INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON VIDEO GAME AGENCY

Edited by Ivan Girina & Berenike Jung

CRITICAL NOTES – Non peer-peviewed

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Epistemology of the Werewolf

Epistemology of the Closet and the Queer Agency of *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*

ABSTRACT

In recent years, hidden identity party games have become popular with games such as *One Night Ultimate Werewolf* (Bézier Games, 2014) gaining attention among players and designers. Within these games, players are assigned a hidden identity and they must uncover who is "really" who. Taking *One Night* as its primary example, this article proposes that queer theory can bring the dynamics of agency within hidden identity games into sharper focus. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concepts of sex and knowledge and José Esteban Muñoz' experience of closeted performances of heterogender, this article shows how playing *One Night* offers a space where social habits that support (or undermine) attitudes to non-straight sexuality are actively reinscribed. Beginning with a retelling of Muñoz' childhood experience of "butching up," this article highlights the shared affordances of the closet and playing *One Night*. Akin to Muñoz' experience, Werewolf players must know the system, they must act as villagers; they must be a spy within the game, fearful that their actions may cause them to be outed. As such, a close reading of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and *One Night* presents a window into society to illuminate the experience of agency and the closet. Sedgwick asserts that i) sex and knowledge have become conceptually inseparable; ii) attempts to uncover knowledge/sex are prolific; iii) the homo/heterosexual divide is imperative to all; and iv) the closet is performative. Following in the footsteps of Bonnie Ruberg and D.A. Miller such a reading of *One Night*'s gameplay and systems makes Sedgwick's assertions all too evident. When the player's assigned hidden role become an extrapolation of sex (and therein knowledge), the game's system and play become a mimesis of society.

From this, the implications of asserting agency in concealing one's identity within a system constructed to expose that knowledge can be expanded. Such an expansion proves to betray a degree of nostalgia for the high rhetoric of the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s, where notions of passing, deception,

and subcultural modes of knowing are invoked, mirroring the sentiments of secrecy and survival read connotatively in *One Night*'s systems and play. However, such an inference does not wholly depict *One Night*'s queer monstrous Werewolf. As such, this article turns to the horror genre to construct a more contemporary take on werewolves, one that represents today's positive approach to queerness and monstrosity. Within this queer frame of mind, *One Night*'s Werewolves become another incarnation of those found in horror films and literature (Benshoff, 1997, Bernhardt-House, 2008). Indeed, Werewolves, with their shapeshifting nature, represent a transgression of boundaries and an intrinsic fluidity of identity that more aptly portrays today's queer culture. This more recent attitude toward sexuality, its fluidity and playfulness, is too evident in the switching of roles encoded in *One Night*'s game mechanics and play. All of this presents an innovative and richly suggestive understanding of agency, monsters, and the closet from the world of games, all while presenting the propensity of Sedgwick's theories of the complexities of the closet and sexuality in a system of knowledge seeking.

INTRODUCTION

One Night Ultimate Werewolf (Bézier Games, 2014) is a hidden-identity party game where players are organised into two opposing factions: Werewolves, who must conceal their identities, and Villagers, who must identify the Werewolves. With the game's system and play being centred around social deduction and concealment of identity, this article constructs *One Night* as a mimesis of the lived experience of the closet and its correlated performance of passing as "straight". Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concepts of sex and knowledge and José Esteban Muñoz' experience of closeted performances of heterogender, it shows how playing *One Night* offers a space where social habits that support (or undermine) attitudes to non-straight sexuality are actively reinscribed. Complex negotiations of secrecy and disclosure can be seen when Villager players utilise tactics of social deduction while Werewolf players perform their closeted state. A parallel reading of Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet and *One Night* illuminate the complexities of exerting agency within the paradigm of the closet, so as to highlight the ingenuity and resilience of queer people in such a site of tension. Following in the footsteps of Bonnie Ruberg (2019) and D.A. Miller (1990), such a close reading of *One Night*'s gameplay and its underlying systems makes Sedgwick's assertions all too evident. When the player's assigned hidden role becomes a mimesis of sex (and therein knowledge), the game's system and play become a mirror of society whereby "sexuality is fruit – apparently the only fruit – to be plucked from the tree of knowledge" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 73).

RULES AND PLAY

A game of *One Night* is comprised of the setup, the "Night Phase," the "Day Phase," and the "Voting Phase." During the setup, each player is given an identity role card face-down. This card will then designate their faction for the game, either Villager or Werewolf. At this point, a player may only look at their own role card. Three identity role cards will be left face-down in the centre, which may be used during the next phase of play. After the setup, all players close their eyes and the Night Phase begins. During the Night Phase, some players will have a special role which allows them to interact with the cards placed face-down during the setup of the game. These players may be able to swap a player's role card or interact with the centre cards. Also during the Night Phase, Werewolf players will open their eyes and locate each other while the Villager players' eyes are closed, they will be able to see who the Villager players are too. After this, the game moves into the Day Phase whereby all players open their eyes and begin the process of uncovering each other's hidden roles. There will be arguments and discussions during this phase as the Werewolf players attempt to conceal their identity. Concurrently, the Villager players must deduce who the Werewolf players are, as well as affirm their own role. Once the players have decided who they think is a Werewolf, the Voting Phase begins. Players will vote by pointing a metaphorical gun (their finger) at a player, and at the end of a five second countdown they will "shoot". If a Werewolf is shot, the Villager players will win and if a Villager player is shot the Werewolf players win.

During the Night Phase, there are several roles that take turns to "wake up" and perform an action, often interacting with other role cards. For instance, within the Villager faction, a Troublemaker will be able to exchange role cards between two other players or a Robber may exchange their card for another player's card, whether it be a Werewolf role card or another Villager. The Day Phase is the most active phase of *One Night*. It is when players argue, debate, lie, and manipulate each other in the efforts of outing the Werewolf players as well as affirming the Villager players. During this phase, Werewolf players must conceal their identity from the Villager players while Villager players must use tools of social deduction to uncover the Werewolf players. Geoffrey Engelstein and Isaac Shalev (2019) note that Werewolf players, "know who all the villagers are, and as such, the werewolves are playing a role-playing game whose win condition is to successfully deceive the villagers for long enough to devour them" (p. 220). While the Villager players, "are playing a deduction game where the evidence is mostly in the social interactions at the table rather than the almost non-existent mechanical interactions" (Engelstein and Shalev, 2019, p. 220).

QUEER CONNOTATIONS: D.A. MILLER AND BONNIE RUBERG

Queer themes have already been hinted at in this article, and although *One Night*'s queerness is not explicitly denoted, queerness can be readily read through connotations. Queer studies has a history of revealing the queerness

that is veiled between the lines of nonsexual (heterosexual by default) texts or more denotable heterosexual texts. D. A. Miller, in his formative article, "Anal Rope," explores the potential for queer connotations to be read within Alfred Hitchcock's film, Rope. Miller laments the analysis of formalist elements that surrounds the film's discourse, and instead calls for a close interrogative queer reading to look past denotation and instead into connotation. He quotes Roland Barthes for whom connotation is a secondary meaning, "whose signifier is itself constituted by a sign or system of primary signification, which is denotation" (Barthes, quoted in Miller, 1990, p. 116). To Barthes (1974), denotation is the relatively fixed and limited meaning ascribed to a "sign". Indeed, signs accrue a range of connotative (secondary) meanings, but this order of signification is just as culturally determined as first order denotation. As such, most connotations are not queer, hidden, or otherwise surprising, subversive meanings; rather, they are agreed by cultural assent. However, connotative meanings are unconstrained, and since signs of queerness are rarely denoted and only found secondarily, as closeted, or perhaps suppressed, connotations, it often is in this area where they are found. Miller (1990) explains that because homosexual representation in American mass culture is "appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotations," at once able to be developed or denied, we must read between the lines to see the queerness beneath (p. 119). The same is true for the world of games, wherein industry, praxis, culture, and product are seemingly heterosexual. For some games, queerness is there to be recognised within the signifying system of the text, such as Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* (2012) and Robert Yang's *The Tearoom* (2017). However, for most games, we must look past what is denotable and into the game world's 'shadow kingdom' of connotation for queerness to manifest.

Queer readings are not new to mass media and games (Harper, 2017, Sundén 2009), however Bonnie Ruberg has brought Miller's particular queer interrogation of formalist elements to the study of games with their reading of Valve's Portal (2007). Portal is a first-person shooter and puzzle game in which the player must navigate through a research facility by means of portals. Within the game, the player has a portal gun which creates portals through the walls of the research facility. Each level of the research facility is a puzzle and portals must be made and travelled through to complete the levels. The levels are controlled by the robot antagonist GLaDOS. With all characters within *Portal* being coded as female, Ruberg reads queer intimate relationships between the player-avatar and GLaDOS. One of the many queer connotations they read is a recognition of Miller's equation of the imagery of holes in *Rope* and the anus. They quote GLaDOS who says to the player-avatar, "I know you're here somewhere. I can feel you," suggesting that the research facility the player is within is GLaDOS's body (Ruberg, 2019, p. 74). For Ruberg (2019) the portals of *Portal* too signify holes which, read queerly, represent a homoerotic entering of player-avatar into GLaDOS's body (pp. 73-74). As mentioned above, Miller

begins his essay by illustrating his frustration at the scholarship around Hitch-cock's *Rope*, that interrogated the technical elements of the film while ignor-ing its cultural and social implications. From these frustrations, Miller (2013) derived his methodological form of close reading, a process which he latterly came to describe as "too-close reading" (p. 1). Too-close readings forgo the denotable and instead delve into that which is "too small, or too fleeting, or too peripheral" (Miller, 2013, p 12). For Ruberg (2019) too, the technical elements of game studies scholarship have overshadowed issues of cultural significance (pp. 65-66). As such, this article's approach to *One Night* invites in Miller's queer theoretical approach of the too-close reading to find the queer affect and agency in *One Night*'s shadowy kingdom of connotation.

ONE NIGHT ULTIMATE WEREWOLF AND CRUISING UTOPIA

At a connotative level, we can begin to establish how playing as a Werewolf in *One Night* mimics the lived experience of the closet and, concomitantly, of passing as straight. José Esteban Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia* is a useful point of reference to see the specific affordances of the closet within the game's systems and gameplay. Muñoz (2009) recalls a childhood experience of "butching up" following a proto-homophobic attack by male members of his family after they noticed his effeminate walk. Pained by the incident, Muñoz began a project of studying movement, namely the way assumed heterosexual people walked and applied what he had learned to his own bodily performances. This situ-ated experience was described by him as "playing the game" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 68). The "game" was set within a rigid system of gender normativity, the rules entail an unnatural performance of heterogender, while losing elicited "mock-ery and palpable contempt" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 68). Muñoz states, "I was a spy in the house of gender normativity, and like any spy, I was extremely careful and worried that my cover would be blown" (p. 68). So, to "win" the game, Muñoz (2009) learned the rules of heterogender and applied this to his own body to "ape" a conception of heterosexuality. The system of constant policing regulat-ed the efficacy of Muñoz' performance and, unlike other boys, his performance was deemed authentic and so he was safe from homophobic degradation.

Twinned with Muñoz, connotations can be readily recognised between the closet and playing as a Werewolf. Indeed, in a game of *One Night* when a player is assigned the role of a Werewolf, once the Day Phase begins the player must conceal their identity and perform as a Villager. Like Muñoz, who recognises he is different from his heterosexual male family, Werewolf players must begin their own project of "Villager-ing" up. Muñoz begins his process of butch-ing up by observing performances of heterogender, particularly noting the way people moved, and then applying that to his own body. In *One Night*, the Werewolf players must learn how to perform as Villagers, by observing the rules, system, and play of Villager players and then applying that to their own performance. Such a performance can be understood as a performance of "pass-

ing" within the rubric of poststructuralist theories of performative gender and sexuality. Gender, as theorised by Judith Butler (1998), is a "stylized repetition of acts" and is "instituted through the stylization of the body, and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 519). From this theoretical conception, gender and sexuality is shifted away from previous taxonomised discrete (essentialist) categories of identity. Bodily gestures, movements, and enactments emerge as constituents of the illusion of an abiding identity. For Butler, gender is a both performance and performative, meaning it is a role to be played while it also produces a series of affects. All of this consolidates an impression of identity that is produced and reproduced through and in relation to time. Should there be a dissonance between gender expression and assigned historical category of gender of a person, it may also elicit assumptions a nonnormative sexuality identity. A pertinent example of this can be observed in Muñoz' proto-homophobic attack, when his nonnormative gender expression signified a nonnormative sexual identity to his family.

The acts of passing as straight and passing as a Villager share many aspects of performative gender and sexuality but differ in crucial ways. For Butler's (1998) theory of gender, performativity is the "appearance of substance," or those mundane and repetitious constitutive acts that elicit gender's seeming essential nature (p. 520). She states that gender is a "constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler, 1998, p. 520, emphasis added). The pivotal distinction between Butler's theory of gender performativity and passing, is the mode of belief of the actors. As Ruberg (2019) illustrates, "To pass for straight is not the same thing as to be straight. Rather, to pass is to succeed at being in a certain way, to be glimpsed for an instance and deemed 'authentic'" (p. 101). From this, passing must begin with the prerequisite that the actor recognises that their actions are a performance, a mimesis of the identity. Muñoz' assertion that he was outside the space of heterogender, calling himself a spy in the house of gender normativity exemplifies this distinction. Jack Babuscio also wrote of how gay men (in particular) have learned to perform heterogender through the withholding of knowledge. He states, "This crucial fact of our existence is called passing for straight, a phenomenon generally defined in the metaphor of theater, that is, playing a role: pretending to be something that one is not" (Babuscio, 1993, p. 24).

Reading between the lines to the connotations of the gameplay of *One Night*, playing as a Werewolf is a mimesis of Muñoz' lived experience of the closet and learning to perform heterogender. Mirroring Muñoz, playing as a Werewolf then purports your outsider status in the house of the Villager players. The Werewolf players must perform as Villager players, similar to Butler's theory of performativity, by way of language, gesture, and acts to constitute the illusion of a Villager. However, unlike Butler, the Werewolf player is aware that

they are an actor thus there is no "appearance of substance" to the Werewolf player. Instead, the Werewolf must focus on what the Villagers perceive, so as to be glimpsed at and pass as a Villager. Furthermore, as alluded to by Muñoz, there is the potential for passing to succeed and/or fail. By performing hetero-gender, Muñoz is safe from abuse, while a Werewolf passing as a Villager is safe from being shot and losing the game. Of course, Villager players do know that this is a role they have been given, but within the diegetic system of a game, an extra level of role-playing is required of the Werewolf players who are conscious of the demands made on them to masquerade as Villagers and hide their "true" identities. With this, the term most often used for this lived queer experience is being "in the closet". Being "in" the closet is a recognition that you may be unsafe if you were "out", and so, like Muñoz, a queer person may attempt to conceal that part of their identity. Reading the connotations of *One Night*, the experience of the closet can be extrapolated with the experience of playing as a Werewolf. Indeed, both must actively perform as normative to pass and remain safe from losing the "game".

EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE WEREWOLF

Once we begin to read too-close, a world of queer affect is sequestered within the gameplay of *One Night*. Most notably, werewolves are, in their shapeshift-ing quality, their association with nocturnal deviance, and in the way they are deemed to threaten "normality", distinctly queer beasts. Indeed, for the part human and part wolf werewolf, a transgression of boundaries is evoked that, for Philip A. Bernardt-House (2008), is explicitly queer as it "actively disrupts nor-mativity, transgresses the boundaries of propriety, and interferes with the status quo in closed social sexual systems" (p. 159). Such a proposition also enlivens Jack Halberstam's (1993) assertions on monsters, when he states, "the monster, in its otherworldly form, its supernatural shape, wears the traces of its own construction" (p. 349). When considered with the uniquely monstrous qual-ity of lycanthropy, a disease to be spread to innocents (Bernardt-House, 2008, p. 173), the Werewolf of *One Night* is but another incarnation of those found in the horror genres of film and literature (Benshoff, 1997, Bernhardt-House, 2008). As such, the queer subtext of *One Night* is readily established, with refer-ence to the indiscriminate spread of disease mirrored in the game's rules and mechanics. With this, a move towards theorisations of the closet, something al-ready instrumental to the biology of the Werewolf, proves poignant. So far, this article has shown how playing as a Werewolf reflects Muñoz' lived experience of the closet. There is, however, room to read much closer. Reading the conno-tations in the gameplay, rules, and systems of *One Night*'s, we can see the game as a microcosm of Sedgwick's postulations on sexuality and society, wherein it is a knowledge seeking system that interrogates nonnormative sexual identities.

The Day Phase of a game of *One Night* is centred around hidden identities and social deduction. During this phase, all knowledge equates to the knowl-

edge of who is a Werewolf. This implication twinned with the extrapolation of the lived queer experience of the closet and playing as a Werewolf readily invites us to draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorisation of knowledge, sexual identity, and the closet. Sedgwick's thesis in *Epistemology of the Closet* is that in the late nineteenth-century, a historical turn led sexuality to become an, if not the, integral definer of a person's identity. This led her to argue that "virtually any aspect of modern Western culture, must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 1). There are four integral components to Sedgwick's argument that lead her to this conclusion regarding homo/heterosexuality and the closet. Namely, i) sex and knowledge have become conceptually inseparable; ii) attempts to uncover knowledge/sex are prolific; iii) the homo/heterosexual divide is imperative to all; and iv) the closet is performative (Sedgwick, 1990, pp. 1-3, 67-73). When read too closely, *One Night* reflect Sedgwick's paradigm of habits that construct a space wherein nonnormative identities are actively reinscribed. Gameplay then becomes a mimesis of Sedgwick's theorisations, a microcosm that will present the difficulties when negotiating agency in a system of the perceived binarisms of homo/heterosexuality, secrecy/disclosure, silence/speech, and Werewolf/Villager.

 For Sedgwick (1990), so touched is Western culture by the permeative demarcation of the homosexual/heterosexual definition that a wider structure of secrecy/disclosure and other "contestations of meaning" [private/public masculine/feminine, majority/minority, same/different] have been indelibly shaped by it (p. 72). After demonstrating the extensive and pervasive attention centred on homosexuality since the end of the nineteenth century, she states:

> The process, narrowly bordered at first in European culture but sharply broadened and accelerated after the late eighteenth century, by which "knowledge" and "sex" become conceptually inseparable from one another – so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion – was sketched in Volume 1 of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 73).

 With the discursive conflation of "sex" and "knowledge", we can begin to see the connotations within *One Night*, where "Werewolf" and "knowledge" are also conceptually inseparable. Indeed, during a game of *One Night*, from the moment the Day Phase begins, all knowledge is equated to the Werewolf. While Villager players will seek to find who the Villager players are too, that knowledge is only relevant to uncover the Werewolf players. For instance, during the Day Phase players will ask each other what role they were assigned from the setup of the game. Villager players must affirm their Villager status by presenting the information they have learned during the Night Phase then use tools of social deduction, and perhaps manipulation, to uncover who the Were-

wolf players are. Meanwhile, Werewolf players, like Muñoz, must learn this information too so as to create an "authentic" performance to pass as a Villager. By replacing the concept of "sex" with "Werewolf" in these binarisms, non-normative sex being linked to the unregulated, the beastly, the nocturnal, and the shameful becomes explicit and hence its delineation to the closet. Moreover, as Sedgwick (1990) states, by building on Michel Foucault, it is the permeative heterosexist gaze that began the process of the homo/heterosexual demarcation. The interrogation of non-straight identities taxonomised them, and in turn actively reinscribed straight identities as well (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 9). With this discursive implication, knowledge within a game of *One Night*, means in the first place knowledge of the Werewolf players; ignorance, ignorance of who the Werewolf players are. The propensity for Werewolves to be read connotatively as nonnormative sexualities has been readily shown above but here we see the indicative consequences of such. Now this implication can be seen to effect both Werewolf and Villagers players as analysis of their play within the systems of the game exposes the active reinscribing of their identities.

Sedgwick argues that with the emergence of the conceptual inseparability of sex/knowledge, attempts to uncover nonnormative sexualities became prolific. She claims that after the events of Stonewall in 1969, the "fine antennae of public attention" became energised in its interest in the "love that is famous for daring not speak its name" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 67). For Sedgwick, it is the secrecy of non-straight identities which excites the heterosexist gaze for involuntary non-straight exposures. Indeed, with attempts to uncover sex/knowledge being so prolific, the supposed binary of in/out of the closet becomes erroneous. For queer people, the closet is in flux, constantly built and broken, while the heterosexist gaze strives to fix and declare nonnormative identities, despite the apparent disguise and safety that the closet was meant to afford. For Sedgwick:

> the deadly elasticity or heterosexist presumption means that, like Wendy in *Peter Pan*, people find new walls springing up around them even as they drowse: every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68).

As *One Night* is a hidden identity party game, gameplay is defined by secrecy and disclosure and indeed it is that secrecy and the interrogative social deduction of the Villagers that work to define Werewolf players. As such, with, and within, each instance of playing *One Night*, the Werewolf player's closet will fluctuate depending on each Villager player. For the Werewolf players, the deadly elasticity of the Villager player presumption means that their performance as Villager players is in flux too, and so every encounter with every Villager player is an individual closet and performance.

So pervasive is the heterosexist/Villager gaze that not only will it interrogate their respective nonnormative subjects, the lens will also be turned on themselves. Within this system of secrecy/disclosure while a queer person/Werewolf player is performing the closet there may be few distinctive permeations between them and straight identities/Villager players. Within this system, the homo/heterosexual and Werewolf/Villager divide becomes imperative to all as straight/Villager identities are defined and scrutinised. Recognising this, we can elaborate on Sedgwick's most significant assertion:

> I want to argue that a lot of the energy of attention and demarcation that has swirled around issues of homosexuality since the end of the nineteenth century, [...] has been impelled by the distinctly indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public, that were and are critically problematic for the gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large, mappings whose enabling but dangerous incoherence has become oppressively, durably condensed in certain figures of homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990, pp. 70-71).

Here the supposed binarisms of secrecy/disclosure, sex/knowledge, and homo/heterosexual are broken down while the active reinscription of non-straight and straight identities is evident. For Muñoz (2009), and other non-straight individuals, constant policing is an incarnation of the heterosexist gaze which the aegis providing performance of the closets seeks to avert, while the behaviour of heterosexual individuals too is policed by that same gaze. Straight individuals must constantly negotiate their normative identity as antithetical to the non-straight identities they have demarcated. Here, *One Night*'s aptness as an imitation of the closet is perhaps most pertinent. The interrogative gaze, which seeks only Werewolf/knowledge, will interrogate Werewolf and Villager alike. Once the game begins, to the Villagers, everyone is at once Villager and Werewolf all of whom need be interrogated. If the gaze is upon a Villager player, they must prove their Villager identity with their own knowledge and/or by shifting the lens onto someone they believe is a Werewolf. If they fail to prove their Villager identity, if to the rest of the Villager players they are perceived to be performing too much like a Werewolf, they will be treated as such and potentially be shot. It is here we see the culmination of *One Night* as mimicking the lived experience of the closet. The closet, for non-straight individuals and Werewolf players, can be a place of safety. For all players the system will always be a place of intense interrogation.

MONSTERS, CLOSETS, AND AGENCY
In this paradigm of secrecy/disclosure, sex/knowledge, Werewolf/Villager, it is difficult to discern where agency may be exerted. As illustrated, the closet and its effects are performances of identity, whether they be passing or not. Closetedness, for Sedgwick, is a specific performance of speech that instigated by a

silence. She explains that it is not, however, a "particular silence" but instead a silence that is distinct in its fluidity and that it accrues significance in relation to the discourse that "surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 3). She quotes Foucault who states:

> there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things. . . . There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Foucault, quoted in Sedgwick, 1990, p. 3).

Indeed, the binary distinction of in/out the closet is a misnomer, for the speech act of coming out of the closet can mean little if someone is already perceived as non-straight. Perhaps then, agency is exerted in a closeted person's ability to subvert the heterosexist gaze. In the frequently asked questions section on Bézier Games' website, they are asked, "I'm always a werwolf [sic], and I always lose. How do I win?" to which they reply, "We suggest that you lie occasionally. Or even better, all the time… But say it with a straight face" (Bézier Games). From this, it could be discerned that agency lies in the Werewolf player's performance of the Villager identity, literally, to keep a "straight face." Much akin to Muñoz' project of butching up, he actively learned and applied heterogender to his body as a tactic to subvert the heterosexist leer. Such a claim rests on the predication that the objective of the game, for Werewolf players, is to win, to be undetected by the Villager/heterosexist gaze. The conditions which construct LGBTQ+ lives are always historically and geographically determined and with *One Night*'s gameplay depending on secrecy and survival, it perpetuates a mentality that is premised on identity politics and affirmation. Today, despite strong community support mechanisms, greater acceptance by the mainstream and forms of legal protection, queer people even in the most liberal and metropolitan parts of the West may still have to hide. So, as long as the metaphorical violence of that heterosexist/Villager gaze is reinforced with the real violence of a finger that is really a gun, exercising agency by way of the tactics of the closet is not only a queer subversion of society's will to monitor and police, but also a necessary (if sophisticated) survival tactic. However, little resolution is garnered here for those who "cannot or will not straighten their gesture" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 69).

As stated, the lives of queer people are historically and geographical contingent and such a proposal, with its fixed binary distinction between homo/heterosexuality, is reminiscent of classic historical accounts of the 1970s Gay Liberation Movement, particularly the high rhetoric of Gay Pride. In his remembrance essay on Karla Jay and Allen Young's anthology, *Out of Closets* (1972), John D'Emilio illustrates the radical reconceptualisation of sexual identity seen in many of its essays. D'Emilio (2002) states "gay liberationists inverted the terms in which homosexuality was understood. Instead of being sick, sinful, or

criminal, gay was now defined as good" (pg. 57). With this, "coming out" and "pride" became goals and tactics for the movement, and they became the markers of Stonewall as the turning point of not only "our history as a community, but in Western history itself" (D'Emilio, 2002, pg. 63). This would suggest why, in *One Night*, the system is entirely lycanthro-phobic, and there is no space for Werewolf Pride. However, while *One Night* relies on the systemic rule of Werewolf/Villager, the game's invocation of monsters can offer resolutions representing more positive constructions of queerness, monsters, and agency.

One Night's reliance on tropes of the horror genre too betrays a degree of nostalgia, where notions of passing, deception, and secret queer subcultural codes of knowing are all invoked, mirroring the sentiments of secrecy and survival read connotatively in its gameplay. For Harry M. Benshoff (1997), "Both movie monsters and homosexuals have existed chiefly in shadowy closets" (p. 2). For queer people, monsters, and queer monsters, the site of tension that is the closet, while systemically fraught with prejudice, can highlight how the queer community ingeniously and resiliently exerts agency. For instance, when Engelstein and Shalev's (2019) observation that *One Night* has "almost non-existent mechanical interactions" (p. 220) is considered, codes of knowing and communication are roused. From this, connotations emerge between the Night Phase (when Werewolves locate each other while the Villagers' eyes are closed) and queer means of communicating through secret networks of subcultural knowledges and signals. Also, should another player become a Werewolf, a subtle wink, look, or gesture from other Werewolves can establish covert codes of knowing under the gaze of the Villagers. Such an inference can be read as an analogue to Muñoz' (1996) notion of queerness, which exists "as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere" (p. 6). So, like queer people who locate(d) each other with coded language, hand gestures, and clothing, when around a table for a game of *One Night*, an ephemeral gesture exists as a mirroring form of agency.

The horror tropes of *One Night* too exhibit Butlerian theories of performative gender which are premised on the absence of underlying "true" identity. As such, a further dissonance between gameplay and tropes is seen, as *One Night*'s queer monstrous portrays today's more shifting and fluid lived experience of sexuality. For Benshoff (1997), homosexuality enters the horror film genre, like in *One Night*, "through subtextual or connotative avenues […] homosexuality becomes a subtle but undoubtedly present signifier which usually serves to characterize the villain or monster" and "works to bolster the equally constructed idea of a normative heterosexuality" (pg. 15). Barbara Creed (2015) reads werewolves alongside the equally abject (and queer) vampire, zombie, and ghoul, as the werewolf's body "signifies a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal" (p. 41). Additionally, for Bernhardt-House (2008), the werewolf's "hybridity and transgression of species bounda-

ries in a unified figure […] might be seen as a natural signifier for queerness in its myriad forms" (p. 159). So, unlike the 1970s Gay Liberation Movement which opposed such connotative expansions, today's queer culture accepts monstrosity into its identity. Indeed, when a "true" identity is eschewed a more fluid identity emerges, one that represents *One Night*'s Werewolves who not only transgress the boundaries between human and wolf but, within the game, shift between Villager and Werewolf. As such, *One Night*'s Werewolves prove analogous to today's queer identity that forgoes rigid binaries while adding to a positive narrative where agency lies in the fluidity of identity.

One Night's emergent mimesis of society enables us to locate, as Benshoff (1997) does by building upon Foucault, a recuperation of a paradigm that recognises more positive mechanisms when constructing a history of sexuality. *One Night* was at once a denotable heterosexual text; *One Night* is now a game that mirrors the construction of the closet while highlighting the historic and continued resilience of queer people in such a site of tension. A multiplicity of connotative expansions exists within *One Night*, with this article presenting just one of many that might be found when we look too-close.

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"I am Big Boss, and you are, too…"

Player identity and agency in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*

A screenshot from *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015).

ABSTRACT[1]

From its very first entry, the *Metal Gear* video game series has shown a knack for breaking the fourth wall, sometimes with the intent to shock and surprise the player with gimmicks, at other times to create plot twists aimed to challenge the players' role in the unfolding of the story. This paper aims to examine how, through the narrative and the gameplay of the final chapter of the canonical *Metal Gear* series, Hideo Kojima delivers his closing statement on the saga by elevating the empirical player as its ultimate protagonist, while at the same time reaffirming his role as demiurge toying around with the concepts of agency, identity and self.

KEYWORDS: *metal gear, avatar, identity, agency, meta-narrative*

FROM VILLAIN TO HERO

In October 2015, Hideo Kojima and Konami severed an employment relationship that dated back to 1986 (Sarkar, 2015). This event marked the end of the *Metal Gear* saga intended as "A Hideo Kojima Game", the tagline typically attached to the titles directed by him, although Konami holds the intellectual property and the series continued without its original author.

The last chapter directed and supervised by Kojima is the closure of a circle that had begun almost 30 years before, with the release of the first *Metal Gear* game (Konami, 1987), in which a rookie Solid Snake infiltrates the fortress of Outer Heaven to dismantle a terrorist threat, only to find out that the terrorist leader is none other than his commander in chief, the legendary soldier known as Big Boss. Said circle was probably not born as such, as the then-young game designer could have not possibly predicted how his experimental game would evolve in a multi-million dollar franchise (Makuch, 2014). Although arguably a step ahead of most video game narratives of the same time, the plot of the first *Metal Gear* was, in fact, far from complex, with few dialogues and mostly nondescript characters. It can be easily assumed that Kojima had not planned any of the storylines that came after. This is somewhat supported by the fact that, several times across the years, Kojima stated "this is my last *Metal Gear*", only to keep on coming back to it (Schreier, 2015).

The series' span has kept on expanding with each iteration, gradually adding information, branching storylines, new characters, and often negating, correcting, adding or showing under new light events seen in the previously published instalments (Brusseaux, Courcier & El Kanafi, 2015). It is with *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 2005) that the series starts to look like the circle we mentioned above, transporting players back in 1964 to have them witness the adventures of a young Big Boss, who is presented as immensely different from the exemplified, cartoon-like villain introduced in the first two games of the saga. *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops* (Kojima Productions, 2006) expands on the past of the series' original antagonist (now evolved into deuteragonist), and *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* (Kojima Productions, 2010) definitely elevates Big Boss as the saga's protagonist, after the departure from the series of Solid Snake in *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (Kojima Productions, 2008).

Thus, Big Boss is also the protagonist of the two final games of the series, which are *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* (Kojima Productions, 2014) and *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015). As the number in the titles suggests,[2] the two games are actually two halves of one, with the first half being way smaller in scope compared to the latter. The official motivation for splitting the game in two was that *Ground Zeroes* supposedly served as a demo of sorts to gently introduce players to a completely new set of game mechanics and also to the open-world formula, in contrast to the level design of previous instalments which was much more space-constrained (Serrels, 2013). Of course,

2. This is the first time in the series that the title switches from Arabic numerals to Roman numerals. This is not coincidental: V is the initial of Venom Snake and Vic Boss, two of Big Boss's many aliases; V also stands for both the victory and the peace sign; finally, the letter V is made of two perfectly symmetrical halves, symbolizing duality.

there were other, more practical reasons: teasing the audience, encouraging hype and buzz around the product, getting user feedback and data to tweak and improve game mechanics and, last but not least, starting to generate profit by selling something that, in the past, would have been distributed for free.

But other than these superficial, albeit legit reasons, the real significance of splitting *Metal Gear Solid V* into two separate games was that the two halves, in reality, had two different protagonists.

ONE IN THREE

Readers who are unfamiliar with the game might be confused by this. We mentioned after all that the protagonist of *Metal Gear Solid V* is Big Boss, but now we are instead referring to two different characters. The two statements only appear to be a contradiction; in fact, they are both valid and true. Just like *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* are, at the same time, two separate games *and* one single game, the two avatars that players control in these games are, at the same time, two separate persons *and* both Big Boss.

At the end of *Ground Zeros*, an explosion destroys the chopper carrying Big Boss, his second-in-command Miller and a few other comrades. The game ends on a cliffhanger, not showing the aftermath of the explosion. *The Phantom Pain* opens with a first-person perspective that puts the player inside a Cyprus hospital. Nine years have passed since *Ground Zeroes*: the player's avatar has been in a coma ever since, after suffering major injuries. He lost most of his left forearm and has shrapnel lodged in his skull that pops out like a horn. He is informed that the shrapnel might interfere with his perception and senses and cause sensorial hallucinations; its removal is impossible due to the high risk of a brain haemorrhage.

In these opening sequences, the doctor who is in charge of taking care of the character asks for his name and date of birth, upon which the player has to manually enter this data. An unassuming player might be slightly confused by the request as they are playing under the assumption of controlling Big Boss, so answering this simple question would already be tricky; however, players might also very easily brush off this dissonance and see it as extra-diegetic, with motivations residing outside the game's narrative — for instance providing the system with data to be used in online multiplayer leaderboards, matchmaking etc. This sort of "intrusion" of extra-narrative elements into the narrative is not new to video games in general, and especially not to this specific series, which often references hardware and software explicitly during in-game dialogues as noted, among others, by Wolfe (2018) and Fraschini (2003).

Not long after being asked for their name and date of birth, the players experience another ambiguous event. The same doctor as before informs the avatar that facial plastic surgery will be used to alter his traits and help him go under the radar. Using a mirror, players can finally check his/their appearance, as everything has been shown from a first-person perspective so far: the face in the mirror is unmistakably that of Big Boss, albeit scarred and covered in band-

ages. Immediately afterwards, players are prompted to use an editor with which they can create their avatar's custom face.[3] However, for a brief moment after completing the personalization of the new appearance, the freshly customized face is shown in the mirror, even if no surgery has taken place yet.
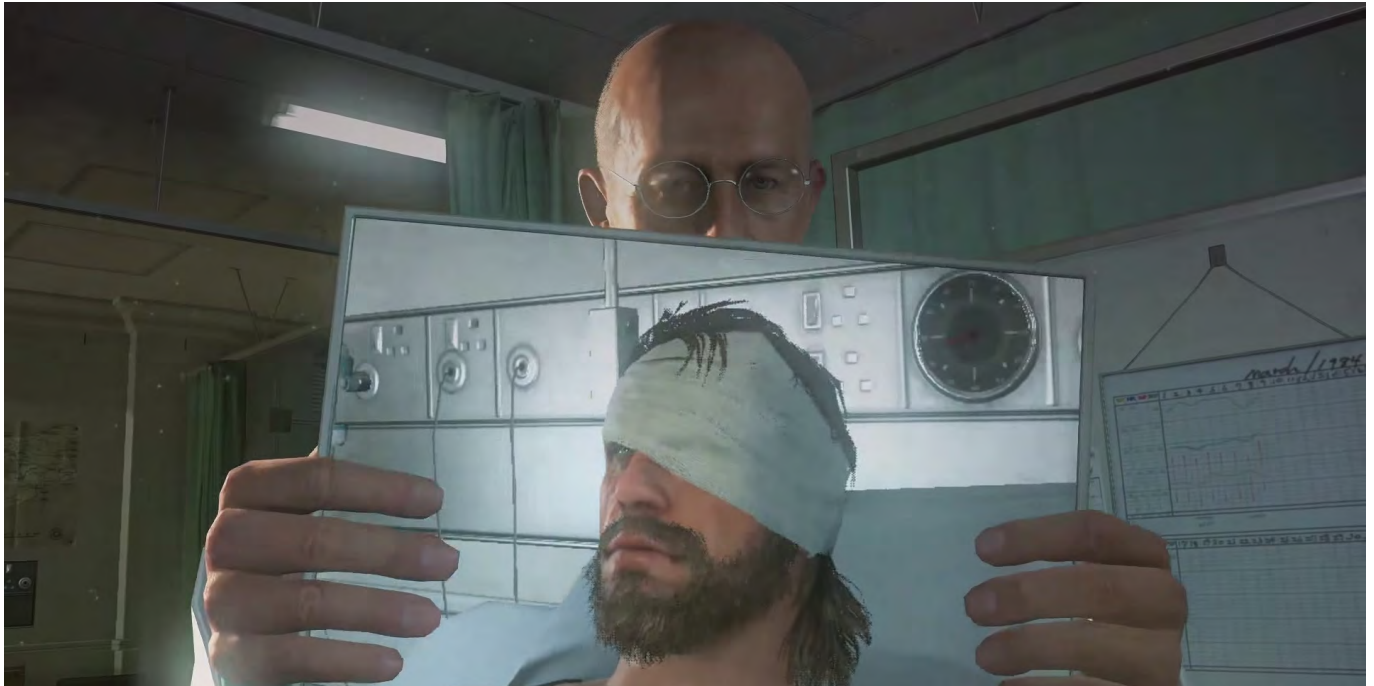
Figure 1 – The doctor holds a mirror in front of the player's avatar (*Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*).

The camera cuts to a new scene. The doctor informs the avatar that two days have passed since the surgery and that he is responding well, having almost completely recovered. The doctor proceeds to show him some pictures with Big Boss, Miller and two soldiers posing together and invites him to leave the past behind. Then, once again he places a mirror in front of the avatar, but Big Boss's facial traits are shown: how does this make sense, if he is supposed to be recovering from the surgery and have a new face? And how come the supposedly *new* face was shown right *before* the surgery, instead?

These questions remain unanswered for the time being because this is when the actual game kicks in and players are thrown in the middle of the action, with the hospital being under attack by unknown forces, which leaves the player no time for pondering. Afterwards, the story starts to unfold and the doubts cast by the whole shady facial surgery procedure are easily forgotten, as the event is never mentioned again. From right after the hospital scenario, nothing happens that might cast doubt on the identity of the avatar players control: everything seems to confirm he is Big Boss. However, an attentive player might notice some inconsistencies with the character. For example, Big Boss is never described nor shown in any previously released game of the series as an

3. This is diegetically interpretable as the character picking his new appearance before the surgery; and once again, the unsuspecting player might just assume that this is all going to be somewhat linked to online multiplayer components of the game.

amputee sporting a bionic arm, a horn-like shrapnel lodged in the skull and a heavily scarred face. Moreover, in this chapter of the series, Big Boss smokes an anachronistic electronic cigar, despite having always been depicted as a tobacco lover with a penchant for Cuban cigars. Finally, one last detail clashes with the character's personality: in *The Phantom Pain*, Big Boss isn't much of a talker, almost presenting himself as "silent protagonist" (Berry, 2015; Mears & Zhu, 2017), which is a typical trait of what can be defined as "shell playable characters" (Lee & Mitchell, 2018) or "mask avatar" (Fraschini, 2003, p. 53) — the kind of digital counterpart that functions best as blank slate onto which players can project their ethics, choices etc. (Papale, 2014). However, all these details can be easily overlooked, deemed as deliberate design choices, or mistaken as the umpteenth case of retroactive continuity.

It's only at the very end of the game that the ruse is revealed. "The player discovers that everything he or she believes to be true following the initial playthrough of the hospital escape has been a carefully crafted lie, one perpetrated on the characters in-game, but also, as meta-narrative, on the player" (Green, 2017, pp. 105-106). The entire mission set inside the Cyprus hospital is replayed. However, this second time, players are presented with two substantial new details that *de facto* negate and rewrite what was shown at the beginning of the game, which can thus be interpreted as partial hallucination. It is worth remembering that the protagonist had just awakened from a nine-year coma and had shrapnel in his head that may have messed with his senses; moreover, as we will soon see, his mind had been manipulated.

> We see Miller and Big Boss lying down on hospital beds, with a group of doctors working hard to revive the latter. Big Boss appears to be in a coma and a worried Miller is trying to get some understanding of his health state. The camera is shaky and keeps on zooming back and forth on Miller's and Big Boss's faces […] Then Miller, breaking the fourth wall, looks into the camera: "What about him?", he asks. The change is sudden and clear. What initially looked like a medium shot is revealed to be a first-person perspective […] the camera becomes the gaze of a third party viewer (Ferrante, 2016).

Miller's question is answered by one of the medics: "He… He took some shrapnel — to the head". And this is the ultimate revelation. The view is in first-person: the medic is talking about the player's avatar. Big Boss is framed by the camera, so the only possible explanation is that, during the whole game, the player has not been controlling Big Boss.

The screen fades to black, and the sequence already shown at the beginning of *The Phantom Pain* is replayed. The doctor puts a mirror in front of the avatar, but this time the face reflected in it is the one that, many hours before, players had carefully created with the face editor. "This is you — as you've lived until this day", says the doctor, chasing away any trace of doubt. It is only after the

surgery that Big Boss's face is shown. This time around, there is no incoherent shifting between the two appearances or ambiguity. The avatar is once again given the two pictures already seen at the beginning of the game; however, while the first time they were overlapping and only partially visible, now players can see (no pun intended) the full picture: one of the soldiers standing next to Big Boss and Miller has the same face as the one created with the custom editor.

> The two overlapping pictures, once rearranged, show ourselves next to Big Boss, providing the ultimate proof of our physical, ontological presence in the game. The picture and the mirror […] attest the existence of the player inside the game world. The riddle is now solved, as upon flipping the picture we can read an inscription signed by Big Boss dedicated to the player's name (Ferrante, 2016).

Lastly, one final scene serves as foolproof *denouement*. The avatar is inside the military base of Diamond Dogs as he pops a cassette tape into a Sony Walkman. The voice is Big Boss's:

> Now do you remember? Who you are? What you were meant to do? I cheated death, thanks to you. And thanks to you I've left my mark. You have too — you've written your own history. You're your own man. I'm Big Boss, and you are too… No… He's the two of us. Together. Where we are today? We built it. This story — this "legend" — it's ours. We can change the world — and with it, the future. I am you, and you are me. Carry that with you, wherever you go. Thank you… my friend. From here on out, you're Big Boss.

While these words echo in the room, the player's avatar observes his reflection in the mirror swinging from Big Boss's face and his original face. A flashback shows the helicopter exploding at the end of *Ground Zeroes*, but the scene has an additional, revealing detail: there was a medic on board, a generic character which is never officially introduced by the narrative, basically just one of the many people serving in Big Boss's army. In the cutscene, the medic protects Big Boss with his own body during the explosion, possibly saving his life.

The epilogue fills the remaining gaps. After the explosion, both Big Boss and the nameless medic fall into a coma. Big Boss awakens before the medic and is briefed about a plan: turning the medic into his *doppelgänger* by altering his physical appearance through surgery and his mind through hypnotherapy, to convince him to be the one and only Big Boss. The goal of this engineered "phantom" would have been to be a moving target for Big Boss's enemies; in other words, to take the heat while the real Big Boss was under the radar, plotting his next moves.

This revelation, in a way, retroactively corrects most of the series' canon. The stories and legends around the messiah-like figure of Big Boss are revealed to be spurred from the actions of not one, but two people,[4] from a strictly nar-

4. This also gives a new meaning to a dialogue included in *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake*, where the supporting character Kesler, when called during the fight against Big Boss, states: "Three years ago, when Outer Heaven fell, Big Boss was seriously wounded. He almost died… He lost both hands, both feet, his right eye, and his right ear. But somehow… he survived …I don't know the details, but apparently it involved turning him into a cyborg. Now he's half man and half machine." This dialogue was originally meant to be a tongue-in-cheek reference to the apocryphal *Snake's Revenge* (Konami, 1990) in which Big Boss has actually been turned into a cyborg. However, with the new information given by *The Phantom Pain*, one could reinterpret this dialogue as a sign of the total success of Big Boss's master scheme: Kesler is a military advisor, but despite that, he is heavily misinformed about him.

rative point of view. But we argue that this revelation also has a meta-narrative significance. We interpret this to mean that the empirical player *is* Big Boss; that every person that has played the *Metal Gear* saga has contributed to expanding his legend: every in-game action, every small variation of the story, every different point of view all come together to collectively form the mythopoeia of Big Boss.

> This fake Big Boss controlled by the player is legitimate. He is the player's Big Boss, the one they built from their choices on each of the battlefields crossed […] The player, through their actions, manages to turn an unnamed soldier into a Big Boss, perpetuating the myth while the real Big Boss is trying to build his own version of Outer Heaven elsewhere in the world. Perhaps even better, it is possible to interpret that this nameless soldier is none other than the player (Bêty, 2016, p. 81).

Thus, Big Boss is revealed to be triune: at the same time, he is the "real" Big Boss, he is the "phantom" medic, and he is the empirical player.

This narrative twist relocates the player from being a mere spectator to being effectively the co-creator of the story and one of its characters as well; it also marks a sudden shift in the player's identity and agency, especially in the case in which the player had tried to recreate their appearance when using the face editor at the beginning of the game.[5] At the same time, this twist exponentially augments and diminishes the player's agency: if it is true that the ending elevates the empirical player to being an integral part of Big Boss's legend, it also displays a loss of agency in the player, who is revealed to having been operating under false premises and been misled by Kojima's ruse — at least on a first, uninformed playthrough.

FULL CIRCLE

Let's go back to the bathroom mirror scene. When the cassette tape stops playing, the avatar flips it and reveals a B side called "Operation Intrude N313". This is the name of the mission a young Solid Snake carried out in the first *Metal Gear*. Big Boss's "phantom" pops the tape in an MSX2 reader (the console for which *Metal Gear* was originally developed). The contents of the B side aren't revealed, but we can infer that a time jump of about ten years happens at the moment the cassette is flipped. *Metal Gear* is set in 1995 while *The Phantom Pain* is set from 1984 onwards; the B side's name suggests that this cassette contains the mission briefing for "Operation Intrude N313", which couldn't realistically have been planned so long before. Another detail seems to confirm the time jump theory, once again thanks to a revealing mirror: the reflection of the Diamond Dogs logo is replaced by the insignia of Outer Heaven. All of this suggests that this scene is set right before, or during, the events of the first *Metal Gear*.

This brings us to the ultimate revelation. The Big Boss who dies in the explosion of the fortress of Outer Heaven is the "phantom" born from the explosion of the chopper in *Ground Zeroes*. The "real" Big Boss is elsewhere, building

5. If we consider that the best-case scenario to surprise players is the one in which they tried to recreate their own face with the avatar editor, we can assume that players who don't identify as male are at a clear disadvantage here, due to the impossibility of selecting a female or non-binary face.

Figure 2 – The "phantom" of Big Boss stares at his reflection. The insignia of Outer Heaven is visible in the back (*Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*)

Zanzibar Land (a specular reflection of Outer Heaven). Thus, the Big Boss who is defeated in *Metal Gear* is, in a way, the empirical player. In a single blow, Kojima rewires and rewrites the player's role, agency and identity as the saga's motive force and original villain. Players discover they "killed themselves" years before, by killing Big Boss's "phantom".

With regards to *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 2002), Fraschini said "Truth is an infinite process. Which means it needs to be constantly rebuilt" (Fraschini, 2003, p. 125). This was the first episode of the saga that strongly presented itself as a meta-narrative, postmodern work (Papale & Fazio, 2018; Markowski, 2015; Higgin 2009). If this proved to be true back then, with *Metal Gear Solid V* Kojima delivers one final blow onto the player's identity, revealing how the virtual and physical worlds are intertwined.

FEELING THE PHANTOM PAIN

As previously stated, the path to the publication of *Metal Gear Solid V* corresponded to the one that saw Kojima and Konami parting ways. The dynamics that led to this breakup are, to this day, quite muddy, but it can be easily inferred that they had a significant impact on the final product, also considering how Kojima Production's staff ended up, during the last months of development, with restricted access to corporate internet, email and phone calls (Sarkar 2015). This is to some extent confirmed by the fact that a whole storyline (the

one related to Eli, a.k.a. the young Liquid Snake, one of the sons of Big Boss) is pretty much rushed to a conclusion that fails to tie several loose ends. As it turns out, this is because a whole mission, the so-called "Mission 51: Kingdom of the Flies", was originally meant to be included in the final product but never made it in time for the release date, ending up being cut. The existence of this cut content was revealed later on with a collector's edition of the game that includes artworks, partial cutscenes and recorded dialogues that, when put together and filling in the blanks with some induction, provide a satisfying closure for Eli's storyline.

The release of this cut material sparked a heated debate on whether the "Mission 51" is to be considered part of the series' canon. Konami itself weighed on the matter, confirming that it is not canon (Peckham, 2016); but in a time and age where customers' feedback and user-generated content are paramount in the success of a franchise (Jenkins, 2006, 2013) it is hard to exactly determine who can say what is canon and what is not. In this regard, the players' agency crosses the boundary of the gameplay and raises interesting questions about authorship and ownership. If the players as collective identity, as we argued before, are the real keystone to the saga, should it be them who determine what is canon, and how? Can and should the game publisher's stance be taken into account in this evaluation? Or should Kojima's opinion be the only one that matters, knowing how possessive he has always been in regards to the authorship of his creation (cf. Wolfe, 2018)?

Finally, it might not be too far-fetched to argue that the sense of unfinishedness a player may feel when reaching the conclusion of the game is actually a desired outcome, one that resonates with the theme of the "phantom pain" (the feeling of something that "should" be there, but it is missing) and ultimately the themes of loss and letting go (Dawkins, 2015).

This bait-and-switch technique, after all, is used on two other occasions by Kojima in *The Phantom Pain*. During the whole game, as players, we are encouraged to build and develop our "Mother Base", an offshore military facility that we can expand by acquiring materials and skilled personnel. In Mission 43, the Mother Base faces an epidemic that, if spread, would pose a threat to the whole world: a vocal cord parasite that reacts to very specific sound waves that are unique to a given language, and that could potentially be used as an ethnical cleansing tool. During this mission, the player must visit the quarantine zone of the base and put out of their misery all those infected beyond any reasonable doubt. As the mission progresses, it becomes awfully clear that nobody can be spared, because everyone is infected. This moment of the game is the only section of *The Phantom Pain* where non-lethal options are not possible and the player is forced to kill, effectively destroying their own squad, put together after so much effort and many hours of gameplay; Kojima deprives players of choice after having trained them through narrative, gameplay and scoring system to avoid violence whenever possible (Bêty, 2016).

Following the crisis of Mission 43, Quiet, a mysterious sniper that never speaks, and that is initially a foe before becoming a powerful ally that can be deployed as companion non-playable character (Girina 2018), flees and is captured by enemy soldiers. During the rescue operation, Big Boss is bitten by a venomous snake, and Quiet is forced to use a radio to ask for help. As Quiet is the host of the vocal cord parasite that reacts to the English language, she leaves Big Boss immediately after speaking to avoid spreading the infection and disappears to die alone in the desert. After this sequence, Quiet disappears completely from the game. The player can no longer deploy her in any mission, not even when replaying older ones: "She becomes nothing but a fainting memory that the player can never find again" (Bêty, 2016, p. 87). By depriving the players of Quiet both as a character and as part of the game system, Kojima exponentially expands the sorrow inflicted upon them, after having made sure throughout the whole game that they heavily invested emotionally in Quiet while being under the assumption of having control over the way they interact with her.

In fact, it is technically possible to skip any storyline involving Quiet, as during the first encounter with her the player has the option to kill her. However, chances that the player decides to do this on a first playthrough are slim. Quiet is knocked out; killing her in cold blood would go against the very philosophy of the game itself. Moreover, the player has most likely been exposed to trailers and other promotional material before playing, and these make sure to establish Quiet as a prominent character (Bêty, 2016; Girina 2018): any shrewd player would avoid killing her so early in the game, if not for narrative/emotional motives, at least for fear of missing out on game content. We can thus affirm that players do ultimately have agency over how they perceive the character of Quiet and her subsequent loss; however, both from a narrative and a game design perspective, the invisible hand of Kojima pushes players toward a specific direction, preserving the players' free will on paper while making sure that the auteur's vision is fulfilled.

THE "IMPOSSIBLE" ENDING

The last commentary Kojima has on players' agency had long stayed buried deep inside the code of the game before a software bug caused this secret ending to be unlocked prematurely. In fact, in a normal scenario, the unlocking of this scene depends on the collective actions undertaken by players in the online multiplayer section of *The Phantom Pain*.

In the multiplayer mode, among other things, players can choose whether they want to own nukes or dismantle them; to achieve either goal, they can invade other players' bases and steal their arsenals. Just like in the real world, owning a nuclear weapon serves as a deterrent but also attracts unwanted attention, so deciding to join or stay out of the nuclear scene is a tactical choice. And just like in the real world, nuclear disarmament seems to remain a utopia.

A cutscene is supposed to be unlocked simultaneously for every player of a given system/console, should the collective nuke count for that environment reach zero. The final quest of *The Phantom Pain*, in other words, is to convince players all around the world to renounce nuclear power in the interest of a greater good (Gault, 2015; Muncy, 2015). A fitting ending for a series that has always been anti-nuke, and one that also loosely ties *The Phantom Pain* to the narrative premise of *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* (Konami, 1990), which takes place in a world that has (temporarily) reached full nuclear disarmament. However, it is an ending that still has not been triggered "organically" as hackers and hoarders make it nearly impossible (Alexandra, 2018).

In an ideal world, nobody would have nuclear weapons, as nobody would ultimately benefit from their use; however, it is possibly more dangerous if only one entity holds nuclear power (due to the resulting power imbalance), rather than a multitude; so as long as there is the chance of anyone retaining, acquiring or restoring nuclear armaments, permanent disarmament remains impossible (Schelling 1960). Through gameplay, Kojima effectively illustrates the challenges of nuclear balance and deterrence, and pushes players to reflect on their agency by giving them one last, seemingly impossible mission, one that can only be achieved with a coordinated, continuative and collective effort.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to expose how Kojima comments on players' agency and toys with their expectations in *Metal Gear Solid V* through various stratagems: by halving the game into *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain*, by splitting Big Boss in three, by rewriting the canon to fit the empirical player in the actual narrative. Kojima plays on the phantom pain thematic and uses it as a mechanic by way of giving agency only to take it all away dramatically. True to his nature, Kojima reaffirms his role as auteur by making it clear that he is ultimately in charge; at the same time, though, he recognizes the players' role in the success of his creation in what is the video game equivalent of a loving farewell letter to his fan base.

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Playing with the Player

Agency Manipulation in *Shadow of the Colossus* and Japanese Computer Games

ABSTRACT

Questionings and meditations on agency in Japan are far from being a recent phenomenon. We can go as far as to challenges to human fate and control over their lives in the ancient Buddhist tradition, or to more contemporary uncertainties about individuality and social responsibility in highly industrialised and mercantile globalized contexts risen in the 1960s. Such disbelief on how much control do humans have over our own actions was further explored in the *Lost Decades* (1990–2010). The relevant changes were due to the context of deep crises (economic, social and cultural) and the supports of these discourses, the media that allowed these explorations. This paper studies how agency has been challenged through the use of the videoludic medium. It explores the medium's meditation on players' and designers' responsibility, and the capacities of computer games to propose meaningful existential and ethical experiences. To do so it focuses on the 2005 game *Shadow of the Colossus*, how it manipulates agency, player's expectations and reflects a context of liquid categories, values, morality and ontological boundaries.

KEYWORDS: *Japan, agency, ontology, morality, anthropology*

INTRODUCTION

Games do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, to study the 2005 game *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico) examination on the relation between players and the videoludic medium, this paper situates it within the wider intertextual conversation that links it to contextual worries of contemporary Japan. One of the main themes interrogated by *Shadow* is the concept of agency and its links to moral responsibility, power, and control within video games. In this essay, I argue that *Shadow* does not only speak to and about agency and games but also about the human condition and its complex and conflictive relation to evil.

To support such an argument, this paper examines *Shadow*'s questioning of the capacities and limitations of video games as experiences, focusing on its design and the relation between gameplay mechanics and the narrative that is subtracted from it. With this aim, the paper is divided into two main sections. The first section situates *Shadow* within the sociocultural and political context from where it originates, that of XXI century Japan, and the polyphonic conversations on agency and video games. The second section examines how the game designs an ambiguous and complex relationship with the players through the figure of Wander, their avatar and the protagonist of the story. The section draws from methods such as content analysis, design theory, and retentional economy, which are introduced below.

SHADOW, A VIDEO GAME OF LIQUID JAPAN

In 1991, the economic bubble created during the 1980s decade burst. Stagnation and recession set in and companies began to restructure, merge, downsize or disappear (Kingston, 2010, p. 24). In this context of economic crisis, youths were particularly hard hit becoming the "lost generation" in the first of Japan's "Lost Decades" (Allison, 2013, p. 29). Furthermore, the destruction of the workplace and its space as socialisation put an end to Japan's dependency culture built and sustained during the Postwar decades on two pillars: family and corporate belonging (Allison, 1994). While men socialised within companies women and children did it at home, based on an ecosystem of knitted affect, care, duty, and belonging (Nakane, 1967). Thus, human attachments and bonds were structured around differentiation and hierarchy, defining every social relationship. Family from the household as well as the affect of dependence (*amae)* were transferred to the workplace (Takeo, 2001).

However, by the end of the Lost Decade, Japan's dependency culture had lost its profitability and advantage for the big corporations and the conservative governments. Seen as a burden for economic development and companies' competitiveness, neoliberal ideologists advocated for its dismantling and began such a process. But the accusation went deeper, as these reformers accused the dependency culture of creating unhealthy "interdependent relationships that hinder individuals from exercising initiative and developing entrepreneurship" (Takeda, 208, p. 156). The so-called "Iron Triangle" of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), bureaucrats, and big corporations that has played a central role in the institutionalisation of the idea of a middle-class country (Chiavacci, 2008, p. 6) raised a new banner lionising for "risk and individual responsibility" (*risuku to jiko sekinin*) (Allison, 2013, p. 28). Under this new metanarrative, the government asked its citizens to become strong and independent individuals "capable of bearing the heavy weight of freedom" (in Miyazaki, 2010, p. 243).

Nevertheless, the interdependencies and bonds that once tied Japanese society together were, by the end of the Lost Decade, undone or deeply diminished, leaving many people unprotected, adrift, and hopeless. During the 1990s, the

middle-class country and super stable society that Japan once thought to be was led to a general sense of malaise, unsureness, and existential anxiety (Giddens, 1984). This state has perdured, and a decade later the same trends have persisted. With the economy showing no signs of improvement, new crises spread across the county, worsened by three mains hocks. In 1995, a 7.2 on the Richter scale earthquake devastated the city of Kobe causing over 6,200 deaths. Almost a third of the city was destroyed, leaving thousands of families homeless (Iida, 2000). A year later, a group from the religious cult Aum Shinrikyō committed a series of indiscriminate attacks in Tokyo's underground train using sarin gas, killing and injuring over 5,000 people (Iida, 2000, p. 426; Kingston, 2010, p. 29). The news spread across the country, deeply harming the myth of Japan's internal security while increasing the sense of a nation in collapse. In addition, two years later, the country was shocked by the "Young A" murders. The "Young A" of Kobe was a case in which a 14-year-old boy committed a series of murders against other students from his school (Iida, 2000). The boy, coming from a middle-class ordinary family, left a confession note in which he blamed the education system, his family, and the adult world that had turned him transparent (Iida, 2005, p. 234). Consequently, as Anne Allison argues, "the very fabric of everyday life at the turn of the twenty-first century seemed to be getting ripped asunder" (2013, p. 30). This social malaise has hit the youth hardest of all and, by the end of the decade, a new form of mental health issue spread across Japan: the *hikikomori*.

Hikikomori are young adult (mostly) men in their teens or twenties who decide to seclude themselves in their rooms for periods of over six months or even years (Hairston, 2010, p. 311). They have developed a fear of social interaction with the outside world, deciding to stay in their room, (Kotler, Sugawara, & Yamada, 2007, p. 112). Hikikomori withdraw from all physical contact (Hairston, 2010, p. 311). They also quit school and have no job, presenting a challenge for psychiatry since the awareness of the new phenomenon (Teo, 2010, p. 178). Although the number of Hikikomori has risen to 1% of the Japanese population (Todd, 2010, p. 135), there is the suspicion that an undetermined but higher number of cases have not been reported yet due to shame and overprotection (Malagon et al., 2010, p. 558; Teo, 2010, p. 181).

In that deeply troubled context, bonding, creating links, and connecting to people became a difficult and uncertain struggle. This increased a deep state of ontological insecurity that manifested in the lowest childbirth in years (1.34%), a decline of the population, and the number of suicides steadily increasing for more than a decade (Allison, 2006; Allison, 2013, p. 30). In that landscape, different discourses lionised the individualistic enterprise praised by neoliberal ideologists. Self-help books, TV dramas, and a whole literature on how to become independent and self-sufficient teach the benefits of learning to live alone happily. This literature, however, contrasts with more than a decade of intermedial discourses warning about the vanishing of society, the pain from the disappearance of social connections, and the dangers of isolation and loneliness.

It is in this context that different discourses draw from a recurrent theme in Japanese literature to examine contemporary concerns about individualism and community. That theme is what I have called Essential Boundaries Transgression (EBT). The EBT refers to narratives in which characters journey to the land of the dead to resurrect a loved one. It appeared as late as in 711-712 in the '*Kojiki'*. The EBT has since then been used by authors to discuss themes such as life and death relations, morality, attachment, or power relationships. In the Second Lost Decade (2000-2010), the theme is used as a proxy to pay close attention to two main concepts: individualism and communalism (Cesar, 2019). Thus, the EBT stands as human-made structural narrative to discuss, through a familiar theme, contextual worries. In the case of *Shadow,* it gives the game its main dramatic tension, the one moving the story forward. It is the aim of this paper to examine *Shadow*'s use of the EBT to interrogate the role of agency in the videoludic medium and how it challenges players' expectations on the experience of playing video games.

To that end, this essay approaches *Shadow'*s engagement in contemporary Japanese debates on agency through a three-stage analysis. The first part applies a textual analysis focused on formal-aesthetic premises. This approach centres on structural and aesthetic aspects that pre-structure the consumption of the game, but do not control or determine it (Eichner 2014, p. 175). This analysis is based on identifying the patterns of appeal formed by the text, which guide its polysemic potential by incorporating the audience as integral to meaning-making (Mikos, 2001, p. 62). Here, instead of drawing solely from the figure of the ideal or implied reader, it focuses on the reading formations and specific dispositions, media preferences and reading strategies it designs. To do so, the text is contextualised within its specific polyphonic, diverse, and heterogenic ecosystem, in this case 21st century Japan. This is, therefore, incorporated in the second level of the analysis, which examines *Shadow* as inserted and interacting with the main debates, worries, and hopes of Japan's Lost Decades.

This first stage follows the methodology designed by Mark J. P. Wolf (2007) that focuses on graphics, interface, algorithm and interactivity, and Mike Schmierbach's (2009) content analysis approach. Wolf defines graphics as a changeable visual display on screen, the interface as the boundary between player and game, the algorithm as the program controlling the game, and interactivity the player actions and responses in the game (Wolf, 2007, p. 24). On top of that, Schmierbach proposes to structure and cut the gameplay into different stages to be studied later. Building on that analysis, this essay's examination on the design of the game draws from James Ash's (2012) concept of affective design, which focuses on the modulation of affect and attention in video games. Affective design builds on Bernard Stiegler's (2010) *retentional economy*, which studies the transmission of human knowledge through the relationship between affect and attention in our memory. When applied to video games, affective design examines the techniques designers use to captivate and ma-

nipulate attention. The aim is to understand how designers modulate affect to ensure a successful gameplay experience, one that is fun and meaningful.

Attention focuses on how games are designed to be experienced as they capture and manage players' emotions through sensory design (Thrift, 2006, p. 286) by appealing to the senses in different ways (Berlant, 2008; Featherstone, 2010). As Shaviro (2013) argues, they are machines for generating affect, to extract value from the affective relation between players and game.

The second stage of the analysis aims to incorporate the dimensions of media production and reception by integrating mediality and textuality with media consumption (Eichner, 2013, p. 175). This builds on communication studies by situating reception and semiotics in its socio-cultural context, and framing the agentic subjects through social action (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987; 2009). This not only places video games within their context but it also helps to account for the hermeneutic and semiotic processes in which players participate while consuming it, understanding culture as a dynamic and negotiated construction, as well as a net of interconnections, meanings, and discourses (Geertz, 1973).

To study how *Shadow* constructs through its gameplay an interrogation on neoliberal discourses and their relationship to moral responsibility, control, power, and agency, the next section examines the game's mechanics and the narrative subtracted from them. The section focuses on *Shadow* as an exploration on existing within, at the margins, or outside the community.

TO PLAY AND BE PLAYED: *SHADOW* AS A MEDIAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGE

*Shadow of the Colossus (*Team Ico, 2005) is an adventure game published right in the middle of the Second Lost Decade. *Shadow,* however, seems to have maintained its actuality and relevance, as it has been remastered twice, one for the PlayStation3 console (2010) and for the PlayStation 4 (2018). One of the reasons comes from *Shadow's* actuality, and its still unravelled mysteries. The game proposes an ambiguous and complex experience to the players, by mixing elements from open-world adventure, heroic games, and romantic literature while, at the same time, challenging and interrogating them, its narrative genre, and the videoludic medium itself.

In *Shadow,* the players' avatar and protagonist of the story is Wander. He is a young warrior who journeys to a forbidden land to resurrect his dead love, a young girl called Mono. In a cryptic cutscene, players are told that this place was once inhabited by a being who could bring the soul of the dead back, but the trespassing is strictly forbidden. Upon reaching the palace at the centre of this land, Wander is told by Dormin – a supernatural force – that he can revive his dead lover but the law of the mortals prohibits such transgression. To do so Wander must destroy the idols found in the shrine by killing sixteen Colossi, incarnations of the idols who are scattered across the land. Finally, Dormin warns Wander that the prize to pay for his wish will be high.

Wander's quest starts by locating the first colossus using the light from his sword guiding him to his enemy and revealing the weak spots on the immense body of the adversary. Once the colossus is killed, black fluid tendrils exit its body and enter Wander, showing the corresponding idol implodes in the shrine. Upon waking in the altar room, Dormin reveals in riddles to Wander how to defeat the next colossus. The process is repeated sixteen times but, in the middle of Wander's quest, a group of riders, a priest and some warriors, enter the forbidden land to stop him.

Right after defeating the last colossus, the riders enter the altar room with Lord Emon, a priest who wears a mask resembling the one shown to the player in the introduction cutscene. When the last idol collapses, Wander's body is transported back to the altar room. Corrupted with horns and uncanny marks, Wander is told by Lord Emon that he has been used and possessed by the devil. Wander is turned into a shadow and a colossus himself. Dormin is resurrected and reunites his separated body parts by borrowing Wander's. Emon and his soldiers seal the demon by creating a portal of white light that sucks Dormin in, returning Wander to his original form. The bridge collapses, sealing the land as Mono wakes up. She finds a crying, horned baby at the spot where Wander disappeared. The baby is taken to a hidden garden at the top of the castle where wild animals greet them.

There are two main aspects of agency effectual for the mechanics and narrative of *Shadow*. The first is the unravelling of the story by the players as they complete one mission after the next. The structure of these missions is constant and repeated throughout the whole game, each comprising of two main events. First, players are told about a colossus they must defeat, its locations, and some of its characteristics. This information is cryptically provided by Dormin and precedes the exploration phase. In this exploration, players use a magical sword to interact with the world by following the light that points to the exact location where they will find their enemy. There are only two aporias – problems to be solved – that the players need to recognise: the location of the next colossus and how to reach it. The first task is relatively simple and uneventful. During these lonely rides on horseback, players do not encounter major challenges in an empty land lacking side-missions or NPCs with whom to interact (Ciccorico, 2007). Once players have successfully reached the colossus, the battle with their foe begins.

This phase is pleasurable as space is appropriated by the players who unrestrainedly navigate through the Ancient Lands, explore the digital environment, operate and manipulate the land, experiencing immediate response to their commands. The horse is responsive, there are no restrictions of movement beyond the balance between material and formal constraints (Mateas, 2004, p. 25). In *Shadow*, the mechanic possibilities imitate the logic of the world outside the game – gravity is a major challenge to movement and combat. This constructs a mimetic representation of the connection between the Ancient Lands and the players' world as their agency is constrained by the laws of physics and their abili-

ties and knowledge of the world, the skills and the game challenges. Restrictions to agency relate to everyday life as they are also informed by *habitus* (Bordieu, 2009), structure (Giddens, 1984), knowledge resources, and our relations to other individuals, groups, and institutional agents (Eichner, 2013, p. 114).

With regard to the battles against the colossi, these offer a small number of choices in order to solve the aporia and meet the condition for victory: the player must stick their sword in the bright blue symbols on the body of the foe to kill it. In order to do so, players need to locate such blue spots and figure out how to reach them. The agency of the player over the game is directly constrained by the avatar's resources: a sword, a bow, and its stamina. However, there are no choices between killing or not the colossi if they wish to progress with the game. Although players can withdraw at any point from the battle, recovering their stamina and health bar, they will find themselves in that same mission. This lack of choices presents one of the main contrasts between the apparent freedom within the game world and the actual constraints of *Shadow*'s narrative structure and its restrained mechanics.

This mechanical restriction relates to the ethical proposition of *Shadow.* As argued by Miguel Sicart (2009), *Shadow* exemplifies a closed ethical game design, in which players cannot implement their values beyond the mechanical restrictions of the game (p. 214). Consequently, players are not given the agency to contribute with their values to the game itself but to morally reflect upon the determined ethical choices and events. Thus, players in *Shadow* have to adapt to these values, experience their otherness, and the disempowerment of not being in direct control over their moral action within the game. Simultaneously, *Shadow* creates a reflective experience as players reflect on the values the game is presenting to them, mechanically forcing them to play by the rules. This is further stressed by *Shadow*'s fluctuation and manipulation of players' agency and control over the game.

One of *Shadow*'s main mechanics in relation to agency fluctuation and closed ethical design is the futile interactivity recurrently used throughout the game. This mechanic refers to scenes in which players are given control over the avatar while the outcome is mechanically and narratively predetermined by the game design (Fortugno, 2008). For instance, after the defeat of every colossus, players are chased by black tendrils projected from its corpse. While players might run, hide, and try to escape, they are always caught by the tendrils. Futile interactive is not only a recurrent mechanic with narrative consequences, but it also structures the dramatic tension that constitutes the premise of *Shadow,* as the whole game and narration is an experience of futility due to agency fluctuation and to the disempowerment of players.

Consequently, *Shadow* presents a major contrast on its structure and distribution of agency. On the one hand, *Shadow* introduces a world of openness and freedom of movement without any map restrictions or zones that need to be unlocked through game progression. On the other hand, the order of the colos-

si, the activation of missions and quests, and the players' imprisonment within the Ancient Lands shows a highly restricted and scripted structure, with a very confined range of actions within the predetermined and straightforward organisation of the events. This structure may produce some contradicting situations as the game has a strict order in which players should defeat the colossi. Therefore, players might visit the site of a future battleground but, if it is not within the corresponding order pre-designed by the game, the relative colossus does not appear. This has a mechanical explanation, as the players' stamina increases after each battle, some fights would be nearly impossible due to the unmet requirements from players who have not obtained enough power to defeat that enemy. For instance, visiting the nest of the fourth colossi before defeating the third would not activate the fight and the colossus would not be revealed.

Thus, through this dichotomic relationship between open-world and linear story progression and range of possible actions, *Shadow* fluctuates and manipulates the players' freedom, control, and sense of agency as a transformative force. This alternation between endowing and snatching agency away from the players has to do with *Shadow*'s inner examinations of the sociocultural role of the medium. While agency might be one of the main characteristics of video games, or even the main pleasure of playing them (Adelmann, & Winlker, 2009; Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2010), the term is still highly debated within academic enquiries on both the ontology of video games and its phenomenology (Eichner, 2013; Klevjer, 2012). For instance, one of the founding definitions of the medium comes from Espen Aarseth (1997) who argues that one of the pleasures of cybertexts comes from acting out power on the text which leads, in turn, to the experience of agency. With agency being such a central defining feature of video games, to modulate players' control or their illusion of exercising transformation into the game world is key to *Shadow*'s meditation on the medium, as it is, therefore, experimenting and interrogating one of the core elements of what makes computer games. *Shadow* plays with the idea of increasing players' control and sense of immersion. While some scholars understand agency in videogames as 'the more, the better' (Harrel, & Zhu, 2009, p. 1), *Shadow* explores the scepticism and debate on absolute free agency, its illusion, and even the phenomenological, semiotic, affective, and narrative impact of mechanically restricting agency. Therefore, *Shadow*'s manipulation of players' agency directly influences its experience, hermeneutics, and overall decoding. This is performed in the game through affective design, to which I now turn my attention.

The manipulation of attention in *Shadow* is mainly performed through affective amplification, which is the designers' attempt to generate and then modulate between affective states. In *Shadow*, this modulation is done through manipulating agency and players' control over the game and their required attention at each stage. As I have previously discussed, *Shadow* designs different situations when players have control of their avatar, Wander, but not over the outcome

of his doomed and scripted fate. This is an attempt by Team Ico to amplify the affective impact specific scenes will have over the players (Fortugno, 2008; Suttner, 2015). Thus, while scenes such as the tendrils that enter Wander could be presented through a cutscene, having the players control Wander's body and actions increases their experience of such sequence as directly happening to them. Furthermore, by offering players control over Wander while he is being punished, the game amplifies the connection between the two.

However, as mentioned earlier, *Shadow* is not a game punctuated by futile interactive moments, but the whole game is based on such affective design. After all, the game gives players enough interactive capacity to proceed in the story. On the one hand, the game offers a free open world; on the other hand, it constrains the progression of the players and their ethical choices forcing them to transgress the laws of mortals (Sicart, 2009). *Shadow* is a game about the responsibility of having agency to impact the world, but also about the morality of doing something just because you are told to do it. Ultimately, *Shadow* is a game that challenges the medium for its capacity to examine one of the most recurrent themes about human nature: evil. In fact, *Shadow* is a game that attracts players into doing something the game constantly reinforces as unethical, dangerous, and morally irresponsible.

To do so the game combines and shifts between mechanics that increase both voluntary and captivating attention. The term 'voluntary' refers to the design of games which attract players attention, while their 'captive' quality keeps players engaged regardless of their intention (Ash, 2012, p. 12). This is achieved by different features of the videoludic medium such as narrative, mechanics, community engagement, and so on. In the case of *Shadow,* the narrative serves both as an initial attraction, a way to get the players to engage with the game, and as a structure to keep the players engaged. As previously discussed, the narrative of Shadow presents a theme familiar to players: the EBT and the fight against death. This theme is approached by *Shadow,* offering the audience the possibility to actively participate in the quest to defeat death, to be agents in the rebellion against mortality and the respect of human limits. The premise is then altered by the strict structure of the game while, at the same time, hints are scattered across its progression to increase the ambiguity and complexity of the story. Consequently, there is an epistemological gap between the players and the game, as crucial information about their quest, their avatar, and Dormin are hidden from them. Thus, the only way to unravel the story and to complete the narrative puzzle is to keep playing expecting more clues and the eventual end of their quest.

On top of that, mechanically, *Shadow*'s design uses different affective tools to modulate and keep the players captivated and motivated to engage with the quest. One of its main mechanics is progression, achieved by developing, moving forward toward unknown futures within the game's context (Ashton, 2011; Ash, 2012). Progression is achieved in the game by defeating the co-

lossi, unlocking new missions and getting closer to the completion of the quest (Jakobsson & Sotamaa, 2011). This is connected via scripted events, which reinforce affective amplification by both rewarding players and punctuating their achievements (Ash, 2012, p. 18). Thus, scripted events reward players by unlocking a new piece of the game's narrative, offering more information about its mysteries. This amplifies the sense of progression and moving forward. This is particularly relevant in *Shadow*, as the game emphasises a cyclical sense of time-space revisiting (Pérez Latorre, 2012; Cesar, 2019).

Progression makes up for the lack of other rewards in the game. There is no levelling up in *Shadow*, nor do players receive new items, skills, or powers. The only reward is the sense of achieving new levels of mastery by defeating the colossi and uncovering new information about Wander's quest, the world, and the impending end. Anticipation and expectation for these events and the information they communicate activate a specific mode of attention by amplifying perception and memory (Stiegler, 2010; Ash, 2012). In addition, scripted events mark the transition from one stage of the mission (exploration) to the other (combat) and vice versa. This juxtaposition of one affect state to another, marked by moments of pronounced slowness and others of intense speed, aims at emphasising the affect by means of contrast and modulation. In conclusion, scripted events encourage players to focus on the present while shifting between different attentive states of perception and memory. These states punctuate both the development of the story and the progress of the players who are, therefore, rewarded for their engagement and mastery of the game.

To sum up, this section has examined how players' agency is manipulated in *Shadow*. It has focused on how the game's mechanics and narrative work to modulate affect and its impact on agency and the ambiguity of a game that, as I argue, plays with the players toying with their expectations. *Shadow manipulates players'* expectations in relation to adventure games and epic narratives in order to critically reflect the complex and fragmented discourses of agency in the fluid context of Japan's transitions to the XXI century.

CONCLUSIONS

Shadow is a game with ambiguous and contradictory messages. This ambiguity stems from its narrative and mechanics which directly influence the construction of agency, its communication to the players, and its examination within the context of Japanese videogames. In *Shadow* this fluctuation of agency from the players and over them is designed through the modulation of affective states drawing from a combination of mechanics and narrative features. *Shadow* thus problematises not only the ambiguity and complexity of its core theme, the EBT, but also of the role of video games as both communicative devices and experiences. As any other product, *Shadow* is not originated in a vacuum and it is to be framed in the fluid sociocultural and historical context of XXI century Japan. *Shadow* stands in the liminality of a time of changes and transition, as its

design confronts neoliberal discourses lionising individualism and self-responsibility as well as the praising of community and solidarity.

Future work on agency in *Shadow* should profit from focusing on audience reception and online discussions about the ambiguous experience the game offers. Researching online forums and the dedicated community aiming to decode the entirety of the game, would shed light into *Shadow*'s hermeneutics and its impact on the audience.

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Shadow of the Colossus, Team Ico, Japan, 2005

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Player Agency and Representations of Disability in *Borderlands 2*

Promotional material for *Borderlands 2* (Gearbox Software, United States, 2012)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the first-person shooter *Borderlands 2* through the lens of the social model of disability and rhetoric. *Borderlands 2* encourages player agency while positioning the player within a visual rhetoric of disability. This combination of rhetoric and agency depicts disability as a social construct as opposed to the more common vision of disability as an innate flaw. This social model of disability within the game exists in tension with some ableist slurs and harmful stereotypes about disabled bodies also found in *Borderlands 2*. Nevertheless, *Borderlands 2* models one approach how games can depict disability without positioning the disabled body as undesirable or grotesque.

KEYWORDS: *disability, agency, game design, aesthetics, mechanics*

INTRODUCTION

The prototypical hero in video games is usually "able-bodied," virtually indestructible, and possesses nearly endless stamina. Even with mechanical limitations on strength and athleticism built into the game, players are rarely confined to the scope of average human ability. Even rarer are depictions of disability in playable characters within video games, especially the first-person shooter (FPS) genre. Games more commonly feature disabled non-playable characters (NPCs). Horror shooter *Dead Space* (2008), for example, features disabled bodies throughout. However, these disabled bodies are rarely presented in a humanizing way. As Carr (2014) notes, *Dead Space* depicts disabled bodies as grotesque and objects of horror. Most of the antagonists in *Dead Space* are reanimated and mutated human bodies, but *Dead Space* is far from the only major game to do this. Many big-budget games produced by large game studies, often called AAA games, like *Left 4 Dead 2* and the *Resident Evil/Biohazard* series feature zombies or mutants. There are noted exceptions to this trend in games, particularly in games that address autism (Gibbons, 2015), depression (Hoffman, 2017), mental illness (Shapiro & Rotter, 2016), and the body and queerness (Stone, 2018), but these depictions are rare and typically produced by smaller game studios. In contrast to this trend, *Borderlands 2* (2012) and its accompanying downloadable content (DLC) includes disability in its playable characters, NPCs, and many of its in-game antagonists and engages with disability in its aesthetics, narrative, and mechanics. While *Borderlands 2* is not without its own problematic language and treatment of disabled communities, the tensions in *Borderlands 2* give the game's rhetoric about disability more nuance than games like *Dead Space* by humanizing disabled bodies and providing players with limited representations of disabled agency within the game.

VISUAL RHETORIC AND PLAYER AGENCY

The most apparent representation of disability within *Borderlands 2* is in the aesthetic elements of Pandora, the world of the game. While a great deal of research in video games has focused on the procedural rhetoric, and rightfully so, the aesthetic qualities of a game are rhetorical as well. In his discussion of the persuasive nature of video game aesthetics, Benjamin Abraham (2018) notes that at times the visual environment can be as persuasive as mechanical or procedural elements. The constant presence of visuals in a game naturalizes their argument for the player because the visual design is always present while procedural elements may not always be occurring in ways the player can sense (Abraham, 2018). This concept of visual argument does not discount the rhetorical force of mechanics or procedure. Instead it merely describes how a visual design can be uniquely persuasive alongside a game's procedural rhetoric. *Borderlands 2* employs this visual rhetoric throughout the entire game. In Pandora, no town or character is without some form of disability, even if that disability is not visually apparent. For example, the primary villain of the game, Handsome

Jack, wears a prosthetic face to appear more conventionally attractive because his face is badly scarred. This becomes narratively significant early in the game when he kills a woman for being badly scarred by acid because he considers her ugly. Beyond Handsome Jack, many NPCs have cybernetic modifications to replace missing limbs or augment their perception. The first human NPC the player encounters in the game is Sir Alistair Hammerlock who has a robotic eyeball, arm, and leg. Tiny Tina, one of the most prominent NPCs in the game, clearly has PTSD and clinical depression. For example, in a side-mission titled "You Are Cordially Invited: RSVP", Tina asks players to lure an NPC named Flesh-Stick to the cave where she captures and tortures him as revenge for killing her parents. One of the game's DLCs, "Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep", also deals with her trauma and depression as she grieves for the loss of a surrogate parent. Even the comical robot sidekick Claptrap admits that its voice has malfunctioned and is stuck in an optimistic and cheerful tone, which often masks its fear and anger.

In addition to the NPCs, landscape and inanimate objects of Pandora appear to be post-apocalyptic. The land is craggy and often arid, lacking significant vegetation, and most of the buildings are patched or look like they were constructed from scraps of metal. *Borderlands* is a world not concerned with pristine visuals unmarred by war, decay, time, but with imperfection. These aesthetic qualities present disability through what Tom Shakespeare (2006) would call the social model of disability. The medical model of disability, which has commonly been depicted in popular media, sees disability as individualistic and a deficiency (Shakespeare, 2006). Shakespeare's social model recognizes disability as a social construct that is relative to the society where it exists. Society creates disability and the able body through how it defines these concepts. The greatest concern in the social model is how accessibility functions in society. While the planet of Pandora is a dystopian wasteland, accessibility isn't portrayed as an issue. All the characters, even those with offensive monikers, are capable and able to do as they please. The advancements on Pandora using "eridium" technology increases equity among the NPC's. These affordances give each NPC specific abilities dependent on their abilities and disabilities: some characters can jump higher, some run faster, some have stronger weapons, and some explode. Through the lens of the medical model, an NPC with mental illness or a cybernetic leg would be viewed as essentially abnormal and deficient like one of the creatures from *Dead Space* or *Left 4 Dead 2*. However, the social model would recognize those conditions as neither inherently abnormal nor deficient. *Borderlands 2* does not position Pandora as a deficient world but a world where abled–ness and disability are determined differently from the world outside the game. While the post–apocalyptic aesthetic of *Borderlands 2* may seem obvious, it may also be the most effective challenge to regressive ideologies of disability.

Beyond the aesthetic qualities of Pandora, disability is also normalized in select mechanics within the game. Simulating disability for the player on a

procedural level can be a significant challenge for game designers. In his monograph discussing how educators utilize the learning principles of games, James Paul Gee (2007) describes how games amplify a player's input to reward their labor (p. 60-61). By pushing a single button, a player can perform the complex action of leaping from rooftop to rooftop or operating a sniper rifle. However, Gee also notes that diminishing player input could be deeply frustrating for players (p. 60), thus most games work to amplify a player's input or their agency. As Janet Murray (1988) notes in her foundational work on video games and narrative, agency is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the result of our decisions and choices" (p. 126). On the other hand, Karen Tanenbaum and Joshua Tanenbaum (2009) present agency as the process of "committing" to the "meaning" of a game (p. 7). They argue that instead of agency being freedom of choice or movement, as other theorists like Murray and Bogost argue, agency is experienced when "the player chooses to engage in this [the game's] fiction, and to allow the drama of the moment to create the belief that her actions have meaningfully advanced the story" (p. 7). In either definition, however, agency exists within the player's interaction with the text, whether that interaction is because of free mobility or commitment to meaning. Thus, reducing the amplification of a player's interaction with the game would reduce their agency as well. Accordingly, *Borderlands 2* does not adjust a player's ability to interact with the world depending on their avatar. The original four avatars for *Borderlands 2*, Zer0, Axton, Maya, and Salvador, do not have any apparent disabilities, but the two characters added in DLC, Gaige and Krieg, do. Gaige has a cybernetic arm and Krieg is a "Psycho," but neither avatar is more or less adept at navigating the game than the original four. In this way, player agency over their avatars is typical for those in other contemporary FPS.

While the avatars may exhibit no mechanical disability despite their aesthetics or backstory, the game does simulate a form of disability in the items players use. Most items, such as weapons and shields, possess at least one strength with one corresponding negative quality. This trade-off is distinct from standard forms of specialization found in games like *World of Warcraft* (2004) or *Skyrim* (2011), where specializing gives players unique strengths. In *Borderlands 2*, weapons and shields have unique weaknesses as well. Infusing these in-game items with weaknesses does resemble some foundational theories about games themselves, though they extend past them to create a diminished form of disability. For example, Ian Bogost (2008) describes how play exists in games and beyond as happening within possibility spaces (pp. 120-21). For Bogost and game designers Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman (2003), play is free movement within a confined space, usually represented by a physical field in sports or by level design and hardware in digital games. Johan Huizinga (1950) describes this effect as a "magic circle" where rules about conduct and language differ from the outside world, like a courtroom or sports arena. Huizinga's work, of course, predates digital games and focuses more on play within society

at large. In a sense, the boundaries and limits of a possibility space are what the player uses for play itself. For example, a ball has inherent limitations due to its materials and the limits of the human body that kicks it, but without a ball, soccer would have no central object to manipulate or use for scoring purposes. Bogost and others are not dictating how games ought to be structured, but rather how they exist in most observable forms. So, in many respects, the mechanical limits of the items in *Borderlands 2* reflect this basic principle of game design.

However, *Borderlands* uniquely positions this common feature of game design within disability by adding items to the aesthetics of disability mentioned above. For example, the Spitter and the Scarab are two of the many standard assault rifles players can find at random. The Spitter is a small minigun with a high rate-of-fire and low accuracy, while the Scarab is much more accurate but has a very slow reloading speed and smaller magazine size. Beyond these simple mechanical differences, most guns in the game are given random qualities that increase their accuracy, rate-of-fire, magazine size, or damage, with most upgrades coming at the cost of another quality. Some weapons become more accurate as you continuously shoot them or use multiple rounds of ammunition in the same shot, which causes players to spend a great deal of ammunition but can do significant damage. In contrast, high damage weapons often have a smaller magazine or a slow rate-of-fire. Many guns are also given elemental modifiers, like explosive or poisonous ammunition, but even these elemental effects can be limiting as many enemies resist certain kinds of elemental damage while they are weak to others. These weaknesses are distinct from the limitations of guns in most FPS where shotguns are inaccurate at range or looking down the scope of a sniper rifle can make players vulnerable to surprise attacks. Many weapons in *Borderlands 2* have a tradeoff that goes beyond what would be found in most realistic gun simulations. While most shotguns have some utility at short-to-medium range, a weapon in *Borderlands 2* like the "Boom Stick" uses all its ammunition in a single shot, has a 0% rating in accuracy, is slow to reload, and can actually damage the player's avatar if used at point-blank range. The Boom Stick can do significant damage in a single shot, but it comes with so many built in weaknesses that it is nearly unusable. Not all weapons in *Borderlands 2* are so drastic in their mechanics, but a similar design principle applies across nearly all of them. In many other shooter games, players can discover the optimal weapon or ability to use, but within *Borderlands 2*, no weapon is truly optimal in all scenarios because of their inherent vulnerabilities in much the same way that no body or object within *Borderlands 2* is outside the social definition of disability. Guns do have a tier system which can affect the quality of the weapon and thus its value within the game, but these built-in weaknesses can be found even in weapons in the most advanced tiers. It is not that all items are "medically" disabled or individually inadequate; it is that all items have differing strengths and weaknesses and the optimal weapon, like the non-disabled body, does not exist.

The mechanical rhetoric of the items along with the visual rhetoric of Pandora puts players in a marginally disabled space by limiting their agency through how items, specifically weapons, function. Most video games position player agency within the possibility space through Gee's "amplification of input" principle, as mentioned above. This makes the balance of creating disability within *Borderlands 2* delicate because representing disability too accurately within the game could make it difficult to play. Drawing on the Sarah Gibbons (2015) discussion of disability studies and games, *Borderlands 2* is not attempting to be a "simulation game" (p. 28) where the primary goal of the game is to provide the player with the experience of having a particular disability. Instead, *Borderlands 2* is more interested in representing or identifying (Gibbons, 2015, p. 32) disability, even in the way its mechanics limit player agency. Making disability mechanically present in the items and not in the avatars themselves reinforces the game's visual rhetoric regarding disability. Players visually experience a world of social disability, not a world of medical disability, and the items emphasize the social model of disability by placing it outside the essential characteristics of each avatar. No one avatar is medically disabled, though they will all equally experience disability through their interactions with the game world. In this sense, enabling player agency allows players to more readily experience *Borderlands 2*'s apparent ideology regarding disability as a social construct.

PROBLEMATIC TERMINOLOGY AND VISUALS

Despite the game's synergy between its visual and procedural rhetoric, *Borderlands 2* does participate in problematic depictions of disability. Most of the common human antagonists are labels instead of names, such as "Psycho", "Lunatic", "Goliath", and "Midget". All of these labels problematically reproduce a deeply regressive treatment of disability. Psycho and Lunatic are slurs for individuals with mental disabilities or able-bodied individuals who are seen as inferior or neuro-atypical. Goliath and Midget are slurs for people with gigantism or dwarfism, respectively, or even people without these conditions who may be atypically tall or short. In the game, Psychos and Lunatics shout in unintelligible phrases, run towards the player frantically, and blow themselves up to hurt the player, whereas Goliaths and Midgets mainly use their respective sizes to combat the player. The cover art for *Borderlands 2* itself shows one of the Psychos miming shooting themselves in the head. At times, the developers attempt to deploy these labels and the behaviors for joke. For example, players may encounter "Shotgun Midgets" who knock themselves over while firing their weapons and then wriggle on their backs as they struggle to rise to their feet. Much of the joke here, of course, is at the expense of the NPC's disability since other NPCs not labeled "Midget" do not have the same animation. The slurs and their accompanying visual rhetoric dehumanizes these common human antagonists through their disabilities. The slurs exist in tension with how the game presents disability as a social construct. One could argue that the

context of Pandora, where disability is omnipresent, complicates these stereo-types, especially since Midgets, Goliaths, Psychos, and Lunatics are not just common antagonists, but also common friendly NPCs as well. However, the complicated and problematic history of the slurs is difficult to overcome in a single game, especially when the visuals associated with these characters reifies existing stereotypes.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite participating in some harmful stereotypes about the disabled, *Borderlands 2* occupies a relatively unique position as a representation of the social model of disability. By enabling player agency to an extent that is typical in most FPS, *Borderlands 2* positions disability not so much as a boundary on human agency but instead as a difference in human visuals. This representation, of course, has its limits as a metaphor for the world outside the game, as it by necessity simpli-fies the complexity of disability to fit within the fictionalized space of the game. Nevertheless, *Borderlands 2* does show how games can represent various kinds of bodies while still giving players freedom of action and the option to commit to the meaning of the game. We hope that games will take up this approach in the future and that the industry creating games can move away from primarily representing the disabled body as grotesque or an object of horror.

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