Playing with Play

Using expansive play to create new meaningful experiences in Hotline Miami

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Abstract

This thesis aims to show that games can offer a wealth of experiences outside of a 'normal' or 'intended' reading. When approaching games with an open mind, research can uncover hidden meanings and new perspectives. Using both an extensive interpretational (procedural) analysis and the concept of expansive play as research tools, this thesis excavates unexplored regions in the space of possibility of the popular indie game Hotline Miami. This approach will show that not only can engaging with a game in deviant ways account for a wider variety in play style within game research, it can also open up Hotline Miami as a critical cultural object to reveal new meaning and new learning experiences about the nature of violence. Through demonstrating the potential of expansive play as a research method, this paper aims to add weight to the argument to widen the scope of academic research to not only simply play games, but to also play *with* games as researchers.

Keywords: expansive play, permanent death, procedural rhetoric, games, death, violence, Hotline Miami

Contents

1. Introduction

In this thesis, I would like to address the issue of how, within a video game, the player and the game rules relate to one another in the process of meaning production. At face value, one might argue that whatever a video game is 'about' is decided in advance by its authors. But even in non-interactive media, this notion has been called strongly into question. Roland Barthes, the great French literary scholar of the 1960's, argued in *The Death of the Author* (1977) that the torch of authorship of literary texts was to be considered to be passed on from the writer to the reader. In essence, his idea boiled down to the notion that once the author releases a (literary) text out into the world, his[1] control over its meaning is out of his hands, and into those of any reader willing to interact with and interpret the text.

In the case of video games, this metaphorical demise seems even more pronounced because they assign their audience (the players) a prominent position within the game itself: every game is designed around a player playing it. If a game is compared to a stage play, the player is situated both in the audience and on the stage. He can both act as a receiver of a story, reading a game almost like he would a novel, and as an actor, participating and generating meaning and perspective in his own story of interaction with the game. Never, it seems, has the author been more dead than with the birth of the player.

In game studies, the question of authorship is often closely tied to the discussion around the role that rules play in this regard. Discussion of this topic can levitate on a scale between two notions of authorship: on the one hand, it can be argued that the game's developer is the author of the meaning conveyed by its procedural structure (in short, the entire aggregate of coded rules that build up the fabric of a game) leaving a minor role for the audience to 'unpack' the meaning written into the game by its creators (Bogost 2008, p. 121). On the other hand, one could maintain that the audience of a game has a significant role to play in the creation of the meaning conveyed within a game, building an experience which comes about through the act of play, in the interaction of the player with the game (Sicart 2011).

Considering this discussion, it may be too severe to dismiss the developer's authorship out of hand, because even if a specific reading can not simply be enforced in every game, play can certainly be steered in a certain direction through procedural means. Still, the fact remains that within the construct of the rules, a varying amount of freedom is left for the player to display his own behaviour. Felan Parker (2008) distinguishes fixed and implied rules, of which the former, the hard-coded, structural rules of the game, demarcate the limits of what behaviour is possible within the game. An example of such a rule is the principle in *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1985) that one can only move right, or that Mario dies and loses a life when he falls in a hole, but it also includes more basic principles that govern the game's structure, such as the controls (when you press the A button, Mario jumps), the way the music and sound design reacts to events in the game and the simulation of gravity that pulls Mario to the ground. These fixed rules thus demarcate the boundaries what Ian Bogost calls the possibility space of the game, the entire spectrum of behaviour that is possible within the the game (Bogost 2008, p. 120).

For Bogost, the creation of a possibility space is where authorship of a game truly lies: through what is made possible with the game rules, a simulated world is formed, which is a selection of certain aspects of the real world. In the way these aspects are selected to represent the world, a rhetorical

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[1] Throughout this article, I use the masculine 'his' for no specific reason but for style and readability. Please read as 'his/her' when appropriate.

expression can be made (2007, pp. 43-44; 2008, p. 122). So, "The rules do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the meaning of the game" (Bogost 2008, p. 121).

But within this possibility space, the player is, in principle, free to navigate at will. This is where what Parker (2008) defines as the implied rules come in: "rules which are suggested or indicated by the game, and are understood by the players, but are not made rigid by code" (pp. 3-4). Within the possibility space of the game, these implied rules nudge the player towards a certain spectrum of behaviour by incentivising or suggesting certain kinds of play. Implied rules may attempt to steer behaviour, but these can be ignored, reinterpreted or misunderstood by players. Thus a game may suggest a 'proper' way of playing, but the possibility space often offers a whole range of playing outside this suggested structure, allowing players experiences that may not have been explicitly written into the game.

As a player, but also as a researcher, we can actively seek out such new unexplored regions of the possibility space of games to enrich our experience, learn new lessons from the game's content and gain new insights into how the game functions and what it means. The main question this thesis aims to answer is how deviant ways of playing can open up a game to reveal new meanings and experiences.

In this paper, I will specifically direct my focus towards the popular video game *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games 2012). This independently developed game most notably received critical acclaim for its coherent and holistic design (Bramwell 2012), and particularly how it employs all aspects of its design, including its extreme level of explicit violence, to form a critical commentary on violence in video games. As such, it can be said to be part of a recent trend of games that introspectively comment on and criticise how violence is and has been portrayed in video games. In this context, it is often associated with the critically acclaimed first person shooter *Spec Ops: the Line* (Yager 2012), which similarly made a comment on violence in games.

Through a close reading of Hotline Miami, and the resulting dual interpretation of its meaning, I will examine how the game takes a position in the aforementioned debate on violence, and how the game expresses this position and its meaning through its procedure. I will start out this exploration by employing an interpretive analysis (Fernandez-Vara 2014, pp. 207-210), to show that through a push-pull dynamic of movement and stasis, a kind of dissonance is created that can turn a player's gaze onto his own violent behaviour in the game, and thus enlist the player's own subjectivity, his presuppositions and his behaviour in the process of creating a critical message.

However, as examining Hotline Miami's process of meaning production will show, players retain a freedom to interpret games for themselves. A game developer can write an intricate story, but he cannot force a player to engage with it. Conversely, nor can he deny the player a search for meaning within the game where he may not have intended it as such. To further seek out the boundaries of the player's role in the creation of a new narrative, I have employed the principle of expansive play (Parker 2008) as a research method to uncover new meaning, experience and mechanisms in Hotline Miami that may not be easily uncovered through regular play. Expansive play, as defined by Parker (2008), is the practice of adding player-imposed rulesets to alter the base experience of a game and enable new ways of interacting with it and extracting new possible game events and experiences (pp. 2-3). Importantly, because such expansive play takes place within the rules of the game (more precisely, it leaves the fixed rules intact while reinterpreting, ignoring or augmenting the suggestions made through the implied rules), this practice can still be conceptualised as playing the game as it was created; only in a creative, perhaps in some cases subversive, personal style.

Although some researchers in the field appear to frown upon play practices that go beyond the game 'as is'[2], playing a game differently than intended may actually be used as a critical tool of analysis that can reveal aspects and dynamics of play, as well as new interpretations and experiences, that cannot be uncovered by forcing oneself as a researcher into the role of a 'model' player. I reflect more in depth upon these theoretical and methodological implications, as well as the result of the application of the method to the case of Hotline Miami, in the prelude to chapter 5.

Through an experiment with the inclusion of a self-imposed rule called permanent death (which is simply a voluntary commitment to restart the game upon death, henceforth 'perma-death') and a close reading of the newly found experience that it creates, it is shown that creative interaction with a game can create new experiences within the limits and affordances of a game, thus further demonstrating the potential for audience participation in meaning production.

This study shows that an awareness of the freedom of the player to explore the possibility space at will can be embraced to create a critical message. To extend this line of freedom of the player, and to stretch the boundaries of the developer's authorship to a breaking point, this article will show that through experimentation with expansive play, players can pull authorship of a game experience towards themselves and create radically new experiences and narratives. In the case of applying the perma-death principle to Hotline Miami, the practice reveals the game to teach something new about violence: that it is not at all the safe and glorious act that it is sometimes portrayed to be.
To sum up, the structure of this thesis can be identified as follows. In chapter 4, I will provide an in-depth interpretational analysis in the form of a close reading, which excavates two possible readings of Hotline Miami and demonstrates how this experience is created through an intricate structure that involves the game's rules, its aesthetics and the player's participation and subjectivity. I will use this analysis in two ways: first, I will demonstrate throughout chapter 4 how the player's behaviour and subjectivity play a central role in the creation of the game's possible message, thus giving weight to the argument that a crucial role in authorship can lie in the hands of the person who interacts with the game.

Secondly, I will use the two readings detailed in chapter 4 as a base line to compare and contrast with a third reading, which comes from the expansive play method employed in chapter 5. In this chapter, I will alter the game experience through the addition of a perma-death rule, which opens up the analysis of the game to new interpretations and critical insights into its structure, how it creates meaning, and places authorship even more firmly in the hands of the player.

Before I start this critical examination of Hotline Miami, however, I will use the upcoming chapters to position my research in the existing academic body of video game research, detailing the interrelationship of rules, subjectivity and meaning in games and providing some theoretical background to the practice of expansive play and perma-death in chapter 2, and providing, in chapter 3, a methodological framework for the operationalisation of my analysis and my experimentational method.

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[2] See for instance Aarseth 2003, who protested particularly against the practice of cheating to speed up game research (p. 4). Although this may be a bit of an injustice, since Aarseth later explicitly considers and defends transgressive play and departure from an 'ideal' player (2007), it still illustrates the point that this departure may not be universally accepted within the field.

2. Theoretical Framework

Rules and meaning

First off, there are other ways of telling a story than simply typing it out for the player. Games are complex media objects, with multiple layers of meaning and multiple ways of constructing meaning (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 52). Obviously, a game can deliver meaning simply through its storyline, for instance by leading the player through lines of dialogue or cut scenes which expose the player to the game's plot. However, being fairly one-sided, this is perhaps a somewhat simplistic method of creating meaning for the player - and it is by no means the only way in which a game can deliver meaning.

Ian Bogost proposes the term 'procedural rhetoric' for a construct that creates meaning trough the procedure of the game. It is "the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively" (Bogost, 2008, p. 28). According to Bogost, visual, written, and verbal rhetoric is inadequate to account for the kind of persuasion and expression the procedure within a game can allow (p.29).

Perhaps encouraged by the suggestion of his book *Persuasive Games* (2007), Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric is often taken to mean persuasion by means of procedural structure, suggesting games that wish to sell or convince the player of something. However, 'Rhetoric' in this concept is to be interpreted not only in this narrow, classical sense, but also more broadly. In this interpretation, rhetoric can be focused on persuasion as well as expression, as Bogost himself offers in his earlier work *Unit Operations* (2006) and later in *The Rhetoric of Video Games* (2008, p.29). Procedural rhetoric, then, is the way in which these processes can be used to craft an argument (or, more generally, an effective expression, ibid. p. 19).

For his definition of 'procedure', Bogost (2007) turns to Janet Murray's description in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), in which procedure is taken to be the computer's "defining ability to execute a set of rules" (Murray 1997, p. 71: in Bogost 2007, p. 4). It is this ability to execute rules that, to Bogost, separates a computer (and, by extension, a video game) from other media (ibid., p. 4).

So, following the concept of procedural rhetoric, it is through the authorship of rules that game developers can create an argument or experience for the player (Bogost 2007, p. 29). Although rules may have a fairly negative connotation in common parlance (or at least one not commonly associated with the 'fun' of playing a game), they are essentially what makes it possible to play a game (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p. 77). Rules funnel the behaviour of the player to create a space of limitations and affordances, within which the experience of a game comes to life. The core authorship of a video game comes down to the shaping of this possibility space of affordances and limitations.

In a video game, the boundaries of this possibility space are generally quite clearly defined by what Felan Parker (2008) calls the fixed rules of the game. These rules narrow down the behaviour of a player towards a specific set of actions possible within the game world (p. 3). Fixed rules, hard coded into the fabric of the game, cannot, by definition, be broken - or at least not without changing the game itself. In the case of Hotline Miami, the player is committed to a complex set of such rules, such as a top-down environment, a system of weapons, procedural AI, and a method to restart levels when the main character dies. According to Bogost, this is how a game becomes procedurally expressive: through what is made possible with the game rules, a simulated world is created which is a representation of certain aspects of the real world. The selection of these aspects in particular, for Bogost, is where authorship in video games resides (2007, pp. 43-44; 2008, p. 122).

A free space of possibility

However, next to a set of rigid, fixed rules, there is a second set of rules that guide play and shape the experience. The implied rules of the game, according to Parker (2008), create a set of assumptions about how the game is meant to be played, without formally binding the player to them (pp. 3-4). These implied rules can include what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) call 'implicit rules': behavioural codes of sportsmanship, etiquette, and general rules of "proper game behaviour" (p. 130-134), but they also refer to anything that is assumed, but not enforced, about how a game is to be played (Parker 2008, p. 4). In Hotline Miami, a certain type of player behaviour is encouraged through implied rules: reckless behaviour generally awards more points than playing cautiously. However, this behaviour is not enforced, because a high score is not a prerequisite for progression. If you want, you can play Hotline Miami slowly and deliberately, without regard to any score, just like you could play Super Mario Bros without collecting any coins or jumping on any monsters.

It is in the space created by the malleability of these implied rules that deviant types of play can be allowed to exist. Parker (2008), having established his system of fixed and implied rules, situates what he defines as expansive play (p. 2) within this free zone of suggested, but not enforced, behaviour (p. 4). Navigating this space of freedom afforded by the construct of fixed and implied rules, players can impose new rules of their own upon the game, thus changing and reinterpreting the experience in "alternative, playful ways" (Keogh 2013, p. 2). As a specific form of emergent gameplay (see Juul 2014, "emergent gameplay" and Juul 2005, p. 76), expansive play may go against or beyond the intentions of a game's creators (p.3), but because it does not break or change the fixed rules, it can still be conceptualised as situated within the possibility space of the game itself (Parker 2008, p. 4).

At the core of expansive play, players actively engage with the ruleset of the game by ignoring, bending or breaking some of the existing implied rules, and imposing a new rule of their own. Success in the game is redefined by the player to, for instance, finishing it in the shortest time possible. This kind of emergent play can change the experiential structure of the game to "generate rich and resistant outcomes" (Salen 2002). This attitude to play can place the player in an intriguing, possibly subversive (see Flanagan 2005, p. 4) position of co-authorship to the experience created.

The conceptual space that I take expansive play to occupy can be schematised as follows. The whole of the procedural structure of the game, that is, its rules in the broadest conception possible, can be conceptualised as all that the game is. This is the coded backbone of the game, its DNA. This DNA contains information about the game's controls, colour palette, sound effects, score system and all other elements that visually and invisibly are part of the game. Within this structure, the fixed rules place a picket fence - or if we are to stick to the biological metaphor: a cell membrane - around the area of possible ways to interact with the game, thus demarcating the possibility space. Within this cell of the possibility space, the implied rules can be used to suggest certain types of play. So there could be a bonus point incentive for aggressive play, an accuracy bonus to incentivise for deliberate play, or a certain type of enemy that favours a stealthy approach. All of these implied rules steer the player's behaviour toward a certain part of the cell or possibility space. Expansive play, then, plays around with these suggestions and lets the player guide his behaviour towards parts of the cell that the implied rules do not suggest venturing into.

Room for critical play

This is the critical potential of expansive play: it opens up areas of a game that are previously unexplored, repurposing the rules and the game to create an experience that may be outside the intentions that the developers have had when designing a game, but is still a part of the game as such. It lays bare not only unknown aspects of gameplay, but can also be used to reveal its structure and help understand how it creates its meaning. Moreover, it can be a useful tool in a researcher's tool-

box to help reflect on subjective aspects within research methods and shine light on theories and conceptualisations about the nature of games from a different perspective. More on the critical potential of expansive play will follow in chapters 3 and 5.

Some empirical work has been done in the exploration of the possibilities of expansive play, particularly within the specific subcultural practice of 'speed runs': recorded attempts to finish a game in the shortest time possible, often ignoring or reappropriating everything that is not directly in service to this cause (see for example Franklin 2009; Scully-Blaker 2014; Turner 2005). The fact that the resulting videos are often uploaded to YouTube (or even broadcast live on a constant Twitch stream on speedrunslive.com) and shared within specific speedrunning communities shows that this kind of practice can turn a single player game into a competitive experience. It can even (and often does) become a spectator's sport, of which a speed run of Mega Man 2 performed on a stage in front of a large audience, while accompanied by a rock band playing the theme music to the game is by far my favourite example (IGN 2012).

The example of speedrunning as an expansive gameplay practice shows that creative expansive play can transform the game experience from a solitary into a social event, but different imposed rules can have different effects on a game's experience. Brendan Keogh (2013) explores a similar form of expansive play called "perma-death" within the popular adventure/building game *Minecraft* (Mojang Entertainment 2009), which alters the game experience by imposing "harsh consequences to the usually trivial event of the character's death" (p. 1). This style of play has been commented on before, most notably by Ben Abraham (2013) in his experiment with *Far Cry 2*. The imposition of the rule of perma-death (in most cases by a commitment of the player to the vow of ending the game or starting over from the beginning when the character dies) radically changes the experience of the game by substituting a tone of experimentation (i.e. dying and trying again) with one of vulnerability. "The stop-start 'what if' of traditional gameplay experimentation is superseded by a close coupling of the player's concerns with the character's bodily existence and a real-time, uninterrupted narrativisation of play" (Keogh 2013, p. 2).

Different games are varyingly compatible with perma-death, and will thus yield varied results. In the instance of Minecraft, as Keogh showed, the rule can add a narrative depth to a game which normally has little to no set narrative. Applying a self-imposed rule of perma-death to Hotline Miami in particular may transform the gameplay experience radically, because death is such an omnipresent theme in the game. As I will show in chapter 5, the experiment with perma-death imbued the game experience with a very strong tone of desperation, frustration and sense of vulnerability, but at the cost of the loss of the original narrative.

3. Methodology

Aims and approach

As mentioned in the introduction, I will investigate how playing a game 'differently' through expansive play can change its structure, meaning or experience and generate a meaningful experience beyond a normal reading. Specifically, I will look at the place of the player in the process of creating the meaning that is put forward in Hotline Miami, and investigate how a player can pull this authorship toward himself.

In order to investigate this complex process in depth, I will take a two-stage approach to examining the process of meaning creation in Hotline Miami.

In the first part of the analysis, which will appear in the next chapter (Chapter 4), I will show how the procedural and narrative structure of the game involves the audience in the act of storytelling. This analysis will serve two purposes within this paper: first, it serves to show how Hotline Miami creates meaning through its procedure, and what meaning is created by the procedural structure of the game. Secondly, the analysis of chapter 4 will serve as a baseline for the experiment that I will present in chapter 5. The exploration in chapter 4 can be seen as a look at the game's 'intended' form, that is to say, the readings that can be gathered from it by playing the game 'as is'. In practice, chapter 4 takes the form of two different readings of Hotline Miami and how these come about through the narrative, proce- dure and aesthetic of the game as well as the participation of the player.

In chapter 5, then, I will build upon this interpretational baseline by performing an experiment that is aimed at stretching the limits of player authorship even further, consciously stepping beyond the intended experience of the game by amending its rules with a new self-imposed rule (specifically, 'perma-death': the rule that once my character dies, I am bound to quit and start over from the beginning), and comparing the results to the baseline I have laid out in chapter 4. I will show by engaging in this kind of 'expansive play' to craft an entirely new narrative experience within the game world in which I position myself as a player in a central position to this story. This new experience allows me as a researcher to gain deeper insights in the inner workings of the game, as changing the consequences of death in the game allow me to see clearer how the mechanism surrounding player death affects the game experience and narrative tone. Interestingly, this new perspective on death in Hotline Miami also revealed a more profound meaning hidden in the way the game can be played, by placing me as a player closer to the reality of violence, or at least by making me feel part of the stress, terror and anxiety that comes from a situation where the stakes are high and defeat can come in the blink of an eye. Through this experience, Hotline Miami can offer a deeper understanding of the actual workings of violence and the justification of it.

Part one: building blocks for an interpretational analysis

Authors that occupy themselves with the analysis of games as complex media objects are confronted with the task of developing a justifiable way of carrying out such an analysis specific to their particular research. Because a game is a complex, multi-layered system (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 52), a clear canonical methodology is not readily available in most cases. The emphasis for research will depend strongly on both the goals and focus of the research and on the game that is under scrutiny. Thus, every researcher must create their own toolbox of methods depending on what they wish to learn from a game (ibid., p. 156). Even a thorough analysis of a game is unlikely to look at every aspect of a game. So, a focussed analysis will look at a selection of aspects that are relevant to the research goals and questions that the researcher looks to answer (Fernandez-Vara, p. 18).

In order to decide which aspects of the game need my attention in the analysis, I turn to Clara Fernandez-Vara's *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2014). In this comprehensive work, Fernandez-Vara lists and expounds possible areas of analysis in a well-argued structure. More so than older, more tentative methodological approaches of Consalvo and Dutton (2006) and others, this work helps to structure, focus and streamline the practice of game analysis, without becoming a definitive 'how to'- manual (Fernandez-Vara, pp. 4-5).

Fernandez-Vara structures the 'building blocks' which make up an analysis around three general, interrelated themes: the *game overview*, *context*, and *formal aspects* (pp. 13-14). It is important to note, however, that the previously mentioned areas are "so interwoven it is difficult to talk about certain aspects of games without making references to others" (p. 17). I mention them here mainly to illustrate and provide context to the information I will be giving in my analysis, but in order to retain a clear structure of argument, I will not attempt to force my analysis rigidly into these categories.

The *game overview* is, in short, what identifies the game: its basic features that distinguish one game from the other. In order to give a basic idea of what 'kind' of game it is, I will give a brief overview of Hotline Miami in chapter 4, explaining in short how the game is played, what its audiovisual 'feel' is and what kind of story it tells.

The *context* of a game can be an important factor to understanding how a game relates to the culture in which it was created. This context is defined by a number of factors ranging from the game's genre, the typical audience that interacts with it (as well as the way it is marketed towards this audience), and various aspects of socio-cultural and economic context (pp. 59 - 60). Because I interpret Hotline Miami in part as a commentary on violence in video games, the culture of these violent games is important to touch upon, and I will do so briefly in my overview in chapter 4. A similar interpretation is, perhaps, open to debate, so I will turn to contextual aspects to provide credibility.

Because my main interest lies in the interaction of the game's rules and its player, the *formal aspects* will be of particular importance to my research. Exploring elements in this category can provide a more in-depth insight to the how the game works and how it is played (p. 117). In chapter 4, I will focus on how these formal aspects come together in creating what I argue is the game's central meaning: a critical commentary on violence in video games. I will consider aspects of dynamics and game rules to explore how these elements contribute to the game's meaning production. Moreover, I will look at how these rules create a procedurally mounted argument - and how this argument requires the participation of the player to complete. In this sense, my analysis in chapter 4 is essentially a procedural analysis, focussed on answering the question of what Hotline Miami tries to say, and how it uses its procedural structure to bring this message across.

Part two: beyond a standard reading

Having explored the basis of the game and the way it mounts the violent behaviour of the player as part of its commentary on violence in games, I will then stretch the limits of this audience participation in the production of meaning beyond an ordinary reading of the game by performing a gameplay experiment in which I add a self-imposed rule of perma-death. By doing so, I will deliberately alter the player interaction with the game in such a way that its tone changes dramatically along with the behaviour of the player.

The critical potential of expansive play is an asset to a researcher that wishes to deeply investigate the possibilities, mechanisms, experience and inner workings of a game. It is suggested by some in the field that researchers should maintain their objectivity by attempting to play as 'model' players and not give in to the temptation to cheat or otherwise cut corners in the analysis of a game, for fear

of missing it original intended meaning (e.g. Aarseth 2003, p. 7). While it certainly makes sense to try to approach a game, at least at first, with an eye toward how the game is meant to be played, this only yields one experience, while the freedom of movement of the player within the medium can actually (and, to many players who do cheat or otherwise display deviant play behaviour) offer a wide range of experiences. It seems to me a waste to rigidly adhere to a 'proper' way of experiencing a game, when manipulating the implied rules can direct the researcher to areas of the game which are left untouched when all suggestions of how to play are followed.

In fact, as Kücklich (2007) notes, taking into account unorthodox methods of play can not only up a game to reveal hidden structures and experiences, but actually turn our gaze as a researcher towards our own practice by helping us recognise flaws in our theoretical models, discover blind spots in our perspectives, and allowing insight into and transparent reflection on our subjectivity as both a player and a researcher (pp. 257, 260). It seems to me that Kücklich is right in suggesting that the taboo on cheating (and, by extension, expansive play) in games research is one that should be broken, as long as we remain reflexive of our methods. As such, playing *with* the rules, rather than only *by* the rules can be a fundamental tool in our methodological toolbox as games researchers.

To investigate implications this style of play can have on the narrative and play experience of Hotline Miami, I have set up an experiment in which I bound myself to the premise that when my character dies, the run (or, from a narrative perspective, the story) ends with his death - and I would be forced to start again from the first chapter. This would make death not permanent in any strict sense, because I am still able to restart the game from the start. The feel of permanence in this case lies in the risk of losing the effort and time invested in getting to a particular point in the game, and will thus also increase the further I get in the game. Each incarnation carries with it the weight of the very real personal stake of losing all the progress up to that point, leading to the emergence of a new story within the game: not one of trial and error and eventual triumph, but of a bitter, desperate fight for survival that can teach something new about the nature of violence.

The principle of perma-death as an experiential experiment has had some precedence within the field of game studies. Keogh (2013) and Abraham (2013) have authored similar experiments with Minecraft and Far Cry 2, respectively, in which they experienced a heightened sense of coupling between the player and his character (Keogh 2013, p. 3), and an increased emotional tenor of chaos, unpredictability and anxiety (Abraham 2013, p. 1; Keogh 2013, p. 4). Both authors have also commented on the narrative implications of approaching the game with perma-death in mind, most notably how it changes the storyline from a start-stop narrative, stitched together from the successful parts alone, into a continuous, unbroken story of a single life within the game world (Abraham 2013, p. 1, Keogh 2013 p. 3).

The application of a perma-death rule has different outcomes for different games, depending on its mechanics particularly surrounding the death of the character. In Minecraft, for instance, it is, from my own experience with the game, very possible to play for a long time without dying, even when not playing particularly cautiously. Minecraft allows the player to craft armour, which makes the player more resistant to attacks. It is also possible to fend off attacking enemies by setting up a secure location using building blocks mined from the environment, and by staying indoors during the night when enemies roam the world. Having reproduced Keogh's experiment myself (as an aside: this ongoing project can be found on the Minecraft forums under the handle of Snarewell), I found that the experience was focussed more towards the exploration aspect of it, partially caused by the fact that Keogh committed himself also to the self-imposed rule to never set up camp, but to keep heading east and only settling down at night. Although this by no means detracts from Keogh's exploration of the use of expansive play in general, my own experiment has the epistemological benefit of being able to examine the principle of perma-death more in isolation.

Applying the principle of perma-death to a Hotline Miami has strong implications for gameplay that make it different from previous experiments with other games, the most prominent of which is a drastic increase in difficulty. Of course, the promise to forgo the possibility of save points or other ways of negating a character's death will always carry with it an increase in difficulty, but in the case of Hotline Miami, this increase is felt particularly strongly. As I will elaborate on later, the gameplay revolves around a trial-and-error style of navigating rooms full of enemies, in which a single mistake can end the character's life in a fraction of a second. The way in which this is made bearable for players is that revival of the character is also done in a split second, so the penalty for death in a regular playthrough of the game is very low. To forgo this possibility, thus, ups the stakes dramatically. As a consequence of this, a player will have to navigate into what Aarseth (2003) calls the stratum of expert play, which calls for the player to gain significant skill with the game through repeated play (p. 6).

This experiment has two interesting implications: first, it can help explore how rules shape the game experience and the overall meaning it conveys to a player. Secondly, it shows by pulling a distinctive part of the authorship of a game's meaning toward himself (while remaining situated within the possibility space afforded by the game), a player or researcher can explore a perspective of the game that is out or reach to the 'ideal' player.

Because the role and experience of the player is an important aspect of my research, a prominent place will be given to personal experience in my account, particularly in covering my experiment in chapter 5. Such an approach comes with its benefits and drawbacks, the most obvious of which is the fact that it is, at least in part, inherently subjective. However, some researchers (e.g. Klastrup 2007, p. 2) argue that subjectivity is inevitable when looking at the experience that is created in a game, and as Fernandez-Vara (2014) notes, a subjective approach can be particularly fruitful when examining the less systemic human factors that cannot easily be measured objectively.

Thus, what follows is first a close examination of Hotline Miami, focussing on its rules, its message, the interrelationship between these two and the role that the player plays in the process of meaning production in the game in chapter 4. Then, in chapter 5, I will present the results of my expansive play experiment, and discuss how it changes this complex dynamic and allows the game to offer new insights into and a deeper understanding of the nature of violence than is taught in a regular reading of the game.

4. Analysis

Structure of chapter

In this chapter, I will provide the main body for this thesis, which consists of an in-depth analysis of what meaning may be embedded in Hotline Miami and, particularly, how it expresses this through the structure of the game.

As this is a fairly long and in-depth chapter, I will briefly outline its structure here for reasons of clarity. First, I will give a brief overview of the basic facts about the game and the cultural context of the public debate around violence in video games in which it arguably takes part. Then, I will explain in depth how I consider this game to take a part in this debate, by way of an interpretational analysis that focuses on how the rules and the player's subjectivity can work together to create a meaningful experience that leaves room for interpretation.

I start this analysis with considering how Hotline Miami takes a place in its cultural context as a critical commentary on violent video games by exploring how it makes its violence meaningful. I have identified an argumentational structure that creates a type of dissonance, both in the game itself and, potentially, in the player, through what I refer to as a push-pull dynamic of movement and stasis. This pushes the player on the one hand to behave as a 'typical' player - accepting its rules and its mission to kill and internalising it as his own mission to beat the game through violence - while on the other hand pulling the player back into an introspective mode through its dialogue, procedural design and aesthetic aspects.

Then I will show that, although this seems to be the most commonly accepted reading of Hotline Miami, the game offers the potential for a different interpretation, which builds upon the mechanism described above to pull the rug out from underneath those who seek meaning within the game's narrative to justify their own violent behaviour within it. As such, it can be argued that Hotline Miami also comments on the matter of the player's participation in the creation of the story, which resonates well with my stated intention to show that where authorship of a game's meaning lies is a debatable question.

I will show that it is not only the the story as embedded in the dialogue and setting of the game that plays a role in its meaning production, but that for a very large part it is the game's rules, its place in the cultural context of violent video games, and particularly, the player's behaviour, presuppositions and attitude that have a central place in how Hotline Miami engages its players with a meaningful experience. This latter subjectivity has an important role to play when considering its importance to the notion of authorship. Within the space of affordances and limitations that a game's rules allow, there is a lot of room for the player to interpret a story differently, to play differently than intended and to perhaps even experience meaning beyond what might have been intended by the game's authors.

Game overview and context

Hotline Miami (2012) is a 2-D action game from Dennaton Games, an independent 2-person development team based in Sweden. It features a top-down perspective reminiscent of arcade-like classics such as the first two Grand Theft Auto titles, and blends this with elements of stealth games, extreme violence and an audiovisual aesthetic borrowing from the pounding beats and neon colours of retro 1980's culture. The player controls a character (who is nameless in the game, but is referred to in the community around the game as 'the Jacket' or simply 'Jacket') who receives cryptic messages on the answering machine in his small apartment that order him in euphemistic terms to kill

people in various locations. The reasons why these people need to be killed remains shrouded in mystery, and the Jacket never asks questions or even speaks at all throughout the game.

The main gameplay sequences are the kill missions, addressed in the game as chapters. There are 19 of these chapters, of which the first fifteen are played as the Jacket, while the last four chapters are played as another character known in the community as the Biker. On these missions, the player has to traverse several floors packed full of enemies, identical faceless goons clad in white and black suits. The player can attack enemies with his fists, but can also pick up the any many weapons that are strewn around on the floor as well as dropped by killed enemies, such as bats, bricks, swords, machine guns and at one point even a pan full of boiling water. Enemies typically go down in a single blow, but so does the player, so gameplay is fast and frantic, and a single mistake can (and, more often than not, does) lead to an instant, unceremonial death. To add to this difficulty, enemies use a procedurally generated AI which causes them to react differently every try.

Hotline Miami has often been mentioned with particular attention to the way it handles violence. It seems the history of video games is an ongoing tale of inherent violence. Even in a benign old-time game like Super Mario Bros., interaction with the world happens largely through violent confrontation with enemies. Although stomping on the heads can hardly be considered very violent, there is still no real peaceful way of dealing with enemies (by, for instance, negotiating with them) apart from avoiding them altogether. Although this is, of course, an option - be it one that overly complicates an already quite difficult game, this is not a regular way of playing the game. An interesting anecdotal exception is a girl from my childhood neighbourhood, an avid animal lover, who took the brown mushroom-like goons to be dogs and refused to kill them, much to the frustration of me and my friends.

The casualness with which violence is assumed to be the only recourse in the face of adversity seems to be a regular plot line in the story of video games of the past decades. However, in the past few years, several titles have come out that have sparked a debate on the theme of violence in video games, of which the notable example of Spec Ops: the Line (Yager, 2012) may have made the most waves in the public debate on the issue because of the way it forced its players to acknowledge and reflect on their own violent behaviour (for more on the complex method by which this is achieved, see Brendan Keogh's (2012) book-long close reading of the game, as well as some recent academic work on the topic (de Wildt 2014; Kraaijenbrink 2013)).

Hotline Miami is often considered in one breath with Spec Ops as a critical commentary on virtual violence. There is much to be said for this interpretation: as I will demonstrate in this chapter, Hotline Miami certainly succeeds in making its violence feel different from the harmless, casual experience it often seems to be in other games. Some evidence of the intention of Hotline Miami to say something meaningful on the topic comes from the developers themselves. In an International Business Times interview, creators Jonathan Söderström and Dennis Wedin rebel against what they perceive as a tendency to sanitise violence in video games: "We wanted to show how ugly it is when you kill people" (2013).

Hotline Miami's narrative and expressive structure
To investigate how Hotline Miami joins this debate, I will examine closely how the game conveys the meaning put forth in this interpretation. Before I go into the specific building blocks that create it, I will argue for a rhetorical structure that makes use of procedure, player behaviour and narrative to create a kind of dissonant dynamic of unquestioning acceptance of the rules of the game world on the one hand, and a critical mode of introspection on the other.

The game is structured around an opposition of movement and stasis, in which the player alternates between being pushed into the flow of the game which directs him towards violent behaviour, and then being pulled back out of this flow in scenes that may incite a more critical attitude towards this behaviour. If the game succeeds in creating this attitude, the player is put into the position where he embodies a cognitive dissonance as well as a ludonarrative dissonance. I will explain these forms of dissonance more in depth in the last part of this chapter, but for now it will suffice to say that the procedural and narrative arguments are at odds with one another, and the attitudes that the game suggests, of critical reflection and of unquestioning acceptance, constantly undermine each other.

This dissonant dynamic is then mounted as supportive argument to further build the game's central message, which I take to be interpreted in two different ways. In the first interpretation, the confrontation of the player's critical mindset with his own violent behaviour can be seen as a criticism of video game violence and the willing participation of the player in it. In the other, as I will explore at the end of this chapter, this critical attitude of the player who seeks meaning within the game, trying to find answers and a narrative justification for his violence, is itself called into question and eventually even openly mocked.

No matter which interpretational path is followed, Hotline Miami is, in its core, essentially a game about the experience of killing in a video game - whether it wishes to argue that this is something to be critically examined or, conversely, to dismiss narrative as a contextual justification for it. It is also a game that seems to be designed around delivering this experience with great precision and care. As I will demonstrate below, various different aspects of its design contribute to painting the experience in such a way that it can support the game's argumentation structure and steer the player towards experiencing the game in a way that makes it not just a violent game, (as some reviewers make it out to be - e.g. Wilson 2012), but a game about violence.

Movement
In essence, the sense of movement or forward momentum that Hotline Miami uses in its argument begins with the assumption of a lusory attitude as defined by Suits (2005). The lusory attitude is the frame of mind that the player assumes when playing a game, in which they agree to bind themselves to its rules (pp. 54-55).

The game starts with an explicit expression of this principle when, in the tutorial prelude, a pixelated face of a man with dreadlocks appears. In an annoyed, almost condescending tone (which, as the developers reveal in an interview with PC Gamer, stems from their own annoyance with being forced to include a tutorial against their own wishes (Francis, 2012), he supplies me with some basic instructions, claiming he's here to teach me "how to kill people". I am directed towards a small group of figures (enemies, I assume - they look like people in lab coats from above), and told to kill the first one with my fists. I punch him to the ground, jump on top of his unconscious body and smash his head repeatedly against the floor by hitting the space bar several times.

The tutorial mission is simple and short - less than a minute, in fact - but it appears to serve a purpose beyond just explaining the controls of the game: it makes it clear that in order to progress in this game, you are expected to kill generic enemies furiously and without question. Apart from their white clothing that vaguely resembles lab coats, the people I am told to kill seem to have nothing to identify them by. They are faceless goons; enemies only by assumption. I kill them because I am told to do so, and because I assume it is what is expected of me.

This message becomes a tangent throughout the game, as the missions after this all start with a kill order on Jacket's answering machine. No form of protest or inquiry into this missions is possible (it is an answering machine, after all - a one-way form of communication in pure form). Like Jacket, who

never asks questions about the dreadful missions he keeps accepting, the player too goes through the violent chapters killing everyone in sight simply because this is what the game asks of him. So, we embark upon chapter upon chapter of violent slaughter without question.

Here, the close connection between the player and the game rules becomes apparent: even if I would like to pass the missions without committing murder, the rules simply require the death of every enemy before allowing me to continue (or at least until the final chapters, on which I will comment later in this chapter). If we return to the conceptualisation of games consisting of fixed and implied rules as mentioned in chapter 2, we see that the possibility space is restricted in such a way by the fixed rules that the only way to move forward is through violent action.

The game not only puts forward violence as the sole way of interacting with the world, but it actually encourages the player to master and enjoy it. As mentioned before, the possibility space of games leaves room for different ways of interacting with them, but can, at the same time, suggest certain styles of play through the implied rules. In the case of Hotline Miami, the system of fixed and implied rules seem finely tuned to cultivate a sense of flow, an "optimal mental state where a person is complete[ly] occupied with a task that matches the person's skills" (Juul, 2014) through a number of mechanisms and dynamics created through fixed rules, implied rules, or a combination of both.

The first item that I would like to address in this context is the way the fixed rules are structured to create quick and unforgiving gameplay. First of all, this is made possible by the fragility of life in the world of Hotline Miami. Almost every character in the game can be killed or incapacitated with a single blow. On successful runs, I have sometimes ended the life of six or more people in under twenty seconds. Very rarely does the game afford the time to reflect on these murders, at least in the middle of the action (the exception is what happens after everyone is dead - more on that later in this chapter).

The same tone of fragility counts for the life of the player's own character who, like most enemies, is killed within a fraction of a second with a single shot or blow, creating an unusually unforgiving and dangerous environment. A tiny mistake, in most cases, leads to an almost inevitable death. It often happens quick and without warning: a shotgun blast from an unseen enemy across the room, a mistimed swing with a crowbar resulting in a knife in the chest, an underestimation of the stopping power of three armed men in a toilet stall.

Moreover, the enemies are quick and deadly. They move fast, and often react faster than any human could. They may be rather stupid (they come running towards me in a straight line, and often fall easily into my traps) but their speed and reaction (and the fact that they outnumber me about three to one on average) still makes them very dangerous. Most importantly, their positions and behaviour is not scripted, so every run plays out a little differently. This makes events very unpredictable and it forces players of Hotline Miami to think on their feet.

This level of difficulty could have been a severe disruption in flow - which is after all - simply put - a delicate balance between skill and challenge, situated between frustration and boredom (Czikszentmihalyi, 2007) - were it not for the the unusually quick resurrection mechanic. Death may take you in the blink of an eye, but the pace of gameplay is hardly deterred by this tragic event. My death is met with very little ceremony: the level can be reset, the death undone and the mistakes erased by the press of a single button. There is no penalty, no consequences to the death of the protagonist, apart from repeating only the current floor of the chapter (representing, in most cases, no more than about a minute of gameplay).

In this way, through mostly fixed rules, Hotline Miami creates a gameplay dynamic that is inherently quick and difficult, and thus requires a solid state of concentration from the player. At the same time, the implied rules, created mostly through the scoring system, nudge the player towards a specific play style of recklessness, confidence, improvisation and speed, potentially adding a certain feeling of flair to the gameplay that may contribute further to the sensation of flow. With every eliminated enemy, a brightly neon coloured number pops up that seems to cheerfully tell me I've done a good job. Killing is an art, it appears to signal - a skill worthy of evaluation and praise.

If anything, the style of killing will indeed get thoroughly evaluated and deconstructed. At the end of each level, a score is awarded, which is an amalgam of different categories which each reward different aspects of style. Fluent play is rewarded through a combo system which awards points for consecutive kills within a short timespan, and improvisation is incentivised by awarding extra points if different types of weapons are used to kill enemies. Through a time bonus and 'boldness' score which awards points for killing an enemy in sight of another enemy, these rules respectively nudge a player to play quickly and recklessly.

In my own playthrough of the game, I found myself to be paying little regard to the actual score itself - for me, the game is hard enough without going out of my way to attempt dangerous manoeuvres. As is the case with implied rules, following these suggestions of how to play the game is not strictly necessary, so not every player will interact very much with this system, but it does make a clear statement of what kind of play is encouraged.

Finally, the flow of gameplay is accompanied by a thumping soundtrack, bright neon colours, gratuitous amounts of blood and sharp, snappy sound design which seem to amplify the suggestion to act fast, ruthless, and without hesitation. But at the same time, as I will argue in the context of the next paragraphs, these same aspects are also used to underline the brutality and banality of killing.

Stasis and dissonance
While the main parts of the game may be characterised by the frantic forward momentum described above, this sense of movement is punctuated by regular moments where the action screeches distinctly to a halt. This happens at the end of every chapter: immediately after I kill the last living thing in the building, the pounding music stops and is replaced by an eerie, almost nauseating soundscape. A soft, doubtful voice starts humming an unsettling tune in the back of my head. The adrenaline rush seeps away and I am now forced to walk back to the car, retracing my steps through the bloodbath I inflicted upon this anonymous crowd of people. I walk past the mutilated corpses and am reminded of how I brutally murdered these people. Having first provoked my aggression, the game now pushes the results of my violent behaviour in my face. 'Look at what you did,' it appears to say.

Each new chapter begins in Jackets apartment, which changes subtly between missions. Most notably, small newspaper clippings can be found, sometimes on the kitchen table, other times on the bed or on the coffee table. Apart from the answering machine that delivers the orders initiating the next killing spree, these are the only items in the house that can be interacted with. They offer tiny snippets of back story of questionable significance, as well as a dryly formulated reflection on the consequence of Jacket's deadly outings: " ...six bodies found on East 7th St...police suspects ties to illegal drug trade...". Reading them, however, is entirely optional, and because nothing else in the apartment can be used, picked up or interacted with in any way, I missed them completely when I played the game for the first time.

At a number of moments in between missions, the Jacket suddenly finds himself in a dark, filthy room, in which three men in animal masks address him in a condescending tone. The dialogue con-

sists of vague allusions to the story and the Jacket's behaviour, and they ask questions which seemingly aim to nudge the character and the player towards an introspective attitude towards his own actions: "do you like hurting other people?". In these sequences, the player is unable to do anything except skip through the dialogue. Jacket never replies, so no dialogue options are given, placing these completely uninteractive scenes in direct opposition to the ultraviolent hyperactive play segments.

This opposition is crucial to understanding the way the game creates its expression. In the gameplay segments, the player is pushed towards violent action and unquestioning progression, while in the interluding moments, he is pulled back to a static mode of reflection and introspection. This creates a certain dissonance, both within the game and the player. Within the game, the dissonance is what Clint Hocking defines as a ludonarrative dissonance (2009, p. 256): the procedural suggestion, which is to keep moving, keep killing and not ask questions, seems sharply at odds with the narrative implication that what you do in the game does matter in some way. This dissonance is amplified by the fact that, after each of these introspective moments, the Jacket resumes his violent journey as if nothing happened.

The dissonance internalised in the player is a cognitive dissonance. In psychology, the term cognitive dissonance is used when someone suffers from holding two or more opposing beliefs (McLeod 2008). In this case, the stress comes down to trying to reconcile one's violent behaviour with the most obvious answer to the question whether one likes to hurt other people, which is (hopefully, anyway) no, I don't. Ultimately, I am the one who controls Jacket to commit his heinous acts. I do this as unquestioningly as he does, because I am immersed in the game. The lusory attitude that is required of the audience of a game, asks of the player a certain compliance with the rules of the game world. If I want to play this game, I have to kill a lot of people. This is my justification for my violent behaviour: there really is no other choice, it seems, because it is impossible to complete most levels without killing everyone in sight.

This leads to an interpretation of Hotline Miami as a sharp criticism of the portrayal and unquestioning acceptance of violence in video games. By putting the player in this position of dissonance, by withholding justification and explanation for the required actions within the game (which most players, myself included, carry out willingly and, admittedly, with pleasure - it is a difficult but engaging challenge after all), it relinquishes the judgement of this behaviour to the player himself. It confronts me with a stinging moral problem: I enjoy all this action and violence, but it does not seem to serve a narrative purpose beyond the violence itself, leaving me behind with internal questions: Why are you doing this? Are you okay with all this violence without cause? Can it be because, as the game's dialogue explicitly asks at one point, I "like hurting people"?

This is of course, as is inherent to an interpretation, at least a partly subjective affair. Not every player may stop to reflect on the deeper lying meaning but opt instead to just revel in the challenge of the game, as many seem to do. Some players, in fact, seem to actively rebel against the game's attempt to force introspective judgement upon them. As a forum user by the handle of Drake Sigar notes: "Nobody can pin this shit on me, I was just following the universe's orders (2012).

However, there still seems a general tendency in reviews and user reports to pick up on this reading of the game, notably by game developer Rami Ismail of the Dutch development studio Vlambeer, who defends the importance of the game in an article on Gamasutra (2012). Importantly, many reviews describe the same feeling of unease with the contrasting message the game appears to put out: "I'm vaguely aware that I'm blaming the developers for the horrible things I've done to relieve my boredom" (ibid, par. 40), while some comment explicitly on the ludonarrative dissonance that creates this (Taber 2012, par. 3).

If this interpretation is followed, the questions become poignant and lay bare the very sense of cognitive dissonance that seems to underlie the game's story. I kill all these virtual characters because it is asked of me, but is it really true that I do not have a choice, that I can hide behind the game's rules, like 'Drake Sigar' above? After all, this justification, if examined rationally, is a false one: I do not have to play this game. Even if the game forces me to kill people in order to progress, it is still a choice to keep playing.

However, just as the choice of whether or not the newspaper articles are allowed into the game's narrative is left up to the player, so is the matter of whether or not one engages with the conflicting introspective mood of the segments in between the action. This freedom of choice about whether or not to engage with the game's argument is key to understanding how the game also leaves room for a second reading, which seems almost diametrically opposed to the first interpretation: a tongue-in-cheek rejection of seeking narrative and meaning as a reason for why the game is to be played.

A different interpretation: mocking the meaning seeking player
Up to this point, the signs I have described do indeed point towards the suggestion that Hotline Miami wants ask its audience critical questions about their behaviour as players. But for a game that wishes to criticise violence, it is peculiar that its mechanics and reward structure actually encourage violence, recklessness and behaviour uncritical of consequence. In no way is violent behaviour ever punished or discouraged (quite the opposite, in fact), and never does the main character ever question, or face the consequences of, his actions.

As said before, early on in the game a character asks the Jacket (or, by extension, the player) if he likes hurting people. But in the same sequence, three other questions are posed that are easily forgotten, because they are never anwered: "Who is leaving messages on your answering machine? Where are you right now? Why are we having this conversation?". The questions are asked, suggesting that the player should reconsider or at least critically examine his behaviour and his place in the game world.

After this, you are free to go, and continue on the killing spree that has perhaps started to feel natural by this point - presumably on a mission to find answers to these questions. But the character continues, unquestioningly and silent, throughout the first eleven (out of nineteen) chapters of the game, and the questions are never answered. Then, at the end of the eleventh chapter, the character is shot down in a set sequence. He 'wakes up' in a dream-like scene in his apartment where another confrontation with a single masked character in a sofa awaits.

> "Before we say goodbye, I'll let you in on a secret...
> What you do from here on, won't serve any purpose.
> You will never see the whole picture...
> And it's all your own fault. ...
> Now it's time for you to leave.
> There's a warm bed across the hall from here...
> And you look like you could use some rest."

The chapter that follows is a crucial turning point, both in terms of narrative and of argument, and is radically different from all of the other chapters, both in terms of gameplay and aesthetic. It begins with the Jacket waking up in a hospital bed. The bright neon colours are replaced by the sterile white of a hospital's corridors, and the nimbleness and aggressiveness of the protagonist are completely taken away. The player's control over the character is severely hampered by the fact that he cannot attack anyone, moves at about half of his normal speed, and has to stop every few paces to

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avoid passing out. The upbeat music is replaced by an ambient hum, and the screen tilts and distorts wildly the more the character moves around. The goal is to escape the hospital, defenceless and hamstrung, while remaining unseen by any of the guards or doctors patrolling the halls. Even coming within line of sight of one of them for just a moment means starting over from the beginning of the chapter. This chapter stands in sharp contrast to all other chapters, as it takes the entire flow out of the normally engaging gameplay and replaces it with a mechanic that is cumbersome, difficult to handle and by far not as much fun to interact with.

This chapter, which thoroughly confused me at first, seems to make sense in the context of the interpretation that the game argues for a rejection of narrative. It shows how the game is thoroughly 'broken' when the mechanics and flow are taken away, in contrast to how the game actually seemed to function quite well without a meaningful plot in the chapters before this.

This interpretation also accounts for the fact that none of the three possible endings, even the one which requires significant work gathering hidden secrets throughout the game, offer very little in the way of resolution, neither in the sense of answers to the previously asked questions or the plot, nor in the form of any meaningful comment on violence itself. In fact, the ending dialogue seems to openly mock those who seek answers, essentially arguing that it's just a game, and you play it and enjoy it even though it is meaningless.

Then, in the last part of the game, it goes on to add a little bit of narrative drive in the form of the story of the 'Biker', who the player confronted and killed earlier in the seventh chapter. The Biker, it is revealed, has also been receiving messages on his answering machine, just like the Jacket has. But, unlike the Jacket, the Biker does actually ask questions and seems to be affected by all the digital slaughter. If the Jacket is a metaphor for the the player who plays for the fun and flow of the mechanics without delving too much into the meaning behind his behaviour (as one might argue of some players of games like Call of Duty), then the Biker can be said to be a metaphor for the player who seeks meaning within the game.

The last few chapters play out to be a short story of his seeking revenge, or answers, or at least some kind of resolution. However, as the final plot draws to a close, the Biker is confronted with two janitors in a basement, who appear to reveal themselves to be representations of the developers and seem to openly mock the Biker, as well as the player, for seeking meaning and reason behind the whole murderous journey:

BIKER:
What's going on down here?
BEARDED JANITOR:
We're playing a game... Aren't we?
BLONDE JANITOR:
And you're one of our pawns aren't you?
BEARDED JANITOR:
I guess this means game over...
BIKER:
Who are you working for?
BLONDE JANITOR:
No one, haha
BEARDED JANITOR:
We're independent, we did it all ourselves
BLONDE JANITOR:
Hard to believe isn't it?

BIKER:
You think this is a game?
BEARDED JANITOR:
Don't you?
BLONDE JANITOR:
You mean you haven't enjoyed it?
BEARDED JANITOR:
That's a shame, haha
BIKER:
why are you killing people?
BLONDE JANITOR:
We haven't killed anyone, you have...
BEARDED JANITOR:
They were all scum anyway, weren't they?
BLONDE JANITOR:
You think they deserved to live? Do you?
BIKER:
That's it?
BLONDE JANITOR:
Haha, you seem disappointed?
BEARDED JANITOR:
What were you expecting?
I think we're through with your questions
BLONDE JANITOR:
Yeah, your move, creep

After these final lines of dialogue, the Biker kills them both and leaves on his motorcycle, riding away in the sunset while the credits roll. There is no resolution, no answers, just the seemingly smug comment that it was all 'just a game'. No real comment on violence has been given, nor has the plot been resolved in any meaningful way. All that still stands is the experience - the eighteen levels full of engaging, murderous combat. This may seem unsatisfying, and in some ways, it is. But in a way, this seems a fundamental aspect Hotline Miami. As a reviewer on Rock Paper Shotgun comments: "[Hotline Miami] is indefensible. That's rather the point" (Meer 2012).

There is an alternative ending for those attentive or determined enough to gather a sequence of hidden secrets throughout the level. These are tiny glowing pixels, which when collected turn into letters to form the sentence "Born in the USA". This sentence, when fully collected and puzzled into place, can be entered in a computer in the final chapter, right before the scene with the janitors. However, the alternative ending still offers no significant resolution, just a short dialogue with the same janitors who speak a few lines of dialogue about a "patriot" organisation that is barely touched upon in the rest of the game. The game ends, again, with the Biker killing them both, saying "I have no interest in politics. You people have wasted enough of my time".

If the Biker truly stands for the inquisitive player, this is the ultimate rejection of narrative: when presented with the answers to his questions, he declares his indifference, writing off his search for resolution as a waste of time. Even to the player inquisitive enough to put in hours of extra game-play collecting puzzle pieces, the message remains the same: there is no meaning. All that matters is the experience, and players that seek a deeper meaning (embodied in the game by the Biker) can write the game off as a "waste of time."

Although the majority of online reviews and commentaries emphasise the critical message embedded in the first interpretation, this nihilist reading of Hotline Miami has been picked up on by some, commenting for instance on its postmodern qualities (Bernstein 2012).[3]

In a way, this interpretation doubles back to the core intent of the first one, to confront me with my own violent behaviour. I invested several hours in playing through a game, following its arc until completion. At the end, I found out that its story was meaningless, and there is no real justification to be found in the narrative for my violent behaviour. Again, I find myself hiding behind the presupposed lusory attitude and the restrictions of the possibility space. I had no other choice, right? In fact, there is always a choice: if you do not enjoy a game, you can always quit playing. However, I did enjoy playing it. But if the enjoyment didn't come from a meaningful plot, then from what? Then it must have been the action itself, in spite of (or even, perhaps, because of?) all the gory, dehumanising misconduct that it is.

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[3] See also the video game criticism channel Errant Signal (2012) on Youtube for an in-depth interpretation that roughly follows this line of interpretational argumentation.

5. The perma-death experiment

Stretching 'intended' design

In chapter 4, I have shown two possible interpretations of the Hotline Miami that strongly depend on the player's attitude and his navigation of the game's possibility space. Through a close reading of the game, supported by commentary from the gaming community and games journalism, it has become clear that there is no single way to read meaning into Hotline Miami. The way one engages with the experience put forth in the game leaves a significant amount of space for personal interpretation and variation, which suggests that, indeed, the player holds at least at least some degree of contribution to the authorship of the game's meaning.

In this chapter, I will build upon this close reading to extend this authorship even further, using the interpretational foundation I have laid out in the previous chapter as a base line for comparison with the outcome of a radically different way of playing the game. As I will argue, engaging with the research method of expansive play (in my case, the introduction of a new self-imposed rule of perma-death) can open up a game to reveal avenues of experience and meaning that are not encountered when playing the game in a conventional way. As such, it offers not only advantages in terms of unique experiences, but also in terms of new methodological approaches.

Many researchers and reviewers arguably engage with the 'intended' design of the game only, perhaps out of a reluctance to allow the researcher's subjectivity to seep into the analysis. Espen Aarseth (2003) notes that play is, of course, an essential tool in acquiring knowledge about a game (p. 3). This play can take many forms, but it appears that for Aarseth, this play should only be aimed at revealing the game 'as is'. Primarily concerned with keeping this original "flavour" of the game intact, Aarseth warns against the use of cheats to speed up the research process, which spoil this flavour and may taint the research in such a way that "it is hard to imagine excellence (...) arising from such practices (p.4). To him, it seems impossible to reach a deep understanding of a game if the researcher cheats in the game they are studying (p. 7).

While it is certainly true in most cases that one needs to experience how a game is supposed to be played in order to gain solid knowledge about it, in reality players engage with games in many different ways. Some may simply be inept at playing a game and thus fail constantly, some may elevate their play to competitive levels by recording 'speed runs' and challenging others to do better by completing the game faster, and some may, indeed cheat. As Kücklich (2007) argues, cheating may actually be employed as a methodological tool which helps a researcher to "reflect upon the presuppositions that we bring to games, (...) identify blind spots in our research perspectives and thus discover new avenues of inquiry, (...) [and] help recognise flaws in our theoretical models, which are so often built upon the experience of playing by the rules, rather than breaking them" (p. 357).

Rather than going to great lengths to preserve our gloss of objectivity as researchers, it may be prudent, as Lammes (2007, p. 28) and Glas (2012, p. 91) suggest, to instead embrace and transparently reflect on our subjectivity as a player. Although the method that I am proposing is not a form of cheating (if anything, the introduction of a rule of perma-death makes the game much harder than usual), I consider this line of reasoning to apply to my approach also. As Kücklich argues, one of the most fundamental aspects of game is the "dialectic between exerting control and surrendering to the control of the game" (2007, p. 360). Through expansive play, a researcher can push the boundaries of control within the possibility space towards opening up new revelations of what the game means and how it works. Thus, it is a valuable research practice to not only play a game, but to also play with a game.

As I will demonstrate below, adding the rule of perma-death to Hotline Miami broadens the possible reading of the game, heightens the procedurally supported sense of desperation and danger and can guide the player down new paths in terms of narrative and gameplay. Not only does the experience of playing the game become much more intense, it also shows that when death has real consequences, violence is no longer a light-hearted and safe act. Perma-death enables Hotline Miami to show a distinctly different reading than the interpretations mentioned in the previous chapter: a violent rampage through hostile territory is not a glorious affair, but nasty, brutish and short.

What follows is my reflection on how the voluntary introduction of the perma-death rule can change the experience of playing Hotline Miami, as well as its narrative focus, beyond what may have been the developers' intentions, thus putting the player in a position of authorship in collaboration with the game.

A new experience

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the play experience and the story of Hotline Miami are strongly entangled with one another. The player, and his conscience, play an active role in the completion of the game's message: that video game violence is a theme worthy of introspection and critique. If we look at the game's protagonist, we see a largely blank slate - a mirror that is used to confront the player with his own behaviour. What little we know of his personality is to be concluded mostly from his behaviour - and thus from my own as a player of the game. This behaviour paints him as an enthusiastic violent killer, who revels in the glory of well executed improvised battle. He is an action hero of the kind that succeeds through an unlikely string of lucky breaks and lightning-quick reactions. If he would speak in between his kills, he would perhaps utter James Bond-like quips making light of his enemies' demise.

This is made possible because his own death does not really exist in his universe. When opponents die, their death is permanent. When Jacket dies, his death is undone in less than a second and with the press of a single button. This creates a narrative in which only the successful runs really happen; the many other tries where I made a mistake and let Jacket die are simply rewound and undone. The narrative can thus be seen as a fragmented text, which is 'compiled' only after play is finished (Keogh 2012, p. 3). Changing this mechanic by connecting the characters death to the consequence of ending the run changes this fragmented narrative to a single, unbroken narrative (Abraham 2013, p. 1).

The introduction of the self-imposed rule of perma-death has distinctly different implications for an arcade-style game like Hotline Miami than it has on the adventure game of Minecraft. A main cause of this is the speed of the interactions and the fragility of the character. Where Keogh's story of his experience with Minecraft revolved around a sense of exploration and accomplishment afforded by the fact that he managed to persistently escape death (albeit sometimes narrowly), my own experiment turned out to be more of a story of the inevitability of death.

Although I had played through the entire game at least twice, with many repeated runs of separate single chapters in order to gather information about the game, I had clearly not yet reached the expert level of play required to get very far without dying. It became clear in the first attempts that this was not going to be a narrative of victory, but of inevitable defeat. The question is not if my character is going to die, but when and how - many runs ended with me dying on the second or third chapter.

As time progressed, I grew alternately more frustrated and more cautious. The frustrated approach seemed to work at times, because speed and recklessness can be an asset when trying to surprise enemies before they can react. However, the significant downside to an aggressive style of play is that it

requires a sustained agility with the controls, a very fast reaction speed to deal with unexpected situations and, crucially, a certain degree of luck. When playing the game regularly, this may be the best approach, which, as I have pointed out in the previous chapter, is procedurally reinforced by the point system which awards credits for reckless behaviour. This primarily works, however, when a mistake followed by an untimely demise can be made undone with the push of a single button. When dying carries with it the serious consequence of losing the progress up to that point, this risk becomes increasingly unacceptable the further one progresses.

Over time, I learned the value of careful observation and pattern recognition in the AI's behaviour. The transition to a more cautious approach thus seemed natural. As I grew more cautious, I became more aware of the fragility of life in this game. With this awareness came a certain emotional involvement with the character's fate that I had not experienced in the game before - not because I developed an emotional bond with the protagonist, but because his fate became intricately entangled with my own. In the regular playthroughs of the game, when death was still inconsequential, life had very little meaning. This time around, life was distinctly fragile, and fear of death became more real and much more tangible.

During this experiment, I became immersed in the game in a different way. The intense concentration that its challenges may account largely for the fact that this immersion was much more intense - at the most concentrated moments I forgot all about the world outside the game. But the increasing awareness of the entanglement of my character's fate with my own also changed the nature of this immersion in a very distinct way. In the regular runs, the 'intended' narrative of the game, delivered through cut-scenes, dialogue and the dynamic of action and stasis (which I described in the previous chapter) played an important role in my experience of the game. During my experiment, the lines of dialogue became a hindrance, and I skipped through them as fast as I could. In this way, they lost their importance to my experience entirely. By bending the way I engaged with its rules, I also dramatically altered the tone and the structure of the experience. It was no longer about the character inside the story, but about myself as a player inside the game world. Or, to put it differently: in a certain way I became the character in the narrative created by my inclusion of a custom ruleset.

As my entanglement with my character's fate became more pronounced, a new reading emerged which may, perhaps, be seen as an even more fundamental critique of the way violence is portrayed in games. Through the addition of an edge of consequence and realism, the game now shows that violence is not the easy affair which it is often portrayed to be. A violent rampage, as my desperate, flailing (and ultimately, unsuccessful) attempts to finish the game in this way made painfully clear, never ends with the person gloriously perched atop a pile of his enemies dead bodies. It ends suddenly, quickly and violently, without ceremony or room for dramatic last words.

Felan Parker (2008, pp. 1, 5) argues that the experience of a video game is situated between its fixed rules, such as the principle that being shot causes the death of my character, and implied rules which are not strictly enforced but are do tend to shape or steer interaction in a certain way. The most relevant example of such an implied rule in Hotline Miami would be that death is of little consequence because of the ease of 'resurrection' of the protagonist. The practice of expansive play, to Parker, exists within this construct of fixed and implied rules, and change the assumption of how the game is 'supposed' to be played by changing, amending or ignoring the existing implied rules (p. 4). Brendan Keogh (2013) argues that if this interpretation of a video game is accepted, expansive play can still be seen as "playing the game as designed" (p.2) - even if the altered experience of the game hardly resembles how it is regularly played.

However, although the inclusion of a perma-death rule does not strictly make Hotline Miami into a different game - I am still bound in my interactions by the fixed affordances and constraints that the

game offers - it does impose a dramatic shift in what the focus of the game is about and how it is experienced. It is clear that a game can offer dramatically different experiences in unexplored regions of its possibility space.

Bending the experience of a game by engaging with it in a way that may not be the original intention of the game does not detract from its ability to convey meaning. In fact, as Clint Hocking reflected in the introduction to Ben Abraham's perma-death experiment with Far Cry 2 (2009), it may infuse the medium with the potential to engage with it in a profoundly critical and introspective way by confronting the player with his own feelings of "fickleness, foolishness, cowardice and frailty". My experience of experimenting with Hotline Miami has certainly convinced me of this potential power of expansive play. Hotline Miami, once infused with the desperation and struggle of the very real stakes of permanent death may actually come closer to simulating the reality of violence than a regular reading does. It now teaches that violence is distinctly *not* glorious and heroic, but a frightful, frantic and chaotic affair. Moreover, where the original reading plays around with my own justification of all the violence - pulling it out from underneath me and confronting me openly with why I am doing this - in this new reading, a new justification emerges that actually seems defensible. Because the stakes are now so high, I find myself in a distinct situation of self-defence where it is either them or me. By adding the fear of death to the gameplay experience, I find myself closer to the mindset of someone who is actually caught in a battle situation, complete with an understanding of how it can be justified to kill this other person who is trying to end my life. In this sense, expansive play explores the theme of violence even more in-depth. It potentially provides insight into aspects of violence that have to be experienced to be fully understood, touching upon the stress of battle and the frailty of life and the banality of death and even issues of PTSD and how it is possible for soldiers in battle situations to kill first and to have to deal with the psychological implications later. For this reason, expansive play proves to be a very fruitful method to unearth hidden content.

6. Conclusion

By means of an in-depth procedural analysis, I have endeavoured to show how Hotline Miami attempts to steer the process of meaning creation towards a critical perspective on violence. Of course, the way a player interacts with the game can colour this perspective, in the sense that some players may may read deeply into the story, while others may play the game just for the experience and neglect to engage with the embedded critical message, or even reappropriate the game's structure to create a computational and public element. This gives rise to a variety in how the game is read, and what meaning a player takes away from the experience. Hotline Miami can be read (as indeed it is) as both a critical commentary on how violence is portrayed in video games, but also as an insightful and perhaps confronting look at our behaviour and presupposition as players of the game.

Furthermore, my method of applying the principles of expansive play to Hotline Miami shows that it is possible to stretch this authorship of the player even further by bending or augmenting its rules. A game inherently leaves freedom to the player to behave in different ways (otherwise it would not be an interactive experience), and it leaves significant room to explore the possibility space far beyond what is commonly seen as the boundaries of the game.

For Hotline Miami, this opens up an entirely new meaningful experience that can teach the player something new about the themes embedded in the game. If played and read through the principle of perma-death, Hotline Miami now offers a deeper understanding of the intricate workings of violence. The first thing that springs to mind is that when severe consequences are attached to the death of the character, it becomes painfully clear that violence is not at all a light and easy affair. A normal reading may already slightly hint towards this, as it is quite difficult even without the rule of perma-death embedded in its ruleset. But with this principle included, the violent rampage that in a normal playthrough can be seen as a stitched up narrative where the failures are erased from the completed story now turns into a desperate fight for survival where there is absolutely no room for lightheartedness and lapses of concentration.

It is this extreme increase in difficulty, coupled with an increased sense of attachment to the character's fate, that bring this new experience closer to a realistic position on violence, allowing the player to actually feel the sense of stress, anxiety and terror that comes with having to fend for his life. Where the readings I explored in chapter 4 are arguably built around the mechanism that the player has the justification for his violence pulled out from underneath him, this desperate, flailing attempt to finish the game without dying actually seems to bring this justification back. The violence, now, can be seen to be truly justified through the desperate fight for survival, turning into a situation of 'it's either them them or me'.

From a methodological standpoint, this shows that it can be truly revealing to approach games in such an innovative, deviant manner. Many reviewers and academics examine a game 'as is', following an intended use of the game. But as my analysis and experiment show, interesting results can be gained from approaching a game beyond a 'vanilla' reading.

Because games leave a space of possibility within its rules, different players can play the game differently. As is also apparent from researchers such as Kücklich (2007), Lammes (2007) and Glas (2012), strictly adhering to the rules may thus miss a significant part of the rich practice and culture of gameplay which may be critical to understanding games as interactive media or even works of art. In more broad strokes, although this is more of a suggestion for further research and theoretical development, my experimentation method can fit into a general cultural tendency of a re-evaluation of objectivity and an embrace of subjectivity in many fields of society. In journalism, the gonzo-

movement (as first propagated by Hunter S. Thompson (1970) in an article about the Kentucky Derby) embodied in new journalistic platforms such as Vice or the Dutch website De Correspondent, seems to lean toward a tendency of eschewing the fly-on-the-wall perspective in favour of an approach more appreciative and transparent towards its inevitable subjectivity and putting the author/researcher in a more central place, or at least acknowledging their presence within the story. Some journalistic authors would even argue that, as William Faulkner put it, "fiction is often the best fact", and indeed, the Dutch Middle-East correspondent Joris Luyendijk observed that "sometimes the only way to convey the truth is to violate it" (1999).

It seems fitting, then, that academic and journalistic writing about games should follow the same lines towards a more appreciative and transparent attitude towards subjectivity. As the recent 'new games journalism'-movement shows, the field of journalism appears to be taking the lead in this matter (see for instance Kieran Gillen's often-cited manifesto The New Games Journalism (2004), and it is through subversive, innovative and expansive play that we can take steps toward a reflexive research field.

It seems to me to be a very fruitful attitude to, at least in some research, allow the subjectivity of the researcher to enter into the writing. Embracing subjectivity can be an asset to any researcher if carefully considered, reflected upon and made transparent. Whats more, engaging in research methods that eschew the objectivist approach of examining games 'as intended' and instead go beyond developer's intent and even normal gameplay can prove to lay bare fundamental insights into what games mean, what place they have in our society and how we can improve them as critical cultural objects.

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