

# Play/Write Student Journal

## Vol. 2



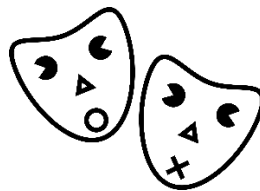
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## Editorial

Rachel Gorden

We are happy to present the second issue of the *Play/Write Student Journal*. The mission of our journal has remained the same since its founding in 2021: to promote the visibility and writing skills of (post)graduate students in the field of Game Studies. Coming from the interdisciplinary master's program Game Studies and Engineering at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, our core idea for this journal remains to collect and share the work of students coming from different backgrounds. As the journal emerged as a student initiative, it seeks to form a bridge between student's work and academia while also serving as a platform for the practice of analytical thinking as well as a community project.

With this issue, we are also happy to announce that we have received support from the University of Klagenfurt's library this year, which enables us to publish this journal on a more official platform. Our editorial team, previously consisting of me, Benjamin Hanussek and Tom Tuček, has also gained a new member, with our fellow student Samuele Balduzzi joining us for this issue. The cover art for this issue was once again created by our fellow student Nikolay Markozov, and can be read as reflective of the importance of community, which goes hand in hand with our journal's mission.

In contrast to our very first issue, this issue consists of essays that students of the Game Studies and Engineering master's program have written as part of their courses. Our core idea is to use this issue to show that papers produced by students throughout their education can provide interesting insights that are worth reviewing and publishing. The pieces that were selected for this issue deal with a variety of topics including representation, ethics, challenge, citizenship, and learning, all in the context of (video) games. In addition to this, we are more than happy to be able to include a presentation of a game-related master's thesis stemming from the Visual Culture master's program offered at the University of Klagenfurt.

This issue begins with Marie Biedermann's "Science, War and Responsibility: The Representation of Moral Boundaries of Technological Invention during War in *Gato Roboto*" which discusses whether scientists and engineers carry ethical responsibility of their inventions during wartime and shows how different aspects of this debate are represented in the game *Gato Roboto*.

A different take on representation is offered by Tom Tuček in "One with the Avatar: Player Character Representation in *Planescape: Torment*". Through discussing the concept of

the avatar in videogames as well as the notion of videogames as text, he shows how players can gain knowledge about themselves through their avatars, and how this can be regarded philosophical practice.

In my contribution to this issue, “*Papers, Please* as an Ethical Learning Experience in the Context of Citizenship”, I show how the design of the game *Papers, Please* – and especially the intertwining of moral dilemmas with player agency – serves as a crucial example for how players can learn ethical reasoning, which I frame as an essential skill for citizenship.

Staying in the context of games and citizenship is Benjamin Hanussek’s essay “To Love the Other(s) Duty: How to Harness a Citizen in *Death Stranding*”, which reads the game’s asymmetrical multiplayer through the lens of Lacan’s notion of love and interprets it as social commentary.

Turning towards issues in game design, Süleyman Utku Dağlı’s essay “The Difficulty of Videogames and Intelligence of AI” discusses whether video games should have different difficulty levels for players to choose from or make use of responsive game design, instead.

Lastly, Yvette R. Puff and Thomas Sauerschnig present the current state of research of their master’s thesis in “Roll for Diversity”, which focuses on the visual representation of gender, race, identity, and (female) body throughout different editions of the *Dungeons & Dragons Player’s Handbook*.

# Science, War and Responsibility: The Representation of Moral Boundaries of Technological Invention during War in *Gato Roboto*

Marie Biedermann

**keywords:** representation, ethical responsibility, technological invention

## Introduction

“All’s fair in love and war” (Smedley 1850, 434).

Throughout history numerous wars have been conducted on our planet, and therefore, violence has played a great role in the building of our world as we know it today. However, some questions arise when thinking about the circumstances of war in detail: How do human beings justify questionable moral behaviour during war? Why are we still creating new morally questionable technologies to inflict death and violence onto our own species? And who is responsible for those inventions? Is it all fair in love and war?

In this paper, morals are defined by a set of rules in which societies create an environment of safety. If these rules are overstepped, it creates a danger to humanity and individuals on a physical as well as psychological level.

In this paper, I will discuss question posed above by studying the representation of scientific inventions and technologies in warlike situations in Doinksoft’s videogame *Gato Roboto* (2020). I will use the example of nuclear weapons to demonstrate the complexity of moral boundaries regarding those technologies. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that during times of war, morals are disregarded in the realms of technological inventions.

## *Gato Roboto* in a Nutshell

In order to understand the following analysis, I will give a brief overview of the main plot of *Gato Roboto*. Genre-wise, the game identifies as a 2D, science fiction, Metroidvania. The narrative starts with Gary, a soldier, and Kiki, his cat, flying on a spaceship and crashing onto planet Earth 2. Due to the crash, Gary is not able to leave the ship to investigate the happenings on this planet, and therefore, sends out Kiki in a mechanical suit to explore the station. The player then has to guide Kiki through the obstacles of Earth 2 to help them survive and leave the planet. Through the course of the game, the player is able to discover log entries which

help to understand the past happenings on the research/military station of Earth 2 (Doinksoft, 2020).

The main antagonist is Dr. Heinrich, a scientific engineer who transferred his mind into the body of a mouse. Due to his log entries, the player discovers that Dr. Heinrich had moral troubles regarding his firearm creations. He states: “The DEFENSE WEAPONS they have us developing are inhumane! I cannot understand how that which causes such devastation could be created in the name of ‘galactic security.’” (Doinksoft, 2020). Furthermore, he says that he came into the possession of an ill dog which he will later name Barkley. He explains that he developed a strong bond with Barkley and is willing to save him at all costs. He starts experimenting with body-swapping in order to save his little friend. One log entry by a person named Jimbo implies that Dr. Heinrich was at war with the whole crew: “The doctor has gone mad. The security systems have been modified to target all personnel in the compound. Most of my colleagues have either been killed or turned into one of those ‘things’” (Doinksoft, 2020). “Those things” imply technological enhancement experiments on animals (Doinksoft, 2020).

Throughout the game, the player-character Kiki encounters Dr. Heinrich, embodied as a mouse, several times. In the end, Dr. Heinrich reveals that it was his plan to swap Barkley’s mind with Kiki’s and his own with the mind of Gary, the soldier, the latter of which he successfully achieved. However, in the end, Kiki manages to escape from Earth 2 with Barkley, who turned against his “master” by killing Gary, Dr. Heinrich. Additionally, it can be seen that the mouse made it onto the escape-pod as well, which implies that Gary was able to escape with Kiki and Barkley (Doinksoft, 2020).

### **Moral Boundaries in Times of War and Love**

Dr. Heinrich questions the need of the demanded strong and “inhumane” weapons in the name of “galactic security”. He demonstrates having boundaries. Which raises the question “Do scientists have a moral responsibility for the consequences of their work – for instance, the death of people that might follow from the construction of certain types of weapons?” (Ryberg, 2009, 474).

According to Ryberg, the moral responsibility of newly created weapons does not lie within the realm of the engineers themselves. He argues that future technologies cannot be foreseen, and therefore, scientists should not be held responsible for the possible outcomes of their inventions. “Responsibility for use is rightly ascribed to whoever formulates a policy and whoever makes the decisions, and this group almost never includes scientists but rather

politicians” (Ryberg, 2009, 475). Politicians, however, might distance themselves from the responsibility by arguing vice versa. If those technologies would not have been invented in the first place, policies would not be needed to regulate said technologies. Politicians are the ones regulating existing inventions, rather than creating them themselves.

In *Gato Roboto*, it is not made clear why the scientists on Earth 2 are creating “inhumane” weapons. It is only stated that those are needed for “galactic security”. Whereas by stating that someone else has them creating those weapons, Dr. Heinrich distances himself morally from the responsibility. The player-character, however, never discovers who and why those weapons are being created on Earth 2 (Doinksoft, 2020).

### **The “Replaceability Argument”**

In addition to that, Ryberg uses the replaceability argument to demonstrate that scientific engineers are in fact not responsible for the suffering their inventions might create. He argues that

If an undesirable outcome follows from a scientist’s work, but this work would have been carried out by another scientist had the first rejected it, then, the argument goes, the first scientist had not made things worse than they would have been, and he/she should therefore not be held responsible (Ryberg, 2009, 475-76).

According to this argument, Dr. Heinrich would be free of any responsibility regarding his inventions. Furthermore, it would mean that any scientist or engineer cannot be held responsible for their creations whatsoever. However, Ryberg counterargues by stating that morally questionable technologies should not be invented in the first place and that “certain acts (...) are wrong to perform independently of the consequences they produce” (Ryberg, 2009, 476). “Certain acts”, however, is a broad term. To define, those acts might be inventions that can inflict death and pain onto others and/or are morally not justifiable. The Replaceability Argument holds truth within its reasoning that other scientists or engineers might conduct the same work, however, it does not clear them of the responsibility of said work.

### **Firearms for Peace**

To stick to general rules such as that it is wrong to contribute to the development of military technology is probably much too simplistic. Weapons and other military technologies may be used to protect people and to prevent undesirable consequences (Ryberg, 2009, 476).



According to Ryberg, weapons might have the ability to create peace. In *Gato Roboto*, the research/military station on Earth 2 is creating weapons in the name of “galactic security”. However, the need of firearms in order to keep peace is paradox.

Sarewitz (2009) in his chapter named ‘The Idea of Progress’ argues that: “While technologies are intended to solve particular problems within a restricted context, almost any widely adopted technology will have consequences, unintended and sometimes undesirable, outside that context” (Sarewitz, 2009, 305). This argument reinforces the belief that engineers, and scientists are in fact not responsible for their own inventions, due to the fact that those might be used for something other than their intended purpose. Could it be that Dr. Heinrich and his team of engineers cannot be held responsible for the outcome of their inventions, when they were in fact creating weapons in order to keep peace in the name of “galactic security”? Could it be that the initial purpose of their scientific invention might not cross moral boundaries but the unintended and/or undesirable outcome might? However, this phenomenon might happen vice versa as well. Morally questionable technologies might find another, more positive, unintended purpose later. Ryberg argues that:

[I]t is well known that, while nuclear power, and also drugs, pesticides, aircraft, radar, processed food, satellites, computers, transistors, lasers and many other technologies have been developed for military purposes, they have had obvious beneficial civilian applications as well (Ryberg, 2009, 476)

Here Ryberg indirectly states that inventions flourish within the military. One could argue that in times of war, technology accelerates due to competitive human behaviour. Even though wartimes are usually connotated with negativity, which obviously makes sense, it can be said that due to war, inventions were developed which ultimately led to positive changes within our own society. One fact which supports this argument might be that:

One might even observe nuclear weapons, which have brought humans the capacity to annihilate their own societies, were in fact a strong stabilizing force in the second half of the twentieth century that arguably led to radically reduced loss of life from organized, international violence following the carnage of two world wars (Sarewitz, 2009, 305).

Paradoxically, the possibility to annihilate societies contributed to the saving of those.

## Morality and Nuclear Weapons

However, Sarewitz does not recognize moral boundaries which scientists might have crossed while inventing such technology. Nuttall (2009) in his chapter about 'Nuclear Technologies' explains that

Even before the detonation of the first nuclear weapon at the Trinity Test in New Mexico on 16 July 1945, the first signs of dissent had emerged within the scientific team. Joseph Rotblat (Nobel Peace Prize 1995) was the first scientist to resign from nuclear weapons work on the grounds of conscience. Rotblat believed that scientists should be concerned with the ethical consequences of their work and he would go on to be the youngest signatory of the pacifist Russell-Einstein memorandum of 1955 (Nuttal, 2009, 105).

Scientists still had concerns developing nuclear technology. Joseph Rotblat who resigned from working on nuclear weapons, even signed a pacifist anti-nuclear technology memorandum. As already mentioned before, Sarewitz states that nuclear technology was invented to kill many lives, nonetheless, these weapons saved many lives. However, this outcome could not have been predicted. Scientists who worked on nuclear weapons could not have known that these inventions will save lives instead of destroying them, hence, they created technologies with the intention to kill.

In his chapter about "Nuclear Ethics", Koos Van Der Bruggen (2009) states that there are arguments against and in favour of nuclear weapons. One of the main facts he describes is that "[t]hese weapons cannot be 'uninvented'". (...) [T]he nuclear weapon has above all become a weapon of deterrence: preventing other states from using their nuclear weapons" (Bruggen, 2009, 463). He furthermore states that even the possession of these forces is ethically questionable, however, countries need them due to the fact that opposing forces (might) own them as well. The deterrent factor contributes to the possession of them (Bruggen, 2009, 464). In *Gato Roboto*, Dr. Heinrich states that he develops weapons for "galactic security", due to the new knowledge gained, this could mean that other planets in the galaxy might already own weapons as powerful, using them as weapons of deterrence. If this is the case, Dr. Heinrich and the other engineers and scientists on Earth 2 could rather be considered heroes than villains. Their work might have helped to develop technologies to prevent other species, planets, or civilizations from attacking Earth 2 and probably the Earth as well.

## Conclusion

The game demonstrates the downfall of Dr. Heinrich, who questions his creations while spiralling into the realms of isolation by separating himself from the other engineers on Earth 2. His downfall might be the aftermath of his 'forced' work on morally questionable weapons. However, even though he denies his responsibility by stating that "they made him" build those technologies, scientists and engineers are still to a point responsible for their work. I strongly believe that while playing *Gato Roboto*, players are able to see this argument due to the dialogue and context of the game.

During wartimes, scientists and engineers are made to overstep and disregard moral boundaries. *Gato Roboto* displays this overstep and beautifully shows the extent of the creation of highly dangerous and inhumane weapons on a more individual level. It is a dive into the possible thoughts and mental disturbances engineers might suffer from while conducting such work. Their flight from responsibility and their ongoing questioning of their work demonstrates the pressure such work can inflict on them.

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# One with the Avatar: Player Character Representation in *Planescape: Torment*

Tom Tuček

**keywords:** representation, avatar, learning, philosophical practice, storytelling, RPGs

## Introduction

This essay will introduce the idea of gaining knowledge through texts, followed by the concept of the avatar in videogames, and elaborate on how paramount said concept is to gain insight about oneself while playing games. James O. Young already started dealing with the question of whether literature can contribute to our knowledge of the world in his essay from 1999. His conclusion suggests that literature that makes practical use of representation (defined here as intentional inclusion of elements that refer to recognizable real-world objects; see Young 1999, 128) is indeed able to teach us about the world. Furthermore, even if a text does not assert any truths, it can still reveal them (Young 1999, 142).

As videogames can be seen as ergodic literature, or *cybertexts* (as per Aarseth 1997), they should be considered no exception to Young's conclusion. With proper use of representation, videogames can also contribute to our knowledge of the world. This essay will explore a slightly modified version of that question: whether videogames can contribute to knowledge of ourselves. This will be discussed by examining the cult-classic role-playing videogame *Planescape: Torment* (Interplay Entertainment 1999; in this essay also its re-released *Enhanced Edition*, Beamdog 2017). Often considered as one of the best-written roleplaying games of all times (Ruberg 2009), it serves to show how the avatar, acting as a possible representation of the self and other aspects, is configured and presented within the game.

## The Avatar

The idea of the avatar in videogames presents a widely discussed topic not only from an engineering or design perspective, but also as a subject of existential philosophy, as can be seen in the book by Kania (2017) about how situatedness in single-player videogames through an avatar is an essential factor in creating meaningfulness. The avatar is seen here as the agent within the virtual world of the game that the player has direct control over, but it can also be defined as any item that serves in aiding the player's agency within the game. As such, Klevjer

equates the avatar to a prosthetic extension of the player in his influential dissertation on the aesthetics of the avatar (2006), thus also including non-sentient items like guns and cars, if they are under the direct control of the player. Klevjer also notes, however, that this distinction is not useful for exploring the role of the avatar for emotional immersion in narrative and diegesis.

For the purpose of this essay, the avatar will be examined through the main player character of *Planescape: Torment*, called "The Nameless One". Although companions can join throughout the game and are directly controlled by the player during combat encounters, the only character that allows for choices to be made by the player during dialogue sequences is The Nameless One. As *Planescape: Torment* is an unusually dialogue-heavy game, in which many encounters can be completed by verbal arguments rather than physical ones, this difference in control can be considered significant, and The Nameless One is thus considered the only avatar within the game. This idea connects to the work by Willumsen (2018), who differentiates between an avatar (a game component under the player's control) and a character (the representation of an individual). Willumsen also elaborates on the difference between avatar control and character complexity, especially in the context of cutscenes, in which player agency is revoked in favor of deepening character narrative. Such revocation of control also occurs in *Planescape: Torment*, when The Nameless One takes actions or gives answers that were not explicitly directed by the player.

The question of whether we can learn something about ourselves through an avatar, stems from the idea of role-playing as philosophical practice (see Pohjola 2014). While Pohjola's work focuses on live-action role-playing (LARP), many parallels can be drawn to role-playing videogames; although one has to keep in mind the differences as well. Analogue role-playing games are usually coordinated by a gamemaster, who tells the story and enforces the rules. In a videogame, however, these roles are automated by the game engine itself. This entails losing the ability to respond to players in an individual manner. Instead, videogames will only allow players a predefined freedom of choice, and mostly react in ways that the designers of the game have thought of ahead of time. Thus, a truly individual narrative experience, unique to the player playing it, might be technically impossible when playing a videogame – although some games utilize procedurally generated content in an attempt to achieve this goal (e.g., *Al Dungeon* (Latitude 2019)). The next chapter will explore the idea of how a predefined narrative experience can still be meaningful and teach us about ourselves.

### **Gaining insight about oneself through playing videogames**

In his work on videogame aesthetics, Feige (2015) presents the principle "des sich-selbstdurchspielens" ("of playing through oneself") and argues that playing certain videogames can lead to a form of meditation of the player, in which insight about the self can be gained (Grundke 2019). Players are confronted with stimulating topics and have to reflect on their personal sensibilities and preconceived notions about such topics, like mortality and morality. Feige also uses *Planescape: Torment* as an example of a game that promotes reflection on certain themes – explicitly on death, sin, regret, and redemption. However, it is important to keep in mind, that such an experience and the resulting exploration of oneself will be an inevitably individual interpretation, influenced strongly by the background of the person playing the game.

One might argue that being confronted with difficult subjects that lead towards self-reflection is in no way unique to the medium of videogames. Movies, books, or even music may confront us with topics that intellectually stimulate us. However, one of the distinguishing features of videogames – the ability to exert agency within the fictional world via the use of an avatar – allows for this experience to unfold differently than in classical media. By immersing oneself and becoming part of the narrative, rather than just observing, one is forced to deal with the subject matter personally. This requires two further preconditions to be met: the game has to be designed in a matter that allows for Feige's principle to occur, and the player has to feel a certain connection to their avatar. This does not necessitate for the avatar to become a complete representation of the player, neither visually, nor in regards to their identities and morals. However, players have to become aware of which aspects are shared between them and the avatar, and which differ.

Pohjola explains a similar contradiction, of how live-action role-players tend to believe that they could become the characters they create, while those characters are also supposed to be individuals, completely independent from the players (Pohjola 2014, p. 114). Thus, it is likely not important what the character represents in itself, but rather, it is the themes and topics that are central to their experience, their story, and their conflict. As we are exposed to various themes and obstacles throughout a story, we can interact with them via the avatar as a prosthetic extension of ourselves; either in line with our own morals and beliefs, or in contradiction to them. We are given the chance to reflect on our actions and thus strengthen the picture we have of our own identity and ideals. These themes also serve as proper representations that we recognize from our own lives, thus allowing us to understand them on a deeper level than just as fictional depictions. *Planescape: Torment*, for example, allows

players to act as an individual that is predefined as sinful, and they have to judge, condemn, or allow redemption both for other NPCs and for themselves.

To optimize a game for Feige's principle, Karhulahti's notion of the *storygame* (a videogame with high narrativity), in combination with a seemingly sapient player avatar, seems to be a reliable form to stimulate reflection. *Planescape: Torment* is also mentioned as an example of a *storygame* within Karhulahti's work (2015, pp. 152-153). In such games, players might not know the consequences of choices they make at the time of choosing, and are furthermore often given the option to lie and deceive other parties – with varying results. It is such a virtual setting and (albeit limited) dynamically responsive environment that allows us to learn about the world and ourselves – via our interface, the avatar.

## **Torment**

As was discussed thus far, *Planescape: Torment* fulfills the conditions of being a *storygame* with a distinct avatar: The Nameless One, whose particularities become apparent at the game's main menu screen already: the available options are titled "New Life", "Resume Life", "Select Life", etc. This communicates how the character and various incarnations of The Nameless One already existed before one even starts playing the game. Yet, starting a "new life" allows customization as is usual in an AD&D role-playing game, by allocating stat points in traits such as strength, charisma, and intelligence. In the descriptions of the individual traits, another hint at the previous lives of The Nameless One is given, as stats like wisdom and intelligence allow him to regain memories faster, or more efficiently. The visual representation of the avatar cannot be altered, however.

This idea of an avatar with a pre-existing history and personality has become more prominent in recent high-budget role-playing videogames (such as *The Witcher* or the *Mass Effect* series), not least because of marketability and the shift towards fully voiced games also requiring fully voiced main characters. As opposed to traditional role-playing games, in which players are oftentimes allowed to customize their avatar's appearance, characteristics, background stories, and personalities, making use of a pre-existing character as an avatar can be said to weaken the association between player and avatar, as they are no longer a self-made representation.

Yet, The Nameless One, while indeed in possession of a pre-defined past, suffers from amnesia at the start of the game (similar to the protagonist in *The Witcher* (CD Projekt 2007)). In the game's early vision statement, this was described as a deliberate choice, to allow players to identify more with their avatar, as they explore the game's setting together and solve the

puzzle of his past (Last Rites Team 2007, p.5 and p. 33). The game is also explicitly designed to continuously build the character while playing through the story, thus further strengthening players' identification and association, as exemplified in these descriptions of the game:

The entire game is the character generation screen and allows you to build your character to suit your gaming style. (Last Rites Team 2007, p. 7)

The character creation system in Planescape: Torment is also a little different than some RPGs you may have played. The game itself is a character generator... your actions throughout the game define your character's development and have the power to shape the world around you. (Pennyway et al. 2017, p. 2)

This continued character development can be seen not only in combat, as proficiencies and the character's class change, but also in dialogue, as different responses, actions and reactions determine The Nameless One's moral alignment. *Planescape: Torment* thus rewards players for creating their own version of The Nameless One. While in many dialogue sequences, some choices lead to objectively better outcomes (such as higher amounts of experience points earned), when confronted by the NPC Ravel and her infamous question of "What can change the nature of a man?", the game treats all of the presented sixteen answers (except for refusing to answer) as valid in their own right, and the player is neither rewarded nor punished for giving an answer they believe to be correct themselves. By being given such opportunities, players are confronted with their own ways of handling such thought-provoking topics, and are allowed to find out more about their own values.

## Conclusions

The highest amount of experience points gained in *Planescape: Torment* occurs when The Nameless One learns of his true name. The number is an order of magnitude higher than any other amount, and thus communicates a clear message by the game's writers – that this is the most important thing to be achieved within the game. "In knowing your name, you know yourself", the game explains, and stresses the value of this knowledge. It can be argued that playing videogames can give one the chance to gain such knowledge – to know more about oneself, reflect on one's own behavior and values, by "playing through oneself".

The avatar serves a crucial role in this, as it is our way of interacting and acting within the game. Every game might have an avatar, yet a seemingly sapient character, as it is found in most *storygames*, allows us to identify and associate with it, while also realizing truths about ourselves. According to Young, one can gain knowledge about the world by reading certain



kinds of literature, while according to Feige, one can gain insight about oneself by playing certain kinds of videogames. This essay dealt with the idea of acquiring more knowledge and understanding of oneself by playing a certain game, but there is no doubt that there exist many other methods to reach similar goals in the context of playing videogames.

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# ***Papers, Please* as an Ethical Learning Experience in the Context of Citizenship**

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**keywords:** ethics, learning, citizenship, decision-making, player agency

## **Introduction**

The game *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) lets players take on the role of a border inspector responsible for checking incoming people's identification papers in a fictional and dystopian communist setting. The monotonous and repetitive task of checking identification papers is sharply contrasted with the violence implicit in this task, which adds up to an almost satirical gaming experience. Many games today "direct our attention to real and urgent problems at hand" (McGonigal 2011, 351), and the situations that players face in *Papers, Please* are indeed not far-fetched from our reality. The game can for instance be read as a commentary on the dehumanization of people in border zones or on the moral implications of misplaced authority.

But can *Papers, Please* also go beyond this and provide its players with impactful learning experiences? This paper will approach this question on a theoretical level, using Zagal's classification of ethically notable videogames as a starting point for inquiry (cf. Zagal 2009). It will conclusively argue that while *Papers, Please* does provide a framework for ethical learning experiences, it does not necessarily predetermine this experience for players. The game can therefore be considered a good starting point for learning skills essential for citizenship, such as ethical reasoning.

## **Ethical Reasoning, Citizenship and Videogames**

In his paper *Ethically Notable Videogames: Moral Dilemmas and Gameplay*, Zagal explores how games can provide ethical learning experiences. He writes that

(...) games provide play spaces where people not only transform the gameworld, but also themselves (...), they can be used to explore ethical reasoning. When used as a transformative tool, videogames can empower people to learn what it means to live ethically and how to go about doing so (Zagal 2009, 1).

Living ethically also relates to a core issue for citizenship; as Delanty argues

[citizenship] concerns the learning of a capacity for action and for responsibility but, essentially, it is about the learning of the self and of the relationship of self and other. It is a learning process in that it is articulated in perceptions of the self as an active agency and a social actor shaped by relations with others (Delanty 2003, 602).

This core relationship that constitutes citizenship – the relation between self and other – is shaped by ethical systems that citizens could ideally explore, learn, and reflect upon through games.

### **Player Responsibility & Engagement in *Papers, Please***

Zagal establishes criteria that a game must fulfill in order to be “ethically notable”, and therefore useful for players to explore ethical reasoning. He writes that a game is ethically notable if it “attempts to make the player feel personally invested or responsible for the decisions they make in the game” (Zagal 2009, 4). *Papers, Please* is inconsistent regarding this. On the one hand, the core task of the game is the endless and increasingly difficult processing of identification papers. This core task is not a joyous one, as it is repetitive and monotonous, and the game can thus also be described as a work simulator. While players focus on following the instructions of how to process the papers, who to let pass, who to deny entry, and who to detain, their actions increasingly resemble those of a machine. This renders the gaming experience rather unemotional and mechanic, and inhibits feelings of personal investment and responsibility in players. This effect also influences players’ attitudes towards the decisions they make over the characters that attempt to cross the border, as these characters are increasingly framed through homogenous information (such as age, gender, country of origin, etc.) and less through individual qualities. It can nonetheless also be argued that this is precisely one of the effects that the game attempts to create.

However, the game also invites players to question this effect as well as the authority installed in them as the border inspector. It does so by attempting to emotionally engage players through the attachment of backstories to both the border inspector – whose role the player takes on – and the characters processed at the border. The border inspector for instance has a family to take care of, while the people that attempt to cross the border are often in difficult situations, such as fleeing from oppressive regimes. Some characters also appear regularly at the border, which forges a more personal connection to the player. These emotionally charged backstories can prompt players to halt and reconsider their actions. It

can therefore be argued that while the game does not directly incite feelings of personal responsibility in players, it nonetheless provides the possibility for such an experience.

### **The Intertwinement of Moral Dilemmas and Agency**

The backstories also fuel the core moral dilemmas that players face, which brings us back to Zagal, who argues that a game is furthermore ethically notable if “it provides players with dilemmas or situations in which their understanding of the ethical system is challenged” (Zagal 2009, 5). Moral dilemmas pose one of the main challenges in *Papers, Please*, as players are left to decide for themselves: will you deny entry to people who are arguably good, or fleeing from another country? Will you detain people who might be innocent in order to ensure your own family’s survival? Will you let people pass that you know are criminals? Will you support an oppressive regime by following all orders and instructions but, by doing so, treating people inhumanely?

This is the core point of entry for player agency in the game. *Papers, Please* provides us with 20 different possible endings, all of which are determined by how ‘well’ players did their job and followed the instruction imposed on them. One of the endings, for instance, shows the protagonist’s entire family dying because he has failed to follow all of his job’s instructions. Other ending points of the game have the protagonist leave the country to forge papers for another regime, be imprisoned for associating with suspicious groups, or be reported by neighbors having noticed a sudden increase in the player’s wealth following his suspicious contacts with underground organizations. If players manage to process all papers in accordance with their instructions throughout the entire game, they are rewarded as ‘perfect citizens’ by the regime at the end of the game. All of these endings are primarily determined by the difficult decisions that players have to make.

But what are players really rewarded for in the game? For Zagal, a game is ethically notable, if “it creates moral tension between gameplay rewards structure and the motivations of the characters as defined by the narrative” (Zagal 2009, 6). The primary motivation of the main character or player is survival, which is tied to the losing condition of the game; if you don’t process papers according to your instructions, you lose your job and the game is over (although the game allows for some flexibility in regards to this). However, another motivation of your character might be to make ethically “good” decisions and help people that try to cross the border, which creates tension with your primary goal. In contrast, players can also choose to play ‘unethically’ by turning away those people, or even detaining them to receive bribes by fellow border officers for their own advancement. They can also choose to work

with organizations that aim at destroying the regime, or, in contrast, remain loyal to it. Each decision in the game has its drawbacks, be it for the player, the people at the border, or the regime. Moral tension is therefore constantly given.

However, as players always end up with one of the 20 possible endings, it can be argued that the game rewards them for everything (and nothing). The game does not advocate one moral stance over another. What primarily rewards (and therefore drives) players of *Papers, Please*, then, is the desire to keep on playing and to explore. This can also be considered the fun element of the game; to 'try out' and explore different moral stances. This can also be seen in context with Zagal's last criterion, who argues that a game is ethically notable if "it encodes an ethical system and requires the player to learn it and follow it in order to succeed" (Zagal 2009, 5). The game does not encode an ethical system in a way which champions one moral stance over another. Moreover, success in *Papers, Please* does not mean to obey all the rules, nor does it mean not to do so, nor to find your own moral compass in a dystopian world. Success in *Papers, Please* only means to explore all of these options, and to keep on playing to experience them all and navigate their consequences.

## Conclusion

*Papers, Please* does not match up all of the criteria that make a game ethically notable according to Zagal. It does not necessarily attempt to make players feel personally invested, nor does it enforce players following a specific moral system in order to succeed. However, it can still be argued that the game provides for a framework in which players can explore ethical reasoning, and that it promotes players to do so through its rewards structure and the moral tension and dilemmas that the gameplay centers around. The game is therefore not prescriptive in a way which forces a specific moral code on players, but it is even better; instead of predetermining player's experiences, it provides a playground for testing out the boundaries of moral decisions.

Lerner advocates that "games teach people to recognize different perspectives (...) and understand social roles and rules" and that they "[allow] people to test out the world around them, and redefine themselves in relation to it" (Lerner 2014, 18). *Papers, Please* does precisely this while providing players with the unique perspective of a border inspector. Games such as *Paper, Please* can therefore provide frameworks that can be used for learning, for instance in the context of education in schools, and on a broader scale for the learning of citizenship itself.

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# To Love the Other(s) Duty: How to Harness a Citizen in *Death Stranding*

Benjamin Hanussek

**keywords:** citizenship, asymmetrical multiplayer, social commentary, social credit system, Lacan

## Introduction

The game *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2020) is known and respected for its complex story (Clark 2019), as are most games by Hideo Kojima. However, after its release, the game received much criticism for its mechanics and overall gameplay. The criticism mostly referred to gameplay, particularly the combat system and aspects of driving (Webster 2019; Reimann 2020). Nevertheless, most critics could agree with each other on how innovative *Death Stranding's* asymmetrical multiplayer was (Strickland 2019; Reynolds 2020). It may be the purely ludic or mechanically well-executed multiplayer aspect that convinces people, but it also plays an essential role in how the meta-narrative of the game is conveyed to the player.

The story and plot itself discuss traditional issues of citizenship. For example, how the protagonist Sam deals with being asked to fulfil his obligations as a member of the UCA. Or how other characters in the game are integrated into a civic body that provides benefits to the ones who participate in forming connections through the so-called chiral network. *Death Stranding's* multiplayer, on the other side, is an almost cynical commentary on how citizenship in the digital era is formed. Connections to other players are not established out of sublime duties and rational principles but out of a narcissistic necessity to be loved, in a strict Lacanian sense.

In the following, I will introduce *Death Stranding's* multiplayer and describe its primary functions. Moreover, I will introduce Lacan's notion of love to offer a theoretical framework in which the multiplayer functions will be evaluated in a subsequent interpretation and conclusion.



### **Placing & Liking: Death Stranding's Asymmetrical Multiplayer**

An asymmetrical multiplayer is an aesthetical component that allows multiple players to interact with each other without immediate contact. That means player interactions are directed either retrospectively or prospectively and are always mediated through virtual artefacts.

In *Death Stranding*, this plays out as we complete quests, deliver cargo, and roam the world. While traversing the game and its hostile geography, we use tools and constructions to make our journeys more convenient. These objects can be ladders or ropes but also watchtowers and safe houses. However, our objects transform here into actual artefacts that transcend from our game to fellow *Death Stranding* players and their games. They cannot see our avatar, but they will find our ladders, use our ropes, and most importantly, give us a “like” as a token of gratitude (Ryan 2020: 302), a retroactive interaction.

Logically, we can place objects at sections that are difficult to traverse in the game in a most optimal fashion, prospecting another player's use of it. Naturally, the game rewards artefacts that are thoughtfully placed and frequently used by other players with a plethora of likes, a prospective interaction.

Receiving likes has a minor but not unimportant intradiegetic incentive, as likes increase our level and grant us a passive upgrade that allows us to carry more cargo. But the major incentive for liking and wanting to receive likes will be discussed in the upcoming section.

There are also other functions in *Death Stranding's* multiplayer. Players can, besides utility objects, place holographic signs. Signs like the *babyface* are in a way symbolically arbitrary and difficult to interpret. They are one of many virtual markers that players can choose to place somewhere on the game's geography to express their presence. Furthermore, signs such as the *warning* or the *nice view* can communicate to players that either danger or a beautiful panorama is nearby. These markers can be liked by walking through them.

Beyond that, additional multiplayer functions include sharing or requesting raw materials, completing deliveries for other players, and more. However, their description will be skipped as they do not add to the quality of the analysis compared to the two previously discussed primary functions of placing objects (utility and symbolic object) and liking artefacts (to clarify: objects transform into artefacts once they are picked up by other players and can be interpreted independently of their maker).

### **Lacan's Notion of Love: The Narcissistic Loop**

According to Žižek's reading of Lacan (2011), in this essay, love is, first and foremost, narcissistic. Love is the need to be recognised as an imaginary subject that represents us in pure fulfilment. To love is wanting to be loved as a perfect objectification of our own desires. Lacan discusses and develops the notion of love throughout all of his work. However, we can derive a critical understanding of the pathology of the narcissistic dimension associated with love from his Seminar III.

The person who aspires to be loved is not at all satisfied, as is well known, with being loved for his attributes. He demands to be loved as far as the complete subversion of the subject into a particularity can go.... to love is to love a being beyond what he or she appears to be (Lacan 1993 [1975]: 276)

This passage describes the inevitable downfall we face in setting out an imaginary description of how we want to be loved. This neurotic operation has its origins in the mirror stage, during which we develop the desire for our own objectification. Our mirror image promises us completeness, voidlessness and pure fulfilment. But instead of understanding this profound misrecognition, we transpose our position with the mirror image, and we begin to see ourselves through a gaze that emerges from our phantasmic objectification (Gallop 1982: 120-121). Nietzsche has already described this intimate interaction between our unfulfilled embodied existence and our ideal objectification of ourselves with the famous sentence, "And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." (Nietzsche 2008 [1886]: 68).

We realise that we cannot break free from this gaze, and therefore, we delegate the task of being recognised as our ideal version to someone else. We offer our love to be loved in return for what we desire to be. A destructive relationship to us and our world that is perfectly encapsulated by a cryptic section in Lacan's Seminar XI:

The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic—it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too. What does this mean, if not that, in the so-called waking state, there is an elision of the gaze, and an elision of the fact that not only does it look, it also shows (Lacan 1997 [1973]: 75)

This section makes more sense once it is read as a parable: "The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic [...] not only does it look, it also shows". This parable confirms the suspicion that the imaginary other, the external coordinate that we ask to love us, is a kind of a shadow image, a shape-shifting entity. The other is what we need it to be for us to function

as human beings. The love, recognition and appreciation we need are determined by our distinct imagination of the source from which they transcend to us.

### **Love Me for What I Do and Not for Who I Am**

In *Death Stranding's* asymmetrical multiplayer, we find a modification of the dreadful process of love described by Lacan. Here, love is detached from the actual consequence of having to face the abyss. While love in the real world remains a complex navigation between our neurotic relationship to ourselves while being in a relationship with someone else, in *Death Stranding* we are presented with a pragmatic shortcut.

Love is extracted from its intricate web of symbolic relations and repurposed as a simplified transaction. Love is demoted to like. The like bears the essential element of love, recognition and appreciation, but its associated coordinate is displaced. We are not recognised for our ideal self but for our mediated interaction with a world. Our artefacts are a mediated representation of our existence that becomes the rescue rope from the gaze of our objectified ideal self. It is akin to having the chance to experience the essence, the *agalma* of love, without facing its consequences. Alternatively, in the words of Žižek, receiving likes instead of embarking on the quest of finding true love is felt "in the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing." (2007: 38).

Through the condensation of love to like, the game manages to obtain players as self-motivated members of a community that constitute a civic body under the intradiegetic framework of the UCA. Here, players feel no civic obligation to help others or advance and maintain the infrastructure of the UCS. The UCS has no constitution. Nevertheless, what the UCS does have, being more potent than a constitution, is a social credit system that engages its citizens through a shortcut to fulfil their basic narcissistic needs.

### **Conclusion**

*Death Stranding's* asymmetrical multiplayer fulfils a double function. On one side it is a social credit system that incentives and rewards social engagement while on the other side being a cynical commentary to contemporary social media. On an interactive level, it shows the power of a social credit system that exploits the narcissistic dimensions of ourselves while cynically exposing our interaction with other humans via social media as dumbed down and alienated. While conceptually, the game is about making connections and forging relations with others, it also acts as a smack into one's face in giving a cynical reflection on how humans interact and

form communities in the digital era. This aspect of the game may also explain Sam's logic behind his decision at the end to leave it all behind. But can this be a viable solution for us?

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# The Difficulty of Videogames and Intelligence of AI

Süleyman Utku Dağlı

**keywords:** challenge, responsive game design, AI, DDA, flow, player types

## Introduction

Difficulty levels in video games are always an issue among players as well as designers. Discussions surrounding difficulty settings revolve around games either being too challenging or not challenging enough depending on what players are looking for, as can be seen in Hirun Cryer's article on *Horizon Forbidden West* (Guerilla Games 2022) (Cryer 2022). Furthermore, there is a lot of research about how difficulty effects players (see e.g. Alexander, Sear and Oikonomou 2013 and Smeddinck et al. 2016).

The issue also influences practices of both designers and players. On the one side, developers and designers are trying to create software or systems to optimise the difficulty of games. On the players' side, if they are not satisfied with the developers' or designers' decisions, they use cheat codes, mods or software called trainers to reduce the difficulty of the games and optimise their playing experience by getting extra aid.

After showing why the difficulty of Artificial Intelligence plays an important role in gameplay, this essay will explain Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment and responsive game design before discussing whether games should have different difficulty levels or not. It will finally argue that players should be given the choice if they want to play responsive games or games with difficulty levels.

## The Influence of AI Difficulty on Gameplay

Artificial Intelligence is one of the main factors that makes the game hard. In video games, it often does not appear very intelligent to players, which strongly influences the perception of games as difficult or not. Stealth games are examples in which this becomes visible, for example *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007). Since there is an assassin, the player plays this game in stealth mode. If the player goes into the bushes in this game in order to hide, the enemy soldiers cannot see the player even if they stand beside the player. When the player moves inside, the bushes make some sounds, which can be heard by the AI. Generally, if soldiers hear sounds,

they should be more investigative and look for their source. However, this is not the case here, making the game appear easier for players. This is important because it affects game experience and immersion.

On the other hand, when games appear challenging, the Artificial Intelligence's reaction time, playing style and behaviour change. Games with highly intelligent Artificial Intelligence which reacts fast and aims ideally would for instance be tough to play. This can quickly become frustrating for players, which can be considered one of the reasons why Artificial Intelligence is often designed to appear non-intelligent.

### **Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment**

In order to avoid frustration and ensure immersion for players, the concept of Flow can be used, which was developed by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (see Csíkszentmihályi and Larson 2014). Flow is a state of concentration that amounts to total absorption in an activity (Sylvester 2013, 1-44). The emergence of Flow depends on the relation between the player's skill and the challenges the player faces. If the challenges are easy and the player's skill is high, the player will be bored. If the game is hard and the player's skill is low, the player will be frustrated.

Many designers add a piece of algorithm that adjusts the difficulty. With the help of this algorithm, they try to achieve a Flow state by adaptively changing the game's difficulty. This algorithm is called Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment or short: DDA. DDA uses feedback loops to adjust the game's difficulty level for the player (see Salen and Zimmerman 2014), so the player faces challenges according to their skills.

The responsive game design could, for example, be incorporated into first-person shooter games like this: If the player is not skilled enough, this becomes evident in their playing style. This is measured in their reaction time to certain events. Depending on this information, the game's difficulty is readjusted. For example, the AI can act slowly if the player reacts slowly. If the player cannot aim to the head, the AI's aim should be bad as well. However, the game's settings should not be left like this from the beginning until the end. Over time, the player will start adapting to the game's mechanics, and the player's skill level will be higher than at the beginning. Over time or in each chapter, the AI's intelligence or the game's difficulty should be readjusted so that the game's difficulty matches the player's skill. Not doing so will make games too easy for players over time, which will result in the player losing interest and getting bored. The main aim should therefore be to keep the challenge high enough to keep the player focused.

There are many successful examples of Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment. Different methods have been used to adjust difficulty; the first example that I want to give is *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2005). *Resident Evil 4* is a Survival Horror game that uses a difficulty adjustment system. This system changes depending on players' actions. For instance, if players are playing well, enemies' attacks will give them more damage and play more aggressively (Summers 2015). Another example is *Fallout: 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008). *Fallout 3* is a post-apocalyptic RPG. Bethesda designed a system that adapts the player's experience in which the game provides harder enemies with better guns depending on the player's level. Today, AI's intelligence levels can be designed depending on players' skills. This leads to the following question: do we need to keep difficulty levels when there is the option of responsive game design?

### **Difficulty Levels in Video Games**

In my previous arguments and examples, I suggested that video games should be designed to adjust the game difficulty depending on the player's playstyle, skills, and behaviour instead of adding different difficulty levels. However, it can also be argued that difficulty levels serve an important purpose in videogames. One example that is known for its difficulty as well as an excellent example of intelligent AI is *Demon's Souls* (From Software 2009), an action RPG where the player fights against monsters and enemies in a fantasy world. When *Demon's Souls* first came out, it was not very popular because of its challenging nature. For instance, the first game released was criticized for being exclusive, as everyone should try it, but the challenging nature makes it unattractive (Bishop 2009). However, after years, a fan base emerged for the game. Today, the game is often recognized as one of the best games ever created. For example, the remake that was released in 2020, it was reviewed as "fantastic" (Saltzman 2020). This clearly shows that over years many players started to play the game for its challenge and many people enjoyed it for being so tricky, even with such a hard difficulty level of the AI. This example shows that challenging games without difficulty levels can motivate players to try challenges and compete with each other.

One of the positive aspects of having different difficulty levels is that it gives both designers and players freedom. It provides freedom to designers because it gives them space to design each difficulty level differently. This can also increase the replayability of games because each level can provide different challenges and experiences. Different difficulty levels also provide freedom for players because it gives them the option to explore different difficulties and challenges. Lastly, many game designers lock extremely hard levels. The player

needs to complete the game in previous difficulty levels to open this difficulty level, which furthermore increases the replayability of the game.

However, high difficulty also makes games exclusive for many players. Souls-like genre games are a great example of this, as they are demanding and there is no difficulty adjustment or different difficulty levels that players can choose between. Many people who to play these games struggle and fail. However, to play games in this genre, people use mods and trainers to gain help and reduce their difficulty. This is contradictive to the point made above, that hard games without difficulty settings can motivate players, as players can easily sidestep this issue. Players should be able to finish and enjoy games even without trainers and mods. A solution to this would be to incorporate responsive game design, as discussed above.

### **Player Types**

Overall, game designers should also listen to players' wants and needs. These can be analysed through looking at different player types. For example, many players love to play games for their challenges. Kocadere and Çağlar explain this type of player as “Killer Kate”, who seeks challenges and competition (Kocadere and Çağlar 2018, 16). However, other player types are motivated by their desire to immerse themselves in a different world and to empty their minds. This player type is described as “Explorer Emma”, who wants to explore the game world and follow the story (Kocadere and Çağlar 2018, 17). This player type would prefer easy mode. It can be argued that designers should still incorporate different difficulty levels to serve all of these different types of players.

A good example for a game that accommodates different player types is *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018). Many players want to play *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* to empty their minds, and when they face many enemies, they want to kill many of them quickly. They might take their horses and travel across the Greek world to see old artefacts or the beautiful game world. This type of player will enjoy the easy game mode. However, on the other hand, many players might want to experience the game's challenging nature. They want to fight against all the enemies and bosses. On the other hand, some players want to face these challenges in easy mode. These players are generally the combination of the two playstyles mentioned above. However, those who want to experience the game with challenges can travel inside the world without getting disturbed if they wish to do so. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* provides a game world for all these player styles. However, not all games can provide this for players.



## Conclusion

Understanding what people want is important to provide them with a good experience. In this essay I have shown that the difficulty design of AI is important to achieve flow and immersion for players, and to avoid frustration. I have furthermore shown that DDA is a viable way to achieve this. I have also considered different arguments for and against incorporating different difficulty levels in video games, for example that they provide freedom and replayability, but can also be exclusive. Lastly, I have argued that game designers should accommodate the needs of different player types. Conclusively, I want to argue that players should have the choice between two different game modes; one responsive mode for the players who prefer to play the game with a challenge, with this mode adapting its' difficulty to the player's skills. The other mode should be an easy mode where players can choose if they want to face challenges or discover the world and enjoy the view. This would also give games higher replayability because they can provide new and different challenges and experiences.

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## Roll for Diversity

*How selected visual aesthetics based on gender, race, identity, and (female) body have changed in their visual representation demonstrated on a comparison of the first and fifth edition of the official Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook.*

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**keywords:** diversity, identity, representation, Dungeons & Dragons, pen-and-paper role-playing

The following ideas were created in the fall of 2021 and form a short presentation of our master thesis. The long quarantine days invited us to an intensive confrontation with Dungeons & Dragons. Not only in a ludic sense, by rolling dices and building imaginary worlds, but by encountering that dragon that can be called scientific research.

### Character creation

The topic of the thesis surrounded the question if there was a noticeable change within the visual aesthetics of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) regarding the presentation of identity and representation. For this cause, the very first edition of the Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook from the year 1978 was compared to the current fifth edition from 2014. The idea for this sort of endeavor was of course not new and heavily inspired by Gillespie's and Crouses's (2012) article regarding nostalgic aesthetics and their usage in D&D reprints to cater to the retro-gaming concept. This particular article revolves around the construction of nostalgia from a genre and period specific set of visual codes and distinct rules of application (Gillespie and Crouse 2012, 75).

To expose an assumed visual change, 10 visuals of D&D races (official D&D term) from the first and fifth edition of the Player's Handbooks worked as visual support for our research. An interdisciplinary approach seemed fitting, therefore theories from game studies, cultural studies, ethnomethodology and constructivism, and visual methodologies were consulted. Qualitative research, including visual observation and an empirical study followed.

### **The session starts**

Imagination, narration, worldbuilding and a distinctive DIY character function marks the heart of Dungeons & Dragons. D&D is from a time when fantasy and science fiction texts were considered a subculture consumed by few and produced by even less. Visuals have always been a crucial aspect of the game. Illustrations and artworks animated the imaginary world and functioned as a visual guide through the fantasy world, built by a group of likeminded individuals (Witwer 2018, 1-2). These descriptions given by the official Dungeons & Dragons editors indicate interesting focal points for social and cultural theorists: the active recipient, representation and reproduction, the construction of identity as well as the concept of play and the commercialization of it, to only name a few. The humble beginnings of Dungeons & Dragons started in the 1970s by an enthusiastic insurance salesman named Gary Gygax, who was deeply immersed in the wargaming community of that time. Wargames were an elaborated reenactment and accurate visual representation of historic battles such as Waterloo or Gettysburg. Miniatures, toy soldiers and dioramas were essential to achieve the most authentic depiction of these battles. By the 1950s this hobby found its way into the modern American hobby, organized groups, newsletters, magazines, and conventions followed. Dedicated wargamer and active participant Gary Gygax built his framework of Dungeons & Dragons on this foundation. Self-created drawings, miniatures and rules were Gygax's starting point for what is today one of the most influential media (Witwer 2018: 10). Gygax and the community he engaged with, have striking similarities to Rainer Winter's (2010) observation of horror fans, hence, it can be argued that Gary Gygax was first off, an active fan of role-playing games. Gygax and his peers, prominently his creative companion Dave Arneson, greatly shaped the modern landscape of pop culture and had an impact on videogames and tabletop games. Books, movies, and various other media are only a few examples of D&D's cultural influence. In every intellectual work, ideals, norms and moral implications of its time and society, as well as the thought of its authors, are inherently present. For this reason, a more critical type of reading of Dungeons & Dragons as a text is necessary.

### **The encounter**

Antero Garcia (2007) suggests viewing D&D through how identities are depicted under the critical lens of race and gender (Garcia 2007: 232). Sarah Stang and Aaron Trammell (2020) call attention to texts such as "Bestiaries" (the first Monster Manual) and the representation of women in them with female monstrosities as a reoccurring theme. Stang and Trammell, furthermore, point out a "boys club" behavior by the active D&D players and that these

particular players use the books as a tool of patriarchy (Stang and Trammel 2020: 733). The female body is often the topic in many depictions within the D&D's corpus of work. Women are regularly visualized as evil or abject, like the stereotypical "hag". In regards of reproduction, again, one must be reminded of the huge influence of these books on all sorts of widespread media and their success and omnipresence in digital culture (Stang and Trammel 2020: 744). To look further into the stigmatization of the female body and the reproduction of it, Aaron Trammel (2014) presents additional original D&D texts from the 1970s regarding sexism and racism, this time in the format of contributions to the official D&D magazine, "The Dragon". The titles of these artifacts alone speak for themselves: "Notes on Women & Magic – Bringing the Distaff Gamer into D&D" and "Weights & Measures, Physical Appearance and Why Males are Stronger than Females; in D&D".

### **Gained XP**

There is evidence of a change between the compared visuals of the first and the fifth edition of the D&D Player's Handbooks. It shows how the visuals have adapted to certain socio-cultural changes over time, especially regarding our main visual aesthetic points, gender, race, identity and the (female) body. There is an evident turn regarding representation depicted in the fifth edition of the Player's Handbook. A focus on female representation as well as on cultural and ethnic minorities can be observed. This turn proves the importance of visual aesthetics in Dungeons & Dragons in a cultural and emancipative sense.

### **New game plus**

Harmful issues are scattered throughout the textual landscape of D&D: first and foremost, racism and misogyny. Although many rules are deeply anchored within the game itself, some of them can be changed, which offers the perceptive gamer a silver lining. Nonetheless, the official side of Dungeons & Dragons even encourages players and writers to do so. Many subcultures of the D&D community already realize a more open and free interpretation of the game and choose the way how they are represented as gamers. Bodies, freed from statistics and measurements within a world aside from normativity and stereotypes. Furthermore, Miguel Sicart's (2014) work offers indications of understanding Dungeons & Dragons within the nature of play.

Play is appropriative, in that it takes over the context in which it exists and cannot be totally predetermined by such context. (Sicart 2014, 11)

and:

Play is disruptive as a consequence of being appropriate. When it takes over the context in which play take place, it breaks the state of affairs. This is often done for the sake of laughter, for enjoyment, for passing pleasures. But like all other passing pleasures, play can also disruptively reveal our conventions, assumptions, biases, and dislikes. In disrupting the normal state of affairs by being playful, we can go beyond fun when we appropriate a context with the intention of playing with and within it. And in that move, we reveal the inner workings of the context that we inhabit. (Sicart 2014, 14-15)

Therefore, let us be appropriative and disruptive in the most positive sense. Let us be an active fan like Gary Gygax was, but with today's knowledge on how to be more inclusive, diverse, and non-normative. Let us start a new game plus.

This marks the end of this short adventure. Further subjects that we discussed within our thesis, as the long under title already suggested, are not fully covered in this submission, however, offer material for further insights into the topic discussed.

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