatlantic slave trade in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft, 2013); systemic racial discrimination in the USA in *Mafia III*, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* or *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018); legacy of European colonialism in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*; or war crimes and the fate of civilians in *This War of Mine* or *Spec Ops: The Line* – with various degree of success.

Most game scholars analyzing the issue agree that the major cause behind the invisibility of the Holocaust is the social perception of games as trivial pastime, unfit to deal with serious and sensitive topics (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015; Frasca, 2000; Kansteiner, 2017; Michalik, 2015; Pfister, 2020a; Seriff, 2018). Therefore, any attempt to directly address the ultimate historical evil through a game is considered sacrilegious by popular media, as if the Holocaust were about to be made a matter for child's play. Moreover, as Eugen Pfister (2020a, pp. 275–276), and Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth (2015, pp. 139–140) point out, as sold globally, local restrictions regarding usage of Nazi-related symbols further limit the possibility to include the Holocaust themes or imagery. As a

result, in many World War II-themed games, both Nazi ideology and Shoah are usually whitewashed, especially if the given game allows playing as a German army or assuming a German soldier's position. The Nazi ideology and the genocide cannot be included in such games, as they tend to present War World II as a conflict between two equivalent sides, and perpetuate the idea of war being historical necessity, if not a glamourous opportunity for heroism (Pfister, 2020b, pp. 56–59). Such reluctance to include Nazi war crimes – especially in strategy games – can be traced back to the long-standing fascination with German army in wargame culture (Alonge, 2019; Pfister, 2020b).

It does not mean, though, that the subject is entirely absent from mainstream digital games, and there are a few titles including imagery associated with the Shoah. As Eugen Pfister observes (2020a, 277-279), contemporary mass-market games trying to depict Holocaust employ two basic strategies: either set the game narrative either in an alternative history, or a fictional world where some evil power mimics the Final Solution, or – if caring about historical accuracy – never mention Shoah by name, but throw in subtle hints, whose recognition relies on players' prior historical knowledge.

Wulf Kansteiner (2017) ties this inability to introduce the Holocaust as a topic for mass-market digital games with a larger problem of digitalized memory culture. As it is more open to vernacular activities and testimonies, it disrupts sanctioned ways of remembering the past, safeguarded by public institutions and based upon "time-tested rituals for containing and forgetting potentially unsettling pasts" (p. 133). The digital game market is dominated by a few large, international companies, which go the extra mile with self-censorship to effectively eliminate the risk of games becoming tools of memory disruption. This way, game producers remain a part of institutionalized, regimented culture of World War II memory, which delegates Holocaust memory to selected institutions, such as Yad Vashem or Auschwitz Museum. As a result, Holocaust-themed games can emerge only on the margins of global game culture.

For years, such marginal games formed three general groups: quizzes available on websites educating on Holocaust, failed attempts shut down due to public outrage and neo-Nazi provocations, such as notorious *KZ Manager*, a concentration camp manager first released for Commodore C64 around 1990 in Austria, and then translated, upgraded and developed for different platforms ever since (Kansteiner, 2017; Pfister, 2020a; Selepak, 2010). Only recently, three attempts to make Holocaust-themed games were made, with *My Memory of Us*, a puzzle platformer using a  childlike aesthetic to tell the fairy-tale about friendship and oppression in a country invaded by evil robots (replacing Nazis), being the only one focusing on the topic directly. The other two, *Through the Darkest of Times* and *Attentat 1942* use persecution of Jews as a background for their main subject: complexity of the resistance in Nazi-controlled countries.

Even though II-World-War-themed board games are numerous and varied, titles mentioning the Final Solution are even more scarce. We're able to identify

just two of them. The first one is infamous *Juden Raus!*, a Nazi-era German board game about cleansing the city from Jewish influence, published in 1936 – and, ironically, criticized by the official SS newspaper for trivializing national effort to cleanse Germany from Jewish influence (Seriff, 2018, p. 159). The other is Brenda Brathwaite-Romero's *Train*. Presented in 2009 it was meant as an exhibition piece and a part of *The Mechanic is the Message* project. Played with a series of yellow pawns over a broken glass (alluding to the Kristallnacht of 1938), the game was testing whether players would continue upon learning they were preparing transports heading toward concentration camps. With the powerful combination of mechanics and theme, *Train* is considered to be the only board game successfully addressing the Holocaust to date (Kansteiner, 2017; Seriff, 2018).

The limited number of games even mentioning the Holocaust, especially when compared to the much bigger number of World War II titles conveniently omitting it, can be therefore explained as a result of external pressure from official Holocaust memory custodians, considering ludic frame disrespectful. To avoid the outrage, a game has to either reframe itself from ludic to artistic, documentary or educational (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015, pp. 143–144; see also Pötzsch and Šisler, 2019), or disrupt the link between the subject depicted and history by introducing fictional settings (Chapman, 2019; Pfister, 2020a). *Train* serves as prime examples of game-based artistic installations (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015; Seriff, 2018), while *My Memory of Us* or *Through the Darkest Time* follow conventions of an artistic digital game, the former also using a fictional setting. *Attentat 1942* is in turn framed as educational and documentary, as a university-created software using historical footage and archive-based (though fictionalized) statements (Pötzsch and Šisler 2019; Šisler 2016).

But there is an additional factor to be considered: innate qualities of games as a medium for Holocaust memory. This perspective draws less academic attention, with the most prominent attempt to analyze game poetics as a vehicle for Shoah memory being Gonzalo Frasca's *Ephemeral games: Is it barbaric to design videogames after Auschwitz?* (2000). According to Frasca, there are two main obstacles to the serious treatment of Holocaust in games: the focus on binary outcomes, especially when playing a game is perceived in terms of winning or losing, and the possibility to repeat unsuccessful actions, which leads to the trivialization of all consequences. As a result, Frasca claims "the player could follow a 'correct' path in order to save Anne Frank from death. And if she happened to die, it would not be important, since she would be alive the next time he restarts the game. In other words, the player would be able to jump from life to death back and forth. Therefore, those concepts would lose their ethical, historical and social value." (Frasca, 2000, p. 177)

To remedy those issues, Frasca proposes an "ephemeral game", playable only once on each computer, without any possibility to save, restart or repeat. This way the player would be forced to live through consequences and would not be able to experiment with optimizing the gameplay for the best effect,

thus forced to embrace the irreversibility of consequences and the ultimate nature of death.

In twenty years that passed since Frasca's paper some issues he analyzes were successfully resolved. Even though games still frequently rely on positive and negative outcomes, they are no longer necessarily binary or framed in terms of success and failure. Moreover, irreversible consequences have become a highly-desired feature of cRPGS, such as *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007) or the *Witcher* (CD Projekt RED 2007) series. Failure is no longer necessarily equated with the "loss of a life" analyzed by Frasca. There are games that get rid of failure entirely and introduce branching narratives without a possibility to repeat unsuccessful actions. Simultaneously, there are numerous games with the "permadeath" feature, i.e. permanently removing a killed character from play and forcing the unsuccessful player to start over. While not exactly "ephemeral" in Frasca's sense – as they allow repetition from the beginning – those games seem to be a step toward the narrative experience he considered necessary for serious topics, such as the Holocaust.

With innate obstacles mostly removed, and the changing public perception of digital games as a trivial pastime, both major reasons behind developing Holocaust-themed games are gone. We should expect, therefore, an influx of Shoah games, *My Memory of Us* is a vanguard of. Such expectation leads to yet another question: what are possible benefits from the development of such games?

One answer could stem from the cultural significance of games, both digital and non-digital, in contemporary culture and media ecology. It would be a perfectly reasonable development of Astrid Erll's claim about mediatization of memory (Erll, 2011): if games are surpassing movies as the main medium for cultural memory, then censoring the Holocaust from War-World-II-themed games can do unspeakable damage to the social awareness of the conflict. Arguing along that line, Eugen Pfister points out the danger of depoliticizing World War II and reducing it to the military conflict of technologically advanced and visually appealing armies, while removing both Nazi ideology and untold suffering it caused out of sight (Pfister, 2020a). From this perspective, the introduction of the topic to the game medium keeps the memory alive and seems to be a moral obligation caused by the very existence and popularity of World War II games.

In addition, it is possible to consider unique possibilities the medium opens for shaping the Holocaust memory. Wulf Kansteiner (2017) points to digital games' capability of inducing empathy based on personal responsibility and considers digital games as a possible remedy for the consumer's passivity in the contemporary Holocaust culture. A digital game allowing the player to enact various scenarios in a simulated Shoah environment could lead to a critical examination of perpetrators' and passive bystanders' position, and teach how to recognize signs of radicalization in real life. Thus, the author considers the very thing criticized by Frasca: the possibility to explore outcomes of various

decisions without suffering consequences, to be a major asset in Holocaust education, adding an important reservation – such a game should be produced by official curators of Holocaust memory rather than a commercial company.

Susanne Seriff is far less optimistic, claiming that even though Holocaust-themed games could be prepared with best intentions in mind, they fortify the concept of Jews being "the Other" to be removed, and contribute to the growing neo-Nazi discourse and rampant Western antisemitism. Building her argument on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, she points to the dangers of presenting the Holocaust as playful and reinforcing antisemitic ideologies by introducing them as a part of game rules or setting: "creators of Holocaust toys and toy art may insist that their creations are mere parodic commentary – or cautious education – on the nature of evil in our lives, repeated events of history teach us that, in fact, they are playing with dangerous fire." (Seriff, 2018, p. 167).

The latter reservation is not without merit, but assumes introducing the Holocaust perpetrator as a playable position – it is not by accident that Seriff herself criticized *Train* as a well-meaning game reinforcing hateful ideology. But alternatives should be also considered: a possible Holocaust-themed game could educate about Nazi atrocities without forcing anybody to enact the Nazi position. The question therefore arises: is it more productive to teach the horror of Holocaust by employing the perspective of persecuted Jews and making them playable characters for people of non-Jewish origin, or by highlighting the involvement of non-Jewish agents? As we argue, both solutions come with their own sets of significant issues that cannot be easily resolved

We seriously doubt whether it is ethical to put a gentile player in the position of a Holocaust victim or survivor and make them experience simulated persecution while enjoying the comfort of their own armchair. Firstly, such a perspective might be seen as an especially hurtful form of identity tourism (Nakamura, 1995), allowing perfectly safe people to assume they have experienced Shoah themselves. Secondly, it might also bring forward the problem Frasca exemplifies with the search for an optimal path to Anna Frank's survival. To be playable, a hypothetical game featuring Jewish protagonists trying to survive in the extremely hostile environment of organized persecution would put the agency in the hands of the player. Even if such agency were very limited, as in a walking simulator, it would inevitably force the player to learn the rules, and, in turn, the way to successfully navigate the simulated Shoah. Therefore, the game would necessarily invoke the problem of personal responsibility, creating a false assumption that crafty people could learn "the rules of the game" and bolster their chance of survival. Such rhetoric easily suggests that millions of Jews murdered during the Holocaust were, to a degree, victims of their own shortcomings, as they had never learned to "play the game well." It goes without saying that such an abhorrent idea is both inaccurate and deeply offensive, which makes the concept of a Holocaust-themed game with a Jewish protagonist extremely difficult to put into practice.

The option of putting the player in the position of a non-Jewish character involved in the Holocaust, in turn, might enforce collaboration with the Nazi regime, thus risking the pitfall Sheriff points out and lending itself to neo-Nazi appropriations, even if created as a critical project. Alternatively, such a game might feature playable characters who help Jewish NPCs to survive the nightmare of Shoah. Although tempting, such a solution caters to the trope of the Heroic Gentile, perpetuating the stereotype of agency-deprived, passive Jewish victims waiting to be rescued by external forces, a Holocaust movie trope made popular by films such as *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist*, *In Darkness*, or *Zookeeper's Wife*. It is a direct reversal of the problem created by the Jewish protagonist: in this case there is too little agency given to the victims, which suggests the Jewish population of Europe to have been an object over which forces of good and evil struggled.

The trope of a Heroic Gentile is also very precarious due to the state-regulated World War II discourse common in European countries or Israel. In many places, it is presented as a morality tale of Nazi culprits, Jewish victims and local non-Jewish resistance fighters risking their lives to save as many Jews as possible from the inhumanly efficient German death industry (Majewski et al., 2009; Novick, 2000; Steinlauf, 1997; Zertal, 2005). Such stories censor the painful truth about non-German antisemitism (Gross, 2000; Leociak, 2010; Tokarska-Bakir, 2012), local population responsibility and active participation in Holocaust murders (Engelking, 2016; Grabowski, 2011; Gross and Grudzińska-Gross, 2011). A hypothetical game focusing on heroic resistance stories, even if factually correct, would, therefore, inevitably reinforce such white-washing narrative.

We agree that the removal of the Holocaust from World-War-II-themed games is a deeply disturbing issue that should be addressed alongside the possibility to play Nazi Germany or Japanese Empire. We are also convinced that the highly interactive game medium could prevent the passivity of the consumer's position toward the Holocaust cultural memory and facilitate reflection on the subject. But we also stand by Frasca's two-decade old, insightful comment: using games to educate about Shoah and preserve its memory introduces major ethical issues caused by combining agency and player position, which inevitably leads to questioning the moral acceptability of participating in a simulated Holocaust, even to learn.

### BRINGING TABOO INTO GAME

The theoretical considerations presented above became very practical for us when we were invited to organize a game-based Holocaust-related event for teenagers from Eastern Poland. The event was a part of *Uncommemorated Genocide Sites and Their Influence on Collective Memory, Cultural Identity, Ethical Attitudes and Intercultural Relations in Contemporary Poland* – a four-year research project carried out by the members of the Research Center for Memory Cultures at Jagiellonian

University in Kraków. While the research was conducted in various sites across Poland, the village of Radecznica was chosen for the game-based event due to the involvement of a local middle school in the earlier stages of the project.

Radecznica (est. population 920 in 2019) is a village in eastern Poland, nowadays inhabited almost exclusively by ethnic Poles. Before World War II, though, there was a population of Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish denizens here, Catholics being a clear majority due to the proximity of a prominent Bernardine monk monastery. During the wartime, it was also an area of heavy armed resistance against the Nazi occupation. Local guerrilla fighters are currently well commemorated and celebrated by the local church and community, in a way consistent with the dominant patriotic public discourse in Poland. Radecznica was also a witness to the local Jewish population mass killings during World War II. While researching the local memory of the Holocaust, the scholars from JU helped to uncover and properly commemorate a number of unmarked graves (Sendyka et al., 2020).

The location of mass graves in the area is known largely thanks to the grassroots activity of Stanisław Zybała (deceased in 2014), a local librarian who devoted his life to preserving the memory of the pre-war Jewish community in Radecznica.[1] His work started after a wartime discovery of the bodies of a Jewish family hiding in the forest ravine called Second Pits (Drugie Doły in Polish), as his childhood friend Raźla was among the dead. In 2016 Zybała's efforts and the involvement of Jagiellonian University Holocaust researchers resulted in the commemoration of the Second Pits grave by Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries in Poland – a ceremony attended by the entire local community including middle-school students who would participate in our event three years later (Grzybowska et al., 2019).[2] The event we organized focused on Second Pits, as it was the case best known to the students we were working with – though it is important to stress that the site was only one of ten unmarked mass graves identified by Zybała, the biggest one counting about 70 Jews shot and buried there by Nazi enforcers.

The commemoration of the Second Pits killing site is a part of the recent debate on the Holocaust memory in Poland, turning against the biggest taboo of modern Polish history: the Polish involvement in Shoah. Ever since the end of World War II, the official, state-sanctioned Polish discourse has been downplaying local populations' involvement in murdering Polish Jews, while blowing out of proportion the scale and scope of Polish resistance fighters' and common people's efforts at saving their Jewish neighbors (Bikont, 2004; Forecki, 2010, 2013; Majewski, et al. 2009). Even though heroic efforts to help their persecuted neighbors were undertaken by a substantial number of ethnic Poles, as later confirmed by hundreds of Yad Vashem Institute commemorations (Górny, 2013), and helping the Jewish citizens of pre-war Poland was an official policy of the Polish government in exile, the opposite attitude was far more common (Bartoszewski and Lewinówna, 2007; Engelking, 2016; Grabowski, 2011; Leociak, 2010).

**1.** A letter by Stanisław Zybała of 6 October 2010 to the Jewish Community in Lublin on Jewish graves in Radecznica along with a handwritten map of the place where the author marked the approximate locations of burial sites.

**2.** The field report from commemorating practices by the Research Center for Memory Cultures (in Polish) can be found online: http://niemiejscapamieci. uj.edu.pl/wp-content/ uploads/2020/04/Nie-miejsca-pamie%CC%A8ci-broszura_s.pdf. The detailed account from Second Pits murder and its subsequent commemoration by Stanisław Zybała is avaliable online (in English): https://zapomniane.org/en/ miejsce/radecznica-the-gorge/.

It is to be emphasized that mass hunting of Jewish population in hiding, informing Nazi officials about hiding spots and robbing Jewish belongings never represented the official policy of the Polish underground state; all those acts were spontaneous local initiatives resulting from the centuries of mutual distrust and aversion which escalated under the wartime circumstances and due to Nazi encouragements (Tokarska-Bakir, 2012). Despite that fact, ever since the end of the war Polish involvement in the Jewish population demise was treated as a shameful secret both by the official government and anti-communist underground. The situation started to change after the year 2000, but it is still very far from being resolved; the official state policy is to deny any Polish responsibility for the extermination of Jews, and focus on the stories of the Righteous Among the Nations instead (Bikont, 2004; Engelking and Grabowski, 2018; Gross, 2000).

The basic idea behind the workshop commissioned to the Jagiellonian Game Research Centre was to provide the Radecznica community with additional educational opportunities before the conclusion of the project, so that the scholars from Jagiellonian University not only took data from the local population, but also shared their expertise and commitment in return, an important ethical consideration in contemporary memory studies (Brzezińska and Toeplitz, 2007; Salzman and Rice, 2011). There was also and additional factor to be considered: while the commemoration of the local murder site was quite well-received by the local community, the grave itself quite quickly started to fade into obscurity. To rectify that, Jagiellonian University memory scholars decided to employ additional measures to ensure that the pre-war Jewish population and its tragic history would be remembered and understood by students of the local middle school, the youngest generation of Radecznica citizens. Looking for something else than another celebratory lecture or discussion, they turned to the Jagiellonian Game Research Centre to consider a possibility of using games as an effective tool for Holocaust education.

The aim of the game-based event we designed was, therefore, twofold: to engage teenagers through the usage of ludic practices, and to address the main topic of the research project, that is – the local Holocaust history. It put us in a unique position, as the few existing games engaging that topic deal with the fate of the Jewish population in large urban centers, including ghettos and death camps as major signifiers of the theme. While consistent with the mainstream Shoah discourse appropriated in popular culture through movies set in city-based ghettos, such as *Schindler's List* or *In Darkness*, and photos from death camps, such imagery is also quite different from the local experience and memory of Radecznica population. Therefore, we decided to design our own way of using games as a tool for students to reflect upon the systemic conditions of the Holocaust outside big urban centers or concentration camps.

The ultimate goal was to help the students resolve contradictions resulting from the clash of two competing Holocaust narratives within official Polish

Holocaust culture by appealing to their vernacular culture. We understand two factors contributing to the public memory following the description given by John Bodnar (1994, pp. 15–20). The public memory is a general set of believes shaping a community's understanding of its past – in our case, Radecznica's communal attitude toward Holocaust. According to Bodnar, it is a result of two competing cultures: the official one, sanctioned by institutions and power structures, and the vernacular one, born from everyday practice and individual memories of the community members. In our case, there is a tension within Polish official Holocaust culture, as two narratives compete. One of them is state-sanctioned, safeguarded by national institutions and focuses on absolving ethnic Poles from the involvement in the Holocaust. The other, trying to nuance the picture and highlight the Polish role in the Nazi death machine, is backed by the authority of academic institutions and Jewish community in Poland. As the students were heavily exposed to both contradicting ways to understand the past during the course of *Uncommemorated places…* project, we decided to provide them with creative space to explore vernacular memory of Radecznica community as a counterbalance to both discourses.

We assumed games to be a great vehicle for such an undertaking, as they foster active participation which, in turn, can lead to a change in the attitude toward the past. It is important to stress that we were not presenting students with any new information, as they had already learned about the Second Pits murder and the Holocaust in general. What we were aiming at was to activate that prior knowledge. The textbook information the teenagers had collected during classes, the participation in official events and lectures had formed what could be called an archive: a fact-oriented, static and passive body of knowledge. Our task was to turn that archive into a repertoire: an alternative mode of remembering the past, which Diana Taylor identifies as active and embodied, relying on active participation and repetition instead of memorizing (2003). That, in turn, could lead to integration of the archival, official knowledge with the vernacular culture and foster an active commemoration of Holocaust memory sites as enduring practice.

An additional challenge was the selection of a game type that would make such endeavor possible. Our participants' access to electronic equipment was very limited, as the school hosting the event lacks a computer lab. That fact ruled out digital games and turned our attention to board games as an alternative. Even though our choice was mostly circumstantial, it turned out to be an auspicious one. First of all, being independent from digital technology, it expanded the potential application of the workshop beyond educational facilities in possession of computer labs (and therefore beyond well-funded metropolitan culture centers). Moreover, board games rules are more explicitly presented and less numerous than video game rules, and therefore facilitate thinking in more systemic, rule-based way, something we wish to encourage. Finally, in many board games luck is a more prominent gameplay factor, with rolling dice or

drawing cards at random. In those games individual agency, already recognized as an obstacle when introducing Holocaust as a game theme, is counterbalanced with the with the prominence of fate.

## BOARD-GAME DESIGN WORKSHOP IN RADECZNICA

Considering the aims of the workshop and the lack of board games that would facilitate the discussion on systemic aspects of the Holocaust, we decided that designing board games during the event would be a preferable alternative to just playing them. Choosing the design focus we had two factors in mind. Firstly, we considered game design potential as a learning tool, already analyzed in game studies literature. Secondly, we hoped that such focus would allow us to address the biggest ethical problem about Holocaust-themed games as explained above – namely, that designing games would introduce a different kind of agency that would not force students into one of three morally dubious positions – Nazi murderer, Jewish victim or Heroic Gentile rescuer.

We aimed to provide Radecznica students with an opportunity to discuss and personally process textbook knowledge as well as involve Shoah memories preserved by their families. The goal was, therefore, to enable safe and productive discussion on such a heavy and commonly avoided topic within a controlled environment framed by a goal-oriented exercise facilitating the conversation. In that regard, we were following Illaria Mariani and Davide Spallazzo's (2018, pp. 19–30) practice of approaching social taboos through teacher-curated game design. As a result we hoped to inspire the teenagers to develop more personal attitudes toward the local Holocaust history and help them transform theoretical, textbook archival knowledge into a more practical repertoire, an approach of extreme importance in Holocaust memory preservation (Boroń, 2013; Taylor, 2003).

Interpreting the educational potential of game design as a transformational practice, inducing lasting change on the designer, is also a concept argued by Stefano Gualeni (2015), who claims that in order to prepare the system of the game, the designer has to develop a deep understanding of the issue serving as a base for the said system, and fashion themselves in a way that transforms their comprehension and attitude toward the issue itself. Gualeni's theoretical position was reinforced over the course the game design class, with students designing games promoting healthy lifestyle slowly changing their dietary habits.

Gualeni's, and Mariani and Spallazzo's design classes were both conducted in the course of several months. In our case, the duration of the workshop was limited to two days. For that reason we decided to build upon the experience from critically-oriented game jams (Kultima, 2015). Even though the game jams' initial aim had been to increase the creativity in game development, it turned out to have highly educational properties leading to an improvement of academic performance among game design students participating in such events (Preston et al. 2012) and dissemination of values shared by organizers

and key participants (Kultima 2018). They have also proved to be an efficient tool for building a community around a tragic event, as was the case with Fukushima Game Jam (Shin et al. 2012), or facilitate culture preservation through collaboration between indigenous population and game designers, for example during the Sami Game Jam (Laiti et al., 2020). The latter case was especially important, as it demonstrated that collaboration between professional game scholars and local amateurs without any prior knowledge of game design conventions can open new ways of memory preservation, as the local participants introduce their own cultural perspective and highlight aspects of vernacular practice that outsiders can easily miss.

Drawing inspiration from the game jam culture and hoping for similar effects – a transformation of knowledge and shift in values, as well as preservation of traumatic cultural knowledge through game design – we chose a similar formula. Our workshop was designed as an intense two-day event with professionals working alongside amateurs to develop games operating under mechanical and thematic constraints.

Our final consideration was to not overwhelm students with the workshop theme from the very beginning, as their initial task was to learn how to design a board game in the first place. In rectifying that issue, we were inspired by Braithwaithe-Romero's *Train*, where players were exposed to the rules and allowed to play the game only to be introduced to the Holocaust context afterwards. The shocking revelation provided a powerful tool to explore the concept of banality of evil by changing the perception of the game and forcing a critical evaluation of its system.

Inspired by that example, we decided to task the students with designing a board game on a neutral theme, featuring a mechanics for hiding, escaping or smuggling, and then to re-theme it as a Holocaust game. Thus we hoped to make the task easier while steering the participants out of the most common Shoah imagery to prevent them from designing games set in ghettos or concentration camps.

The event itself spanned over the course of two days and involved 14 students from the last class of the middle school (age 15-16), three of them dropping out during the second day due to their prior obligations. The workshop was organized and supervised by and a team of game scholars from Jagiellonian Game Research Centre including professional game designers, and a Holocaust educator watching over ethical aspects of the endeavor. Two teachers from Radecznica school were also present throughout the workshop. All students and their parents were informed about the reason behind the workshop and its theme before the event, and parents were asked for consent for their children to participate.

During the first day, participants were instructed in basic principles of board game design and asked to design a simple board game on a randomly selected subject, but including a specific mechanics for hiding and seeking, escaping or

smuggling. Students were divided into teams and provided with pre-prepared blank board game component sets (including boards, tokens, cards and wooden pawns) and a mentor from among the workshop organizers to guide and inspire the design process. Mentors were also asked to introduce pre-created rulesets in case participants struggled with the design process. That precaution turned out to be unnecessary, as by the end of the first day all teams managed to create playable game prototypes based on rules of their own design.

The second day started with a lecture on the Second Pits murder, delivered by the Holocaust researcher. Afterwards students were tasked to re-theme their games in a way that would fit the local Holocaust history, focusing on the systemic aspects of depicted events. The introduction of the Holocaust as a theme was hardly a surprise – the students and their parents were not only well-aware of the research conducted in Radecznica by Jagiellonian University memory scholars, but also informed beforehand that the workshop would be dealing with the topic. What was surprising, though, was the re-theming challenge, as most students assumed they would be designing a new game on the second day, with rules crafted specifically for the subject.

After approximately three hours of discussion, three working prototypes were presented by design teams, with detailed explanations of how rules designed the other day were used to cover locally based Holocaust narratives, and why such design choices were made. None of the teams decided to play the re-themed versions, even though they had readily played the prototypes before re-theming. Following games and their re-themes were presented:

1. The game initially themed as light-hearted science fiction about petty criminals escaping from a space jail was, quite predictably, themed as a game about Jewish families trying to escape the region, with a lot of emphasis on the roles of luck and local topography in the runaways' survival.

2. The game about escaping from a collapsing haunted house became a tale of group effort necessary to save a single life, strongly stressing the growing difficulty of such an act over time.

3. For the jolly game about cartoon pigs tending to a farm while searching for a hidden treasure, authors presented not one, but two possible themes. One tied the resource management of the original game with gathering the necessities for survival by swapping farm products to medicine, food and hope. The other dealt with contemporary attempts to uncover and preserve the hidden treasure of the local Holocaust memory.

All presentations had a solemn aura, as both the students and the organizers were deeply moved by the profundity of the outcomes. The last hour of the workshop turned out to be a very emotional yet rewarding experience for everybody involved. After the workshop's conclusion the prototypes were donated to the school library, more as mementos than playable artifacts.

As stated above, the immediate emotional impact of the workshop was unquestionable and very intense. As the task was to preserve the original game mechanics untouched, the students could not rely on conventional pop cultural Holocaust themes. As a result, they were forced to mobilize their knowledge of the local Holocaust history and discuss in detail how to translate it into the existing ruleset. That task allowed the participants to improve their shared knowledge through discussion and community building, as described by Mariani and Spallazzo (Spallazzo and Mariani 2018). It also allowed the students to move past the tired clichés of the Holocaust-related school education into a far more intimate territory. Although undeniably unpleasant for them, the exercise achieved its basic aim: it made a group of teenagers from a devoutly Catholic Polish village develop personal perspectives on the Second Pits murder and Jewish fate in general.

The process of designing the games validated Frasca's arguments, as all three teams not only problematized the conditions of winning the game, but were visibly uncomfortable and faced verbal difficulties when explaining them during the presentations. All groups replaced "winning" with "surviving," and one group made a point to emphasize that not everybody was able to survive the nightmare of Shoah and that it was mostly dependent on external circumstances. By reducing player's agency in the Holocaust-themed version, all groups underlined chance as an important factor in the survival.

Moreover, while re-theming the mechanics designed to cover such actions as hopping planets while escaping from the space jail or entering the haunted house, the students made an effort to redirect the mechanics from reflecting action(s) to emphasizing emotional and physical conditions of the survival. As stated above, one team decided "hope" to be as crucial as food and medicine, introducing those three resources in place of crops from their previous farming game, and another team changed reason for being on the move from active pursuit to fear of being exposed – a decision that strongly increased emotional tension. Not a single group introduced active antagonists, replacing them with the extreme hostility of social environment. Thus, the game designers avoided simplistic blame-tossing and bypassed the nationalistic aspect of the official Holocaust memory.

We consider the workshop to have been very successful in mobilizing the students' prior knowledge of the Holocaust and local history, and putting both official and vernacular archives of memory into practice. Even though it was not explicitly required by the organizers, all students turned to the local topography, seeking to relate game space with the area and subsequently discussing Holocaust memories preserved in their community and their families in addition to what was taught in class. For example, an attempt to name safe spaces on the board after local villages was discarded when, after a prolonged discussion on the said villages' attitude toward Jewish refugees, the students agreed that there were not enough shelters for Jews in the area to cover all safe spaces on the board.

The workshop had an undeniable and immediate emotional impact on all participants, including the organizers. The requirement of operationalizing archival knowledge of the Holocaust crimes transformed it into a far more personal and practical experience. Still, long-lasting effects of the workshop are difficult to assess. Even though the surveys conducted one week after the workshop give us a reason to be optimistic, we have no method to verify the durability of the transformation. The participating students were in the last grade, so they have already changed schools and are impossible to track without engaging substantial resources. As a result, we cannot repeat the survey and assess lasting influence of the experience with any degree of certainty, though both the original survey results and the very strong emotional reactions we personally experienced allow us, to some degree, hope for the workshop to have had lasting positive effects.

**DESIGNING GAMES AFTER AUSCHWITZ**

Though the workshop experience was a limited one, we believe it sheds some light on reasons behind the difficulty for the game culture to approach Shoah as a serious subject. Our conclusion is based on the reactions shared by all designing teams: replacing victory with survival, focusing on Jewish experience and the reluctance to play the game. We believe that those three factors co-create the final conclusion: designing Holocaust-themed games might be a more efficient and morally permissible way of addressing the Shoah through the game medium than playing such games, and board games seem to serve the Holocaust education better than digital ones. It does not mean that we do not consider the necessity of including the genocide in World-War-II-themed digital and board games, as we recognize the importance of Pfister's argument about the dangers of white-washing the conflict (Pfister, 2020a, 2020b).

Our conclusion is consistent with Frasca's (2000) observation: there is a serious obstacle for gameplay engaging the topic in a meaningful way in the game dependency on binary outcomes as a means of game progress or lack thereof, ultimately leading to triumph or failure. It was very clear when each team independently decided not to call the ultimate outcome of the re-themed game a "victory" and found competition within the game tragic rather than exciting. We do not believe, though, that the reason behind such design choice was related to design team conviction that such binarity leads to the trivialization or operationalization of death. There was also no sign of the other reason Frasca gives for the game inability to deal with Holocaust, namely the possibility to revert the action in case of undesirable consequences. No game directly dealt with death, nor included any mechanism to revert move: therefore the problem with binarity and the victory as a final outcome has to be related to other game properties.

As we have learned watching design teams discussions and subsequent presentations, all students had to overcome the major problem with translating Holocaust narrative to the set of actions performed by players. The reason

for that difficulty seems to be an inability to reconcile the Holocaust narrative preserved by public memory with two game-related concepts: personal agency leading to desirable outcome, and the conflict framed as thrilling. As a result, a strong dissonance was created, as those game elements that usually make gameplay exciting: overcoming obstacles and competing against the environment or other players, are framed as sources of trauma in the Holocaust narrative. Shoah public memory depicts conflict as source of untold suffering, and empathizes limitations of the agency, as it is often presented as unavailable for Jewish victims – especially in stories focusing on Heroic Gentile trope.

That dissonance became very clear during re-theming games. All participant discovered that forcing the opponent out of a hiding place or competing over resources is fun as long as the opponent is presented as another petty criminal escaping from a space jail, and the resources are crops to be sold on a farm market. However, the fun evaporates when the one who is chased away is a fellow Jew desperately trying to survive, and the resources turn into food and medicine. As the rules were not transformed with the game themes, the process left all parties involved with an awkward sensation of having fun in a wrong way, which contributed to the emotional impact of the workshop.

This observation can be generalized, as the dissonance workshop participants felt comes from general properties of game culture and Holocaust culture discourses, not from the particular condition of the workshop or the individual properties of Radecznica public memory.

It is, therefore, our claim that there is a basic incompatibility between the way official, public memory of the Holocaust is created and the act of playing the game. It stems from the ways agency and conflict are framed in game culture vs. the Holocaust culture. In game culture, it is common to identify struggle for control and agency the main property of gameplay or a desirable quality in a game, while the official Holocaust culture frames the same struggle as tragic and traumatic. This dissonance is manifested when players are facing a choice leading toward victory or failure, but it is not rooted in binarity of the outcome or possibility to revert choice once made, as Frasca claimed. We believe it is caused by that outcome being decided through player's agency, improving player position in the conflict against other players or AI-operated enemies. Both traits are deeply incompatible with official public Holocaust memory.

We believe that fundamental discrepancy to be the hidden reason behind the common conviction that games are an inadequate medium for the Holocaust narrative, the phenomenon described extensively by Chapman, Lidenroth (2015), Kansteiner (2017) or Pfister (2020a, 2020b). It also explains why the most common strategy to include Shoah-related motifs in games is to relocate it to the outside of the official Holocaust discourse, either by including fantasy elements or incorporating the Holocaust theme into a background of a more game-compatible narrative of armed struggle or civic resistance to Nazi regime, therefore moving agency elsewhere. It also explains why it is easier to

introduce other hurtful histories into digital games and present them through gameplay: their official memory is not as tightly guarded and curated as the Holocaust memory, whose dissemination is monitored by several institutions and nation states (see Kansteiner, 2017, pp. 129–132).

Nevertheless, we consider games to be a very powerful tool for discussing and analyzing the Holocaust memory, precisely for the aforementioned reason: the focus on agency and ability to present complex ideas as systems, not narratives (Galloway, 2006), a quality that can serve as an effective way of explaining entanglements between various actors of the Shoah. Our simple exercise showed that translating textbook knowledge of the topic into a ruleset forced a change in the workshop participants' attitude to the Holocaust and allowed them to consider perspectives they had not reflected upon before, such as the availability of resources or spatial and temporal aspects of survival. It also facilitated the transformation of archival, scripted knowledge into embodied practice (Taylor, 2003). Thus, game design turned out to be a very potent way to disrupt the official Holocaust memory, and combine it with vernacular memory and practice, as to address the local Holocaust events, the students were forced to merge what they had learned at school with anecdotes and information preserved by their families (Bodnar, 1994).

For this reason it is curated game design rather than playing Holocaust-themed games that we consider a powerful educational tool. By positioning the students as designers, not players, we successfully managed to circumnavigate three biggest issues. We avoided forcing the participants into assuming morally dubious positions of Nazi perpetrators, Jewish victims or Heroic Gentiles. We delegated agency out of the gameplay and into the game design, reducing the tension between agency constructions in game culture and Holocaust memory. We successfully mobilized the vernacular memory of the Shoah and facilitated turning archival knowledge into embodied practice. By giving the students a sense of accomplishment coming from the successful design of a functional game prototype, we hopefully forged a link between the Holocaust memory and intense emotions, both positive and negative, providing participants with more personal experience of the topic. This way we've created a emotional alternative for both the prideful state-sanctioned narrative about Polish heroism and the guilt-ridden academic tale of Polish complicity for Radecznica students.

Finally, if the reason behind attempts to break the Holocaust taboo in game culture is the intention of preserving memory through the new medium, as Eugen Pfister and Wulf Kansteiner propose, curated game design offers yet another advantage. While playing an educational Holocaust-themed game constitutes the players as students learning about the historical event, designing a game makes the participants custodians of the Holocaust memory, combining official and vernacular discourses into a unique game-based narrative. That is what prepares the knowledge of the ultimate man-made tragedy to be passed on to the next generation.

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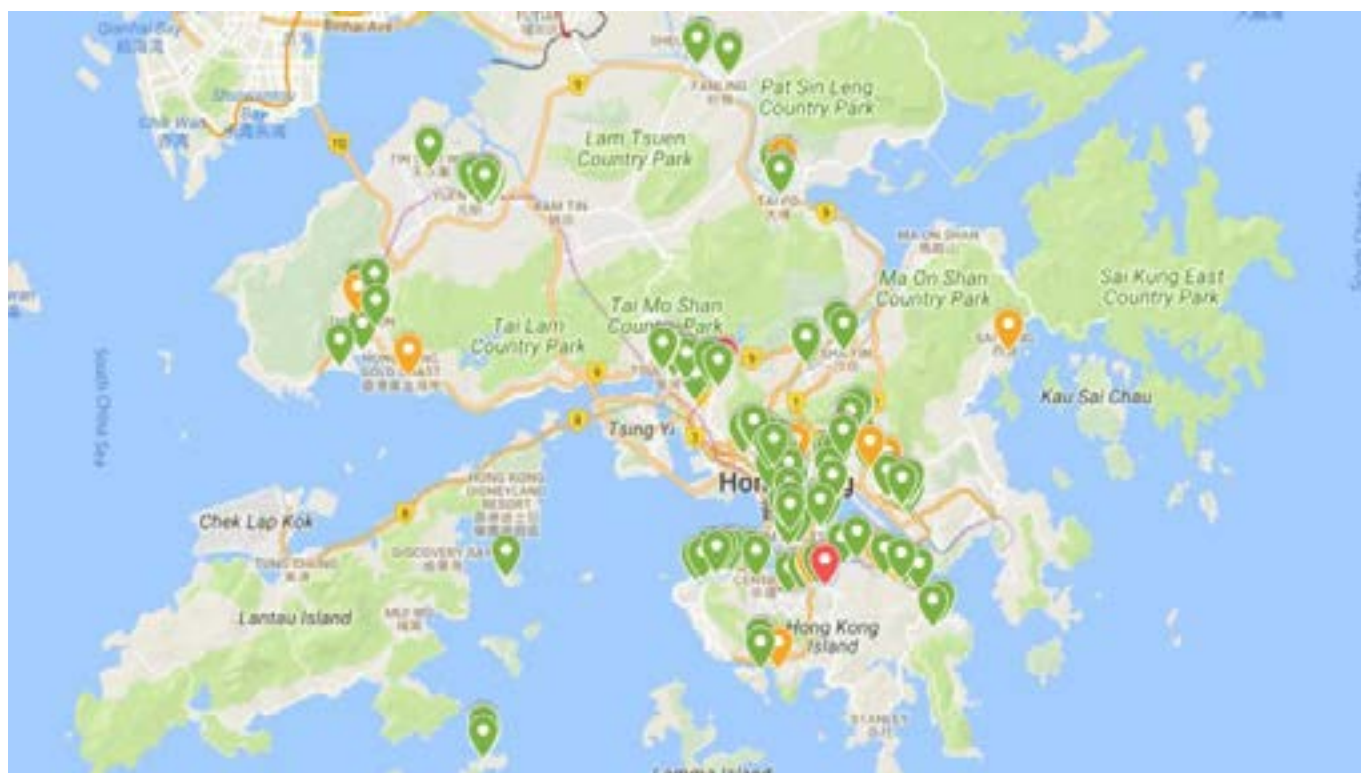*Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg, USA, 1993

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# Invading Space?
## On perceived risk and doing research in game arcades



Source: Google Maps. Map of Hong Kong Arcades

**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses researchers' personal safety by examining a case of studying game arcades in Hong Kong. We approach personal safety from three perspectives as we focus on 1) safety risks associated with specific spaces, 2) risks in meeting and being acquainted with specific people, and 3) risks that are brought along by the theme of a research that may be sensitive. While interview data suggests arcade-goers' worries over 'triad' stereotypes exaggerated by popular culture, police reports and news articles helped us to understand the true and worrying linkages between game arcades and organised crime in Hong Kong even though criminality can by no means be generalised to encompass all arcades.

## INTRODUCTION

"We can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space." (H.G. Wells as quoted in Space Invaders)

Games research is typically a low-risk occupation. However, there are topics and areas of study that force a researcher to exercise great care or to encounter situations that are threatening, disturbing, or unsettling. Delving too deep into the Gamergate[1] controversy or putting together a counter-hegemonic games exhibition in a totalitarian state are some examples that may be considered to involve heightened risk. And then there's organized crime.

This article is an attempt to address the dangers of researching the 'dark', illegal aspects of gaming, and their perceived, if not exclusively factual, links to organized crime. It focuses on a taboo of openly discussing researcher safety concerns, specifically in games research. The intimacy and vulnerability uncovered by such concerns form part of the reason why this may be. Researchers may also worry about being ridiculed over seemingly overweening expectations of one's importance. Organized crime, meanwhile, can seem like a remote phenomenon too unfamiliar to think alongside one's modest writings on games.

We start by briefly introducing a study about Hong Kong game arcades, known for their links to organized crime syndicates, that prompted us to examine personal safety in relation to our research practice. Our main interest is in how personal safety and research methodological choices are linked in the study of digital games. Here we rely on earlier research that has approached researcher safety in research areas traditionally dealing with 'risky' topics, such as criminology or research into so-called difficult populations (e.g. people with substance addiction). The article approaches how association with organized crime turns the 'field' of ethnographic research dangerous and unpredictable (Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2014). Alongside introducing challenges that concern research conduct when gathering material, we discuss methodological approaches that help overcome such risks.

## ADDRESSING RISK

When studying organized crime in relation to gaming, it is valuable to investigate how other fields tackle the topic from a research methodological point of view. According to Lee-Treweek and Linkogle "Social research involves us entering other people's workplaces, homes and communities and we are often unaware of the threats of the field until we have been there for some time [...] Therefore we posit all qualitative research is to some extent potentially dangerous." (2000, 10). Earlier studies also suggest that, "A number of risks to the researcher have been identified, including physical threat, psychological harm, and accusations of improper behavior (Social Research Association 2005), and

**1.** Gamergate was a targeted harassment movement that started in August of 2014 against videogame developer Zoë Quinn which then spread to harassment of journalists, feminists, and other women within the game industry. "Those in the GamerGate movement allege that there is corruption in video games journalism and that feminists are actively working to undermine the video game industry" (Chess & Shaw, 2015). A conspiracy theory linking the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) to this alleged corruption led to additional harassment and threats towards DiGRA members and academics.

understandably these risks may present differently for qualitative researchers" (Parker & O'Reilly, 2013).

To minimize such risks, Pollock (2009) advocates covert, invisible, and non-participatory observation as potential approaches when studying adversary practices. Analyzing official data, such as statistical records and government reports, as well as media accounts, meanwhile, can help to distance the researcher from the subjects. But to avoid the stereotypical, canonical approaches provided by media accounts and common beliefs, an option is to provide multiple perspectives on the issue. In our study, we started from interviews but soon extended the scope into materials that were available without directly researching people or going into arcades.

Research into sensitive or potentially dangerous areas are important but can prove a challenge for institutional ethics approval boards. In looking at research into conflict, violence, and terrorism, Sluka (2018) looks at an ethical approval required by university review boards and how researchers can develop risk assessment and management plans to help negotiate them. While not as directly dangerous as a live conflict zone, the use of risk assessment to minimize exposure to harm by a researcher was essential when the issues of criminality arose in the study.

Ethnographic studies of criminal networks and the consequences for researchers have been addressed by Martha Huggins and Marie-Louise Glebeek (2003), among others. They detail issues such as meeting people after office hours in the evenings and mention precautions such as taking self-defense classes, avoiding working alone, and carrying a mobile phone. In our study, game arcades are not only dimly lit and far away from the public eye, but also considered highly intimate among those who frequent them. In a study by Lin and Sun (2011), conducted in Taiwan, some gamers treat arcades as their home, for instance.

This article demonstrates a need to better understand how a research topic that tackles aspects of organized crime affects both research participants and researchers. We operate utilizing the concept of 'risk' and identified three domains of existing research into personal safety in research, all relevant to our study:

1. place: some research takes place in dangerous environments (e.g. Williams et al., 1992),
2. people: some research involves people who pose a safety risk (e.g. Cressey, 1967; Fijnaut, 2016), and
3. theme and findings: some research address politically, religiously, economically, or culturally sensitive topics which third parties would not like to see published (e.g. Lee and Renzetti, 1990).

The following sections discuss how the place (i.e. game arcades), people (i.e. members of the triads), and theme of the research yielded perceptions of risk in both participants and in us researchers. In qualitative research, methods gain a lot from the researcher's standpoint since subjective approaches and analyses are not only accepted but encouraged. While scrutinizing our and research participants' subjective perceptions of risk in this article, we encourage the reader to approach with reflexivity as it offers a view into one's own research conduct alongside ours.

**HONG KONG GAME ARCADES AND ORGANISED CRIME**

Hong Kong's arcade culture was most prevalent in the 1980 and 90s with thousands of arcades estimated to be operating in the region. The number of actively operating centers has, not unlike in other parts of the world, plummeted significantly in recent years. In 2002, there were more than 400 game arcades or 'amusement game centers' (遊戲機中心) in Hong Kong while by 2018, the number had dropped to less than two hundred. In their place, esports training centers and arenas attracted both government and private investment. The nearly 50-years long history of local arcade gaming (Ng, 2015), meanwhile, continued to change as centers were primarily populated by older adults instead of youngsters.

To document this shift as well as the past experiences of arcade-goers, we conducted semi-structured interviews in Hong Kong. They took place between 2017 and 2019 and helped us to establish the local 'collective memory' (Halbwachs, 1992) of arcade play, spaces, and players (cf. Wirman & Jones, 2018, 2019) with a purpose to record and archive the cultural history of Hong Kong's arcades. The people interviewed played in arcades in the 1980s and 90s. 15 males and 5 females aged between 22 to late 50s were interviewed about their current ideas, meanings, and values associated with game arcades. About half of the interviews took place online through different means of text chatting tools while the other half was conducted face to face.

One of the most prominent themes in the interviews was the assumed pervasiveness of criminal activities in arcades. These were typically linked to the region's organized crime syndicates, or 'triads.' Historically, starting in Mainland China, criminal organizations set up in Hong Kong in the 19th century where they remain as a hidden yet large part of society to this day (Varese & Wong, 2018). It has long been the opinion of the police force that the general public is aware of triad activity in Hong Kong, with the Commissioner of police for Hong Kong in 1960 stating that "Most people are aware of the existence of such societies, but few appreciate the extent of their activities or their dangerous potential in the event of emergencies, whether such be local or international in origin" (Morgan, Bolton & Hutton, 2000).

The major link between gaming culture and the triad gangs lies in the introduction of game arcades in the late 1970s. In the past, arcades often served as venues for money laundering and as gathering spaces for criminals with most people knowing that "in Hong Kong, many lawful public entertainment establishments, especially cinemas, bars, clubs, karaoke lounges, night clubs, discos, restaurants, billiard saloons, and video game centres, are under triad protection" (Chu, 2000).  Increased focus on triads in Hong Kong popular culture in the late 1980s and early 90s reflected an increase of triad involvement in the entertainment industry itself in both illegitimate (protection rackets, harassing film stars, etc.) and legitimate forms (producing, financing and distributing films, etc.) (Teo, 1997). Movie scenes of triad brawls and violence inside game centers were not uncommon at the time (Jing & Lau, 1992, 0:32:20) and seemed to inform the negative impressions of arcades of our interviewees as well.

Studying such a potentially sensitive topic presented several ethics concerns that had to be taken into consideration for the safety of our interviewees and ourselves as researchers. For instance, all interviewees were offered the opportunity to have their contributions anonymized. While this is quite a standard option given to people who participate in a study, the sensitive topic and potential revealing interview findings made the practice crucial for us. Participant informed consent was originally obtained on paper, but the documentation was later destroyed so that no paper trail was left behind. We acknowledge that verbal consent becomes a valuable option when there is a need to minimize risk. Full participant anonymity may prove useful when the participants themselves take a more active role in criminal activity or in tackling it.

When engaged in researching people, various practical measures can be taken when personal data is recorded, and sensitive materials handled. This has been explored in relation to digital humanities using the concept of ethics of care (Suomela, Chee, Berendt & Rockwell, 2019) when it comes to handling "toxic data" and researcher safety for Gamergate related research. In our study, this applied to recognizing the power of researchers and research publishing as something that may put participants into risk. It was also possible to make participants less vulnerable by avoiding mentions of specific neighborhoods, arcades, or notable events.

To complicate the situation, many of the interviewed participants had also disobeyed rules about arcade customer age limits. In Hong Kong, arcades operate under the rules that no one aged less than 16 or wearing a school uniform should enter. During our research it became clear that this was a rule almost no one followed, with interviewees admitting they entered arcades regularly when they were aged less than 16. Stories were fondly told of arcade owners who facilitated underage clients by turning a blind eye or who even offered jackets

to wear to cover school uniforms. What this meant is that many of our participants were admitting to breaking the law, and while the likelihood of any negative consequences arising from admitting this now – ten, twenty, or even thirty years later – it is something that had to be handled with care for the sake of high research ethics.

During the interviews, a range of personal accounts addressed criminal activities in relation to personal safety. Triad presence in game centers was discussed similarly to an open secret, with almost all interviewees acknowledging the link between the two. Research participants' perspectives label the entire physical arcade spaces risky. Yet this view is also related to considering risk in certain people, in the unidentified members of triads, who render spaces risky by occupying them. Participants mentioned, for example, that arcades were 'full of triads' or breeding grounds for triad recruitment. Most of them discussed triads from the perspective of parental care and explained the concerns of those who children frequented arcades. However, as we will discuss in more detail later, such notions are supported by factual accounts about game arcades as spots for a range of criminal activities still today.

> "I think in the early days arcade games do have a very negative image in the mind of parents, because they always think that there is a bunch of gangsters and mobs, but in actual fact most of the arcades is either run by members of the triad or they're protected by the triad members, because you cannot stay there in such terms, so this is one thing." (Man, early 50s)

In the interview material, the dangers of game arcades draw from popular cultural depictions, such as movies and from the themes of the games themselves.

> "Especially these either cop or gangster, triad related movies, you'd always see a scene in an arcade, where the bad guys are playing there, and the cops go in and they want information from this guy."[2] (Man, early 40s)

One participant assumed that her parents gained such a perspective from local TV drama, but expressed a lot of uncertainty around the reasons:

> "They allow[ed] us to go and the thing is okay because I went with my brother, they didn't say no. But if I was a parent I would say no because…you could sense the danger there. Yes…maybe they asked the kids to deliver drugs or whatever. You'll never know. But I think when I look back, like, when I was teenager, I looked back as I…oh no, this kind of place is really danger[ous]. But I don't know [how] my parents know." (Woman, mid 40s)

While links between arcade centers and illicit activities have also been noted in other countries such as the UK (Meades 2018) it is the involvement of

**2.** Such a scene can be found in the movie PTU.

organized crime that makes Hong Kong's situation unique and potentially dangerous one to research. Participant perspectives, however, mix personal experiences of danger and parental control with popular stereotypes some participants openly acknowledging the difficulty to distinguish the two from each other. To understand the context of suggested links to criminality, analysis of a range of official documents was done to understand the position of triads in contemporary Hong Kong society. These included news articles, documents provided online by Hong Kong Police, such as annual operational priorities, special topics and news items, and Hong Kong Government press releases, statistical reports, and game center license data.

**ON 'REAL' RISKS**

The link between arcades and triad activity was acknowledged by most of our interview participants. However, their understanding was that these associations were overblown by the media, in keeping with Chu (2005) who states that "people perceive triads as a menace because they are portrayed as such in sensational media reports and gang movies". While such media reports may be sensational, they do nevertheless reveal that acts of violence are still carried out by triads in game centers on occasion. Among others, a 15-year-old child was beaten unconscious by suspected triad members with a fire extinguisher in a game arcade and caught on CCTV (Lo, 2020). In 2019, there were 1353 reported cases of triad related crime in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Police Force, 2019). And within a year from starting our research on game arcades in Hong Kong, dozens of them were raided, hundreds of thousands of dollars confiscated, loads of gaming machines seized, and hundreds of criminals arrested in ongoing anti-triad police operations (Lo, 2019). A government press release from June 2020 reports that 527 locations including bars, amusement game centers, a cyber café, and residential units were raided and 380 persons arrested during a tripartite anti-crime joint operation, codenamed "THUNDERBOLT 2020" (GovHK, 2020).

Becoming aware of the actual criminal activities linked to game arcades meant that precautions needed to be taken by us when undergoing fieldwork visits to arcades all over Hong Kong. What our participants had suggested about the shady and suspicious triad activities typically linked with game arcades became a visible reality and a central part of our research. Criminality was foregrounded as one of the key themes of the research.

Without digging into the probabilities or actual occurrences of the risks mentioned, the inseparability of perceived an actual risk leads us to accept the concept of risk as theoretical, "not something capable of precise empirical prediction or confirmation" (Shrader-Frechette, 1990, p. 349). As Shrader-Frechette carefully examines, there exists various reasons for the impossibility of differentiating actual risks from perceptions of risk for perceived and actual risk are inseparable and inform each other. Hence, what is discussed in this

article is based on how we as researchers, not unlike our research participants, perceived risk when working on a specific research project that involved visits and research into game arcades in Hong Kong. We have tracked back and analyzed the associated personal knowledge (e.g. prior research, news articles, interviews) that informed our judgement, since "even real risks must be known via categories and perceptions" (Ibid., p. 353). Therefore, our analysis and discussion have come to cover both an autoethnographic viewpoint to the risks we perceived and insights into the broader cultural context that builds the notion of danger around the culture and physical spaces we studied.

Following Shrader-Frechette, the reader should keep in mind that "all risks are defined, filtered, and judged on the basis of some subjective standard, whether it is expected utility theory or benefit-cost analysis, or something else" (1990, p. 353). Importantly, then, the different sources of information and experience that contributed to such perceived risk do not form an exhaustive list of what could lead a person, in general, to perceive risks in relation to Hong Kong game arcades. They are, instead, the sources of information that affected our judgement and our research conduct, things that made us reconsider and revisit our methods and our approaches. The things that contributed to us perceiving risk were further filtered through our inability to communicate in local language (Cantonese), our positions in the city as white European immigrants, and our lack of direct access to interview representatives of the police force, for example. However, as the next section will elaborate, some of the issues with access to information itself added to the mystery and exemplified suppression of speech around the arcades.

### SECRECY, INTRUSION, AND RISK

Beyond interviews, working in and around potentially illicit places resulted in challenges in accessing research data. Among others, it was particularly difficult for us to gain access to an official list of game arcades and their addresses in Hong Kong. By law, all game centers in Hong Kong need an "Amusement Game Centre License" from the Home Affairs Department of Licensing. As a government operated department, the list of all premises that currently hold an Amusement Game Centre License should be made freely available to the public. Yet the home affairs department appeared extremely reluctant to provide this list when requested and demanded the request to be made in person at specific offices and during specific times, refused to provide a digital copy, and charged a fee for the printing paper. With such close association between criminal gangs and game centers, it makes sense that the government would not want to release this information so easily, as it would provide a map of triad associated premises within Hong Kong.[3] However, without proof of this being the case, we hereby document such difficulty and can only speculate on the possible reasons.

**3.** Game arcades in Hong Kong marked on a Google map: https://tinyurl.com/yydu5pxu.

After help from a local contact to navigate the bureaucracy and red tape of the different departments of the Hong Kong Home Affairs Office and Office of Licensing Authority, the arcade address list of 202 addresses was eventually obtained and digitized, creating a custom map of the locations listed. Rhys Jones then walked a total of 94 kilometers over 14 days in May of 2018 to visit the addresses. The result from the location verification was that 4 had become inactive since the government licenses had been issued at the beginning of the year.

While visiting the arcades, risk was always perceived more prevalent in smaller, gambling-focused arcades. The intimacy of such small arcades made it highly obvious when a person entered the space and people inside would be found staring at Rhys presumably trying to figure out why he was there. This was especially evident in the New Territories where foreigners are less likely to live or visit. Tellingly, it was during this research, while walking between arcades, that Rhys was stopped and searched by the police for the first time, which certainly added to the perceived illegitimacy of the task at hand. Doing research in such spaces that may or may not be operated by triads resulted in experiencing risk that was associated with intruding a semi-private territory with a hidden motive.

Photographic documentation, too, was hard to gather as having one's phone or camera out to try and take pictures was immediately met by a member of staff coming up to Rhys to forbid photography. Deciding whether to go against the staff's wishes to take photos secretly was considered risky as it could have led to a confrontation and ejection from the premises if spotted. It is understandable that private premises have the power and legal right to protect their patrons by forbidding photography. However, the strict admonishing added to the secrecy and feeling of intrusion in the space which, again, invited thoughts about how feasible, admissible, or even risky it would be to publish research on the topic.

Even when no physical or psychological risk was perceived, Rhys often felt himself unwelcome. With windows covered from outsider gaze, possibility to smoke at premises, commonly worn-out furniture, and dim lighting, the actual physical surroundings added to the illicit 'feel' of the arcades. In short, the unkept and dark interiors were in high contrast to the fancy malls and well-lit 'cha chaan tengs' and other restaurants in the city. Considering that Hong Kong is one of the safest cities in the world (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2019), the potential risk, even if minuscule, in arcades that stand out from the rest of the city's fancy modes of entertainment became emphasized.

Another instance of perceived risk inside arcades was triggered by the security measures in place. While the staff taking and exchanging cash were typically older men or women, there was typically a young tattoo-covered man sitting nearby to make sure people did what they were asked to do. It should be noted that in Hong Kong wearing tattoos is not as common as in most European countries or in the US, but still typically associated with criminal and deviant behaviour instead (cf. Ma, 2002, Ho et al., 2006). Even if the tattooed

'guards' commonly seen at arcades were not engaged in any sort of deviant behavior, it is fair to assume that their presence was calculated and aimed at intimidation given the prevailing stigma. The perceived risk therefore increased by the co-presence of these assumed triads even if there was no way to verify if they really belonged to the organized crime group or not.[4] The mental association of arcades and criminality seemed to fill in the gaps and assumption of triad membership was given to people who "looked" like triads in places that felt increasingly unfamiliar and faraway. To avoid any risk of confrontation, Rhys only took photos of the outer shop fronts to compare with each other instead while writing notes after exiting an arcade to document the interior.

Moreover, issues arose when it came to co-operation with arcade center owners during the project. It was hard to find owners willing to participate or allow access to the game centers after hours to take photos for archiving purposes. The association with criminality, regardless of being an open secret, remained as something that only certain parties had the liberty to talk about.

## RESEARCHER STANDPOINT AT RISK

Both authors of this study were born and raised in Europe and both are white. Neither of us speaks the local language in Hong Kong, Cantonese. Our positions as white immigrants had implications to research conduct and safety. In terms of language, many slang phrases, or self-references to Hong Kong culture can be obtuse or impenetrable for non-locals to comprehend without additional research into the background and context. Laws concerning the use of certain triad language can constitute a criminal offense in and of itself making translating it a risk for researchers (Bolton & Hutton, 1995). Language barrier can also prove problematic as a non-local researcher, with participants either needing to speak the language of the researcher instead of their native Cantonese or requiring the use of a translator in addition to the non-local researcher. A translator's presence adds to the vulnerability of the participants and discourages the sharing of sensitive information.

Moreover, non-Chinese researchers stand out from the general customer-base of game arcades. Hong Kong is an ethnically homogenous region with 92% ethically Chinese population as of the 2016 census. Attempting to conduct field work into criminal activity becomes a lot more difficult when the researcher is so obviously present or visible to the participants. It can also lead to unintentional bias of the results, if participants are aware of being observed by a non-local researcher and change their behavior.

While there are drawbacks to being a non-local conducting taboo or sensitive research one cannot ignore certain privileges that are afforded to non-local researchers. On the one hand, our position was close to that described by Huggins and Glebeek as a 'friendly stranger' who is "a relatively unthreatening outsider to whom interviewees felt they could disclose their feelings, complaints, and deepest secrets" (2003, p. 374). Accordingly, such outsiders are likely to gather more

**4.** Given that author background influences judgement of risk, it is worth noting that Rhys Jones has tattoos himself and has a generally positive view towards tattoos. After living several years in a neighbourhood with one of the highest crime rates in Hong Kong, he considers himself somewhat 'streetwise' in recognising people's criminal occupations.

data and encounter less friction. On the other hand, from a political perspective, non-local researchers enjoy more freedom to research sensitive topics knowing that if any negative consequences ever arose from their research, they may have the option to return to their country of birth while holding that passport. Such opportunities do not exist for local researchers, who if faced with consequences for their research would not be able to go. This is especially relevant regarding studying the criminal aspect of Hong Kong's arcade scene.

The distinctive political system in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (S.A.R.) causes its own issues with games research in the region. Special care and attention need to be paid when researching these sensitive political issues, especially relating to mainland China. As an example, during the 2019 demonstrations some of the game arcades operated by mainland Chinese companies were destroyed by demonstrators who suggested they have links to mainland Chinese organized crime (Cheng 2019, Mok & Siu, 2019). When reporting such research results, used language needs to consider the local sensitivities. Unwanted notions of the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China may be met by objections even in cases where relationships between the two regions are not the focus of the research.

A National Security Law introduced to Hong Kong on the 30th June 2020 has further complicated the execution of research in the region with academics already self-censoring research topics (Normile, 2020) so as not to break the vaguely worded law. Some Hong Kong researchers have voiced concern that applying for international research grants or international collaboration may fall under "foreign collusion" because of the broad scope of this law (Silver, 2020) meaning even non-taboo research topics could become prohibited. It is also questionable how research that uncovers some negative aspects of local culture, conducted by foreigners, could be interpreted.

## CONCLUSIONS

> "Even though all risks are perceived, many of them are also real." (Shrader-Frechette, 1990, 347)

This article discussed the specific perceived risks associated with different research methods and techniques and the possibilities to alleviate some of the risks in a study into Hong Kong game arcades. Previous research on research safety and risks shows that such concerns can be categorized into personal safety risks related to place, people, and research topic and findings.

In our article we drew a picture of game arcades as potentially risky research environments given their factual links to organized crime in Hong Kong. We observed that arcades as places were often considered risky, but this was because of the assumed people, members of triads, in them and in control of them. These people, moreover, were unknown and hardly identified, yet perceived as

a risk to personal safety due to participants' and researchers' existing knowledge of factual arcade links to triads and stereotypical portrayals of triad members occupying game arcades in popular culture such as movies. More than people, members of triads refer to the presence of organized crime, a domain quite alien and distant for most research participants and researchers alike. Place and people, then, become merged and blurry, and 'triad' a shorthand for a sense of secrecy, thrill, danger, and caution at large.

Referring to government and police reports as well as news articles, we were able to establish a solid link between game arcades and triads in Hong Kong even though this by no means covers all such spaces. Therefore, organized crime, in our short analysis, poses a potential risk to both researchers and research participants. Moreover, the topic of our study itself is potentially politically sensitive and there may be parties whose interests are against publishing details about how game arcades operate in Hong Kong. While such a risk to researcher's personal safety is extremely vague and nearly impossible to prove, its potential existence should be acknowledged.

With all the limitations, one may be left asking: What is the value of such research that does not even attempt to provide a full account of the various aspects of arcade gaming and leaves out those too risky to approach? Does a researcher need to force themselves to approach dangerous people or go into risky places? Is 'edgework' (Lyng, 2005), or voluntary risk-taking for its sensual appeal, a prerequisite for good research in such situations?

Our answer is to support and encourage even the smallest attempts at creating new knowledge while also taking care of oneself and research participants. Beyond physical safety concerns, however, the researcher should also pay attention to how a risky study can drain emotionally: "Research work can be emotionally draining for researchers, and if we are to think about the possibilities of researchers being in risk situations, then we need to consider both physical and emotional risk" (Dickson-Swift et al. 2008, 134). There is, therefore, a further need to study the emotional burden of risky games research.

Finally, Shrader-Frechette reminds us that "risk perceptions often affect risk probabilities, and vice versa" (1990, 350). With appropriate precautions and low risk methods and techniques, it is possible to overcome many of the risks mentioned in this article. One of the goals of this paper was to bring forth and start a conversation about personal safety and risks in games research to allow better preparedness for others.

What comes to the taboo nature of the risks discussed, we see that games researchers who have long justified not only the very existence of their work but also the many positive aspects of their objects of research may find it uncomfortable to address some of the bigger negative sides in the study and play of games. Culturally, the bigger picture behind the interconnectedness of games and organized crime stems from other difficult topics such as gambling in general, illegal gambling in particular, addiction, and money laundering. The lack

of research in this area partially results from many games researchers' lack of knowledge and methodological capability in relation to criminality. Moreover, discussing researcher vulnerabilities is not an easy thing to do especially when they are related to risks that are perceived and difficult to 'prove' actual no matter how inseparable the two may be.

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