Roll 2d6 to kill

Neoliberal design and its affect in traditional and digital role-playing games

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Introduction: Why we play

The approach of violence or taboo in game design is a discussion that has historically been a controversial one. The Columbine shooting caused a moral panic for violent shooter video games[1], the 2007 game *Mass Effect* made FOX News headlines for featuring scenes of partial nudity[2], and the FBI kept tabs on *Dungeons & Dragons* hobbyists for being potential threats after the Unabomber attacks.[3] The question 'Do video games make people violent?' does not occur within this thesis. Rather, I wish to investigate the cause and **a**ffect of violence in video games. What are the historical roots of agency in game design? How does this standardised agency draw from neoliberal ideas of risk, individualism, and meritocracy? How does this affect contribute to a depoliticising effect of video games? I am interested in the *why it is*, as opposed to *what does it do*.

Moreover, when I say 'historical roots' of violence in games I do not mean the history of violent video games. There is a specific form of game in which violence is not merely sensational (as is the case in arcade games) but also agential in an affective manner. The *role-playing game* is a format in which players are urged to relate to, identify with, or immerse in the character(s) they control in the game-space. These player-characters are the crossroads at which player agency and rulesets meet, placed within the fiction of a game, restricted only by mechanical objections and enlivened by the ostensible unlimited freedom of movement of fiction. Tracing the player-character from their first inception of the table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 to a number of digital games today, I can offer a Foucauldian perspective to game studies by addressing their neoliberal tendencies.

In order to provide this thesis with an effectual framework, it should include the apperception of seeing video games as three things: a cultural artefact, a technical-commercial product, and an artistic affect. Although the main concern is with how affect subsists as a role in the presence of 'play' and how we might imagine an affective play, this ternary focus is crucial for relative and relevant context to how an affect is established, and, ultimately, how feeling is transmitted to players. The structure of the thesis is to first establish a theoretical bulk that will consider affective play as a heuristic, then explore how violent-as-play functions as an affective tool..

To find out how 'play' and 'affect' are interwoven in this broad medium, both terms require a definition and a discursive backdrop. As video games are an interactive narrative, an interdisciplinary approach is required. Consisting of literature studies, entertainment psychology, affective computing, game design, interactive narrative, robotics, agents, natural interaction and interaction design, the result is a holistic perspective over the area of emotion in games as viewed by the variant research

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[1] E. Kain, "The Truth About Video Games and Gun Violence" Mother Jones <11-06-2013> http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/06/video-games-violence-guns-explainer/ Retrieved <10-08-2015>
[2] A. Chalk, "EA Responds to Mass Effect Report on Fox News" Escapist Magazine < 24-01-2008> http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/80900-EA-Responds-to-Mass-Effect-Report-on-Fox-News Retrieved <10-08-2017>
[3] J. P. Brown, "FBI investigated a group of Dungeons and Dragons players as part of the Unabomber case" Muckrock <19-06-2017> https://www.muckrock.com/news/archives/2017/jun/19/fbi-dnd Retrieved <10-08-2017>

angles offered by these different research fields.

From this cauldron of criticality, a heuristic mode of analysis can be presented which is particular to and effective for viewing games. Expounding on this, a timeline of video games as a medium is also fundamental; after all, it is not self-evident that games would come to standardise violence as their main form of agency. What led games to assume violence to be the most accessible mode of agency? How can we view an affect borne to violence?

Moreover, a philosophical conceptualisation of player agency is conscripted into the thesis, as well as the consequence of standardising violence-as-agency into the element of play. Two particular lenses are cast to this end.

The first is historical-cultural in nature. Why is this design decision pertinent to the very foundations upon which games' further elements are constructed? The answer to this does not stop there at the 'why' of things; it lets us imagine past the apparent necessity for violence in video games, and how game design can utilise other forms of agency to break the mould and explore new modes of play. This is not to claim there are no games without violence – puzzle games, mystery games, 'walking simulator' games, to name a few. These games, while overlap is certainly possible, focus on cognitive problem-solving and exploration, not violence, as their main method of challenge-solving. Nor do I claim that there are no games that cleverly make use of the industry's propensity for agential violence as a meta-textual statement. Yet it is undeniable that violence is a popular choice in game design, and by looking at its history, it becomes possible to find out why that is.

The second lens deals with modern games as a neoliberal artefact. Fundamental to a neoliberal way of looking at play is the individualist approach of 'risk', 'risk-taking', and 'risk management'.[4] In the concept of a 'player character', that is, a focal embodiment of the player who is framed as the hero around which the game-space is centred, certain affects of individualism and meritocracy become apparent. The narrative-technical liberties of what games allow players to do simultaneously conditions players how they should interact with a game-world (rulesets, reward incentives, or fail states). One taciturn element to neoliberalism is that its actors have a tendency to present themselves as apolitical, suggesting about themselves that forces of pervasive global dynamics of capital and labour can bear no real, political effect enacting societal change.[5] In artistic representation, too, especially in the fiction of role-playing games, the political is denied as a way to shirk individual accountability and responsibility despite complicity or activity.

When a proper introduction and an eclectic discourse has been established, the focus shifts from the theoretical to an applied practical. This will not be a quantitative research, however but a

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[4] A. Berg, "Neoliberalism, Risk, and Uncertainty in the Video Game", in: *Capital at the Brink: Overcoming the Destructive Legacies of Neoliberalism,* eds. J. R. Di Leo, U. Mehan (Michigan, 2014) p. 192 – 194.
[5] S. Springer, "The Violence of Neoliberalism" (s.a., Victoria), p. 4 – 16.

qualitative one, viewing a number of games as a literary text for an approach akin to close reading. There are an overwhelming amount of games, as well as different kinds of games and game developers, so I have decided to limit myself to a series of games that deconstruct agency through definitive exposition and contextualisation of violence. This has brought me to focus on one director in particular: Yoko Taro. His visionary, unorthodox way of telling stories and designing games, prioritising the affect of play over the quality and cohesion of a product.

Of the games he has directed, I will be focusing on *Drakengard* (Cavia, 2003) and *Drakengard 3* (Access Games, 2013) in that order. The first hyperbolises violence-as-play and revokes player reward in favour of negative affect. The third *Drakengard* game (Drakengard 2 is neither directed by Taro, nor is it considered canon in the *Drakengard* fictional universe) maintains a chiasmic relationship with its predecessor, placing the player in a voyeuristic position as they have to bear witness to but are powerless to stop violence happening to the game's main character.

Part 1 – The history and neoliberalism of play & table-top role-playing games

Defining what the element of 'play' signifies in video games cannot be accurately done without first contemplating why video games are played in the first place. There are many types of games offering a plurality of player experience – story-driven games that take from fantasy or science-fiction settings, puzzle games designed around problem-solving, military games that take on realistic, strategic settings, and much more. All this is emblematic of a diversity in aesthetic desires in the consumers and an insistence on (a degree of) creative exploration on the development side. With a market saturated with choice, there can be no singular answer to *why* people play games. Nor should we expect a teleology for what people seek through play. For both the player and the game designer, different aesthetic values hold true that effect a wide diversity of desires and preferences.[6] However games might be designed, framed, and conducted, though, play is their function. They provide a deliberate activity that keeps players engaged and immersed in a unique experience. The ascription of play does not monolithically banish the concept of game to the realm of leisure. Games, simply put, have crossover with art.

Mary Midgley noted as early as 1974 that games and art are premised on a conceptual unity, because they both "deal with human needs, which certainly do have a structure"[7]. This unity signals something deeper that goes beyond the formulation of experiences with either to a mono-categorical language. The conceptual division between game and art does not preclude experiential similarities with the aesthetic and the meaningful they share. Indeed, Midgley argues, the language used to

[6] N. Lazzaro, "Why We Play: Affect and The Fun of Games" (2003) in: *The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook: Fundamentals, Evolving Technologies, and Emerging Applications,* eds., S. A, Jacko L. Erlbaum (New York, 2003), p. 679–700.
[7] M. Midgley, "The Game Game", in: *Philosophy* vol. 49, no. 189 (Cambridge, 1974), p. 231 – 255.

describe engagement, be it with art or with games, ought to be interchangeable.[8] The aesthetic motives for engagement are demonstrably a multiplicity and a heterogeneity. Game developer Chris Bateman has eloquently summarised most (but certainly not all) reasons for play: the motivational forces of social gratification, thrill-seeking, or curiosity; game-specific motives of victory, problem-solving, or acquisition; or representative motives of narrative, horror, and agency.[9] With so much breadth, depth, and content, the argument can easily be made that games cannot or should not be considered only through the disciplinary lens of 'game' studies.

Rules and fiction: play, interplay, and interstice

Although similar and symbiotic in nature, the concept of 'game' differs from that of 'play'. According to Thomas Malaby, 'game' is a kind of physical, organised activity with a defined set of rules and roles, whereas 'play' should be seen as a dispositional stance toward the indeterminate.[10] Games provide the context for differing outcomes – win or loss –, while play is the constant matrix of interaction with these outcomes and the preparation for these outcomes. This new terminology is crucial, as this opens up ways in viewing 'play' as a state of mind where one is fixated on being engaged, rather than analyse it as the interaction which occurs between person and object, or player and game.

This interaction is mediated through the presence of rules. Rules, in common understanding, are regulations which limit freedom of action in a shared public space, setting, or shared context. They are restrictive in nature – yet, in games, players voluntarily[11] submit themselves to these confiscations in order. From this perspective of voluntary restriction, 'game' in a general sense provide three things: 1) a way for players to familiarise with the order of play through play itself; 2) obstacles and challengers that require a contextual ingenuity, on top of familiarity, to deal with; 3) the room for players to devise strategies of play that are more complex than the rules themselves, giving the opportunity to make use of the possible interstices and blind spots between rules.[12]

Although rules take different forms as games move between media (rules become algorithms in the digital space), the framing of a restrictive space players or gamers voluntarily enter in to remains a core feature of any game. Rules, as a rule of thumb, govern movement and action in a game-space, which shapes play in a specific way. In this sense, they regulate mechanical interplay between player

[8] Midgey, "The Game Game", p. 231 – 255, 233, 240.
[9] C. Bateman, "The Aesthetic Motives of Play", in: *Emotions in Games: Theory and Praxis*, eds., A. Hussain, E. Cambria (Bern, 2016)
[10] T. M. Malaby, "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience" (2009) in: *New Literary History,* vol. 40, no. 1 (2009), p. 205 – 218.
[11] Voluntarily as defined as agreeing to the rules of the game while playing it – this says nothing about social pressure to participate in a game along with others or at the suggestion of peers.
[12] J. Juul, *Half-real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (London, 2005), p. 155.

and game.[13] For that reason, when I talk about 'mechanics', I refer to a game's rules. When I talk about 'gameplay', I refer to the player interacting with those rules in a way that could result in the most positive outcome.

This regulatory frame is, on itself, an autarkic object and capable of being played – checkers and traditional card games are examples hereof. But as is often the case, having only rules is bare-bones and insufficient to provide a proper aesthetic motive for the dispositional stance of play.[14] Chess represents a unit as being a member of the feudal order: the knight, the queen, the bishop, among others. Playing cards exceeding ten, too, are represented through a similar feudalistic hierarchy: the jack, the king, and the joker. These representations add nothing to the functionality of the game – players, in essence, do not need this extra information in order to play the game. Still, they prove essential in an emotive sense.

Rulesets and gameplay is dressed up with broad aesthetical and ornamental elements in order to make them more creatively engaging.[15] Fiction and mechanics are complementary axes, but they are not symmetrical. Mechanics can be understood as the blueprint of a game, the object, while fiction serves as the projection upon that object. It is a multi-layered structure on top of the blueprint that speak to players' imaginations through for example graphics, physical assets, sound design, text, advertising, and even the formulation of game rules inside of the game. Fiction is how a player can be drawn into the context of the game. It is a bridging of player-game distance, pulling the player from the real world into the fictional game world. This idea of immersion is important, as it ties into arguments of the individualism of hero narratives, the neoliberalism of risk, and the forceful de-politicisation of game fiction. If rules are designed limitation of player freedom that outline the game-space, the dressings of fiction are natural exhibits native to the game-space that are, through the implied volition, subconsciously taken for granted, incontestable, and unequivocal.[16]

Fiction, as it developed in early tabletop role-playing games (or *RPG's)*, and later on, digital games, attributed a principal contextual frame to gameplay which marked the confines of player action and player agency in moral, ethical ways. Rulesets such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Shadowrun* began allowing players to write their own characters that automatically served as the central focal points of a game's collaborative fiction, or, the heroes of a story. Players became player-characters, direct representational anchors of players weighed into the game-space and concretised through fiction. As I will illustrate, a continuously closing gap between player and game resulted in the

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[13] C. Pearce, "Towards a Game Theory of Game", in: *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game,* eds,. N. Wardrip-Fruin, P. Harrigan, (Cambridge, 2004) p. 143 – 153.
[14] G. Calleja, L. Herrewijn, K. Poels, "Affective Involvement in Digital Games", in: *Emotions in Games*
[15] A. Bartsch, P. Vorderer, R. Mangold, R. Viehoff, "Appraisal of emotions in media use: Toward A Process Model of Meta-Emotion and Emotion Regulation" in: *Media Psychology* vol. 11, no. 1 (2008), p. 7 – 27.
[16] Juul, *Half-real,* p. 141.

development of inventive systems of gameplay through which personalised embodiment and risk management was mediated. Power dynamics flourished through the mechanisms of fictional self-insertion.

Conversely, the player as character does not portend the character as player. A player's input into these shared fictionalised spaces, which establishes itself through the game's stated or unstated fiction, does not cross back into the real world as a measure against politics or personal accountability. The affect of immersive play is a semi-permeable feedback loop.[17]

Gameplay, in this regard, is the translation of a player's emotional engagement and mechanical input into a progression of tangible outcome. This definition forms a new perspective that makes it possible to consider games and digital games as an affect. Excitement, worry, curiosity, elation, disappointment – all are by-products of the maintained recourse of involvement and response when following a game's rulesets to completion or to a fail state. Affect is understood as "impersonal intensities that do not belong to a subject or an object, nor do they reside in the mediating space between a subject and an object."[18] These intensities are subjective feelings in response to either thought or external stimulus. Syncretising these two definitions, it becomes clear how affect induces feelings to occur as a corollary of play. A corollary, because affect by way of its own unnegotiable, phenomenological nature, can never be its explicitly designed intention (aside from unique cases to be handled in the thesis). Play, as an artistic mode, becomes a method to cause positive affect or to attain an absence of negative affect.[19] In other words, one affective motive of play is to seek positive feeling through the engagement of game-space.

Heroes at play: Quantification, power fantasies, and individualism

A neoliberal addendum to the explication of affect in play is made by linking the *curiosity* of engagement to the *anxiety* of risk. The explicitness of danger – the fail state – ensures that 'play' is always based on an inimical dynamic that, if conditions are not met, will mean the literal end of the experience. In role-playing games and digital games, this experience's end is a 'game over'. For instance, to indicate the player's life is at risk, jeopardised, a numeral quantification or visual indication of life is present, commonly referred to as the 'health bar'. When depleted, this ushers in the fail state: the on-screen death of the player character.[20]

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[17] E. Brown, P. Cairns, "A Grounded Investigation of Immersion in Games", (Vienna 2004); R. Busselle, H. Bilandzic, "Measuring Narrative Engagement", in: *Media Psychol* vol. 12, no. 4 (2009), p. 321 – 347.
[18] B. Anderson, "Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of "Total War" (2010) in: *The Affect Theory Reader,* eds., M. Gregg, G. J. Seigworth (London, 2010), p. 161.
[19] F. Stenseng, J. Rise, P. Kraft, "Activity Engagement as Escape from Self: The Role of Self-Suppression and Self-Expansion" in: *Leisure Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Trondheim, 2012), p. 19-38.
[20] For a more comprehensive baseline of health systems in gaming, see: Baltimoregamer.com "Video Game Basics: The Health Bar" Retrieved <02-08-2017>

Failure is formulated through the spectre of death, reminding players that what is at risk is the digital life and form they are embodying. To come out on the losing side is as much of a motivational actor – failure is an experience to take heed of next play session and strategize around in order to progress – as it is an affective stressor – the disappointment and frustration of failing to pass the game's rules and conditions. The 'stakes' of the game instruct a particular approach to play that prompts a degree of caution, strategy, rationality. This finalistic representation of failure informs play through the anxieties it induces. Risk assessors such as health bars, enemy life, and the amount of damage dealt or received urge players to constantly perform a calculus of felicity in an attempt to plot a course of action and anticipate possible consequences of their actions.[21]

Numbers play a vital role in producing or representing risk and handling risk. They enable contextual knowledge and the formulation of strategies that follows from this knowledge. In this sense, numbers are themselves the constitution of risk and the basis for managing risk. Player experience, then, is stipulated by a reliance on this quantification, which becomes a measure of risk assessment. After all, to ensure the game does not reach a fail state, players must zero in on this quantification: if health reaches zero, it means the end of the experience. Calculations must be made in order to prevent it from reaching thusly in order to prolong and maximise the aforementioned positive affect or delay of negative affect. To engage with risk means entering an actuarial matrix where loss is a possible outcome suspended in a causal frame of player input and game mechanics.[22] This greater consciousness of risk, as a stabilisation of statistical knowledges, is the backdrop for a consideration of probability and decision-making in play. Players become more involved with their occupancy in a game-space, as they are perennially occupied with the considerations to conserve it. From a design perspective, the mechanisms of risk, management, and difficulty are powerful effective and affective tools.[23]

From wargame to warrior: The transformation of violence as play

Pendant to preserving health is the awareness of what might deplete it. The origin of health systems in video games can be traced to famous pen-and-paper RPG: Dungeons & Dragons (hereafter *D&*D), designed and developed by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax in 1974. This first iteration were dubbed 'hit points', which was a specific representation of how many 'hits' a player's character could endure before dying. The world of *D&D* is a medieval-fantasy world filled with monsters, and in this setting player experience became organised around survival , and agency centered around interactions of

[21] P. O'Malley, "The Uncertain Promise of Risk," (Brisbane, 2004), p. 27.
[22] Baerg, "Neoliberalism, Risk, and Uncertainty in the Video Game", p. 193.
[23] H. J. Perkinson, *No Safety in Numbers: How the Computer Quantified Everything and Made People Risk-Aversive* (New Jersey, 1996).

conflict. The first edition of *D&D* emphasised the hostility of its world, urging adventurers to prioritise their characters' combat efficiency. The 'classes' or archetypes players could choose from were (and still are) all combat-oriented, ranging from melee proficiency to a more fantastical mastery of magic. This posed a new form of 'game', one where player-invented characters participated in a shared narrative in an improvised manner, governed by a 'Game Master' who embodied important, story-relevant characters in the world and who invented obstacles for players to overcome. Game Masters write their independent campaigns, using the playbook's rules for combat, world-building, and topography, inventing situations the party of players would need to overcome. These obstacles, per the narrative focus of the game, were frequently fearsome monsters, brutal bandits, or magical cults. That is to say, dangers which posed a physical threat to players' hit points.[24]

Since the game was designed around the inevitability of combat as a means of player self-preservation, a single session of *D&D* mostly involved fighting monsters and killing them. The act of combat, from a design perspective and a cultural-historical point of view, is its agential emphasis, which was a relatively new concept. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a moral panic swept through American and British households over the game which appeared to sensationalise violence (and Satanist elements like witches, ritualism, and black magic) as a fun pastime.[25] I say unsurprisingly, because this game was among the first to prominently feature violence in an individualistic manner, and it was a widespread contemporary cultural phenomenon that has spawned a massive gaming culture to this day.

Play, facilitated to the context of a game, becomes the basis of forming small or larger groups and identifying rules which need to be respected in order to function within those groups, nurturing social cohesion through struggle and achievement.[26] Up to that point, while the gross of games had been competitive in nature, they did not organise play around individualised and rewarded use of violence. But *D&D* was new. It is a *role-playing* game; players assume fictional hides in an open-narrative format that allow them to conduct virtually any action as long as they describe it in-fiction and the Game Master allows it – from theft to murder to rape.[27] Indeed, as a fantasy game, it allowed fantasies to flourish.

While not as big a threat to Christian values and western civilisation as the game was made out to be, it bears mentioning that the social logistics of *Dungeons & Dragons* enabled enclosed spaces where players participate in and contribute to a group narrative where they are, by design, the most

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[24] All information available on Dungeons & Dragons's official website: http://dnd.wizards.com
[25] BBC.com, "The Great 1980s Dungeons & Dragons Panic" <11-04-2014> http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26328105 Retrieved <02-08-2017>
[26] A. Hussain, *Emotions in Games: Theory and Praxis*, p. 7.
[27] T. Donovan, "#NotAllRolePlayers: A History of Rapey Dungeon Masters", VICE.com <07-29-2017> https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qbeev7/notallroleplayers-a-history-of-rapey-dungeon-masters Retrieved <02-08-2017>

important characters. The most accessible way of playing *D&D* was to get four to five friends and get together once every week or every two weeks, intimately telling a story together in a closed room accompanied by soda and snacks. It is not lofty to speak of a certain camaraderie developing, a real idea of social cohesion centered around something people outside the group did not or could not share with them. What happened in the group, stayed in the group, a localised space that was isolated from the reality of high school or job through a barrier of fantasy, fiction, and glory. The people who played *D&D*, or rather, the people that *D&D* marketed to, were predominantly a straight and white male population, until the late 2000s.[28]

The parallels in setting between Dungeons & Dragons's setting and contemporary 'sword and sorcery' novels should be addressed. This genre of medieval-fantasy male-oriented literature with titles such as Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* and Karl Edgard Wagner's *Kane* series, which helped cultivate a number of sexist narrative tropes like 'one man kills the evil villain and saves the defenceless woman, who rewards him with her body'.[29] Such a male-oriented space, whose ruleset goads a strategy of play where a character reaps the most rewards if they kill the most, and whose fiction did not address any sexuality or gender that was not idealised, male heterosexuality and masculinity, supports such a disposition through a medieval-European hero narrative, becoming grounds for cisgender, heterosexual male fantasy.

When we look at the origins of *Dungeons & Dragons,* however, we see that a player-centered system of reward was not unavoidable. In the first edition of *D&D*, there were no mechanics present to de-escalate a combat situation: the only conclusion was the annihilation of one of the parties involved. This is a leftover from Dungeons & Dragons its own cultural source: the wargame. The rulebook of *D&*D assumes that players are familiar with the rules of the medieval wargame *Chainmail* (1971), co-developed by Gary Gygax, and uses the game's combat regulations as its own. As a genre of game itself, wargames have their origins in medievalist and military historians in the 1950s devising physical representations of battle in order to better understand troop movement and military engagement.[30] However, as simulation, not open-narrative collaboration was their design philosophy, they did not present the risk of combat as a positive affect.

Chainmail, as was common with other 20th century wargames, was a miniature-based medieval combat simulation game meant to be played between two to ten players. In wargaming rulebooks, the goal of each scenario was to most accurately simulate the macro-strategy and logistics

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[28] C. D'Anastasio, "Dungeons & Dragons Has Caught Up with Third-Wave Feminism" <27-08-2014> VICE.com https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/exmqg7/dungeons-and-dragons-has-caught-up-with-third-wave-feminism-827 Retrieved <02-08-2017>

[29] H. Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Oxford, 2015)

[30] For more information see: Paddy Griffith, Donald Featherstone, Wargame Developments, the general overview of miniature wargaming[x].

of real medieval warfare. The purpose of play was not to achieve victory, as the historical battles the games are designed to simulate already have a set victor, but to give players the feel for tactical command and unorthodox command.[31]

The same affective anxiety in risk management exists in wargames, but through its framing and rulesets there is an augmented irruption of rational responsibility. The unrestrained, personal agency of imagined play is transposed onto the simulated processes of (in)direct hierarchy.[32] The quantification and actuarial matrices which constitute risk are mechanised as the management of multiple lives, rather than as the individual, personalised life of the health bar of a player character. This induces a sense of wariness and caution mediated by the impersonal distance between player and game. In wargames, there is no 'player-character' which serves as a tether of individual embodiment and positive affect of struggle and achievement.

In the first wargames, players did not embody characters: they exercised control over groups as predetermined by the game. The games contextualised violence as being a part of war, a brutal thing, rather than combat, a glorious thing: "it appropriates the conditions of its own realization, then it is more than evident that in all this there resides an expansive power."[33] Loss of life was directly mechanised into scenarios based on historical evidence about internecine parties. Contrasting with chess, where both players have armies consisting of the same numbers and types of troops, wargames were not. They simulated historical war, not battle on itself, and so they applied material conditions. If one contesting side had proven fewer soldiers or an inferior tactical position, then those were the starting conditions for one player.

For example, a popular staple in the wargame is the re-enactment of city siege battles. Games such as *Acre* (1978), *Tyre* (1978), *Lille* (1978), *Sevastopol* (1978) by Simulations Publications, Inc. were games designed and organised around one single historical siege battle. The player controlling the defenders of the city and the player controlling the besiegers started with asymmetrical troop numbers, weaponry, and fortifications. The goal of play of the defending player was to hold out and survive as long as possible against a predetermined result of victory or loss, while the attacking player played to test the defending player's tactical acumen and military savvy while exercising their own. The object of play was a realistic re-enactment of military history. The mechanics of play still governed the conduct of violence, but the games distinctly lacked a tangible in-game reward for victory or loss. Moreover, game rules did not differentiate between forms of battle; the context of play is one of continuous combat and warfare. Smaller skirmishes served as necessary components in the eventual outcome of the grand battle. Mechanics that regulated small-scale combat did not develop until the

[31] B. Cordery, *The Portable Wargame*, (s. l., 2017), p. 3 – 5.
[32] Anderson, "Modulating the Excess of Affect", p. 180 – 182.
[33] Ibidem, p. 167.

wargames of the early 1970s; the player was aught as a military commander removed from the battle they conducted. There was no contextual or thematic need to reward bantam forms of victory. The tension, thrill, and involvement of strategy and skirmish were self-contained aesthetic motives of play and an autotelic means of reward. [34]

Eventually, as wargaming developed as a genre, expansions and games emerged which diverted from macro-movement to small-scale group movement and even individual soldiers. Common was the usage of physical figures to represent numbers – a rule of thumb was that one figure was equal to twenty soldiers; in wargames of the late 60s and early 70s, this number became 10, 5, 3, or even 2. The minifying of field groups and gradually-increasing tactical precision augmented the game tension of combat engagement while conversely reducing player-game distance. Still, losing one figure meant the loss of multiple soldiers, meaning lives lost were impersonal, and this anxiety of being responsible formed the central actualisation of a failed risk. A wargame session only ended if a player's units were completely wiped out. To be on the losing side meant that players had to witness 1) how their strategic insufficiencies had led to multiple deaths as a result of their miscalculations 2) the removal of valuable assets from play by which they could prolong their part in the game.[35]

While *Chainmail* on a certain level operated on the same basis of ancillary play, it introduced an extended set of rules which allowed for direct one-on-one combat. These deadlock situations, in stark contrast to resolving a skirmish through superior tactics, were resolved entirely through the chance of dice-rolls. A number of six-sided dice were employed without extenuating circumstances or external modifiers to determine whether a man-to-man melee ended in another's death. From the official book: "*The man-to-man melee uses two six-sided dice (2d6) to determine whether a kill is made."*[36]

With just two dice, every altercation became a life-or-death situation. The anxiety of ancillary play made room for the excitement of *possibility* and *probability* of victory. In these situations, after all, it mattered little whether a player controlled the historical victor or the loser; these individual altercations could still be won regardless of predetermined fate of battle, encouraging a format of game where overcoming risk could be achieved through the eradication of danger. The conditions of melee – a duel between two – clearly asserted that a win condition is met once the other player's soldier was killed. A schism in gameplay alternated between strategically influencing the conditions of combat, and an individualistic clash where the outcome was not set in stone. With this system, the path to role-playing games was paved. Rather than indirect army management, players could now insert themselves directly into play. As wargames began branching off into this new direction,

[34] Simulations Publications, Inc. *Acre; Tyre; Lille; Sevastopol,* (1978)
[35] Ibidem
[36] G. Gynax, J. Perren, *Chainmail* (1971)

spawning a wide variety of games which take place in J. R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth.[37] This shift toward the fantastical points at a new, significant thematic unity with the aforementioned 'sword and sorcery' genre of fantasy. Individualist – or 'heroic' – approaches risk management evolved to be in employ of obstacle destruction, as opposed to the strategic approach of minimising the frequency of situations in which players were subject to risk. The roll of the dice transformed the calculations of risks into the probability of success through eradicative necessity.

Risky play: chance, the entrepreneurial self, and empowerment

The manner of how agency and activity were mechanised into an opportunistic form of violence nourished the rulesets that risk must be eliminated through violence and that risk management constituted of growing a character to be physically stronger in order to better overcome obstacles. Coincidentally, in Dungeons & Dragons, the only way for a player character to become stronger is to collect 'experience points' (EXP) until a 'level up' occurred. In the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons, the singular way of gaining experience was through achieving victory in combat situations. Levelling up is arguably the mechanical motive of play, as this signifies an increase in measurable strength and combat capabilities, allowing players to better deal with risks and take on more difficult challenges. The microscopy of individual engagements schematises player experience of RPG's as a series of successful survival attempts and the promise of numerical rewards. The fiction of overcoming risky situations grants players more playtime through the preservation of their character's life and through wider access to a variety of powerful skills and precious items. Empowerment not only has trackable measures, it also has a relatively straightforward path to achievement and incremental growth. Experience accrued and levels gained become numerical signifiers of expertise, a quantitative epistemology buttressing meritocratic ideas of hierarchy.[38] Adopting such a particularly individualistic rationality with respect to risk – a proactive stance toward the conduction and necessity of violence – becomes not only an effective way to eliminate risk, therefore achieving victory by the game's standards, but becomes in itself a system of incentive and reward.[39]

Different trajectories of quantification transform players into what Foucault has described as the *homo œconomicus*, or the *entrepreneurial self*.[40] This form of engagement, corroborated by statistical calculations and knowledges of risk, signifies players as participants in and subjects of risk. Numbers transform individuals into calculating selves who subsequently prepare, predict, and

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[37] See: M. A. R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), G. Stafford's *White Bear and Red Moon* (1975), and *Chainmail*'s own 'Fantasy Supplement' extended ruleset (1973).

[38] Berg, "Neoliberalism, Risk, and Uncertainty in the Video Game", p. 189.

[39] T. M. Malaby, "Anthropology and Play", p. 205 – 218.

[40] A. Dilts, "From 'Entrepreneur of the Self' to 'Care of the Self': Neo-liberal Governmentality and Foucault's Ethics", (Loyola, 2011) p. 1 – 4.

evaluate their own actions and the actions of others, especially within the context of risk. As such, numbers come to govern individual behavior.[41] To advance within the confines of the game, then, risk-as-play must be undertaken in order to outsmart the helix of risk of which play constitutes.

Risk in *Dungeons* & Dragons is facilitated through dice-rolls. Player agency is regulated by the codex of its ruleset: the only way for a player-character to perform an action is if a rule governs such an action. In other words, agency is prescriptive, although *D&D's* rules predominantly concern themselves with the conduct of combat. Sex, for instance, is ungoverned, but this lack of direction unintuitively means that it is possible. The result of a regulated action, that is, the mechanised wager of success, is left to chance. Role-playing games, and later, all video games, exist as possibility spaces in which users actualize these possibilities through a game's respective rules.[42] Assigned to each character are their personal attributes, commonly referred to as *stats* (statistics), which are numerical values that represent one of a character's following: their *strength, constitution, dexterity, wisdom, intelligence,* and *charisma.* Other game systems use different measures of character attributes, but this numerical basis is the foundation of the risk-based mechanics of role-playing games. Naturally, there is no true way to mechanically quantify anyone's physical prowess or social charm using numbers. But risk exists as numbers, and therefore risk-as-play has to be quantified as well. This numbers system mechanises player input as an agential actor that a player-character could possibly succeed at within the fiction of the game. For the purpose of the game, the "quantification of that which really cannot be truly quantified is to place a grid of intelligibility over the seemingly immeasurable and position it within the parameters of risk management to an even greater degree. The user as entrepreneurial self must navigate the risks of decisions grounded in the quantification of intangibles linked to the athletic body and its potential."[43]

These attributes represent the likelihood of success when performing a certain style of action, translated into numerical modifiers that increase the chance of success of an action roll. It is possible to influence the values, but ultimately, any action's result is dependent on the pure chance of the dice-roll. The higher the value of an attribute, however, the more bonuses a player-character receives when attempting an action governed by that attribute. The only ways to raise attributes is to level up; the only way to level up is to engage in challenges.

Challenge in early Dungeons & Dragons is analogous to in-fiction combat where risk is actualised by the threat of physical harm. Characterised as enemy monsters, highwaymen, and other ne'er-do-wells, players must remove these risks, lest they perish and their game experience is over. Mechanically, each enemy is capable of inflicting numbers of damage, which subtract from the health

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[41] N. Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 213.
[42] Juul, *Half-real*
[43] Baerg, "Neoliberalism, Risk, and Uncertainty in the Video Game", p. 200.

bar. To reiterate, combat is framed as both the risk and as the only means of dealing with that risk. Nikolas Rose's idea of the 'calculable other' applies here: the calculable other is a scarce resource that players deploy in a game-space, a player-character's enumerative representation becoming the basis of a player's engagement. These numbers represent the body in a sense of totality, subject and subjected to a scientific, actuarial gaze which places the player-character, and by extension the player themselves, under a constant dissection of scrutiny.[44] If a player ignores or fails to accommodate these attributes, the game experience by which challenge-difficulty is regulated becomes one of punitive measure and of higher probability of failure, both adding to the statistic calculation of likely character death.

A gendered element enters the fray when this 'doing violence' is framed as something active and masculine, and alternative playstyles such as 'healing' – its conceptual opposite – are considered passive and feminine. The system only had three classes to choose from: *fighting-man, magic-user,* and *cleric.* The first two classes were combat-oriented, their only differentiation being that *fighting-man* specialises in close-range combat, and *magic-user* utilises long-range spells. The Cleric can be seen as the integration of health systems in Dungeons & Dragons.[45]

Lost hit points, narrativised as wounds done to a player character, can be recovered from through access to medicinal items or rest. These options, however, are unavailable during combat, and as an expansion of risk management, a more instantaneous solution was devised. The concept of healing was integrated into the combat system. Design-wise, the Cleric can be considered as a support class which mainly provides care. They possess a wide array of healing spells, which as implied, restore hit points. However, they have scarce combat capabilities, making them ineffective to engage in combat and survive on their own. As such, their role is one of assistance to the cohesion and the survival of the rest of the party. When the mechanical goal of the game and an aesthetic motive of play is to level up, achieved through constant victory in combat (activity), any player who cannot provide satisfactory efficient outputs will be, by way of neoliberal notions of individualism and meritocracy, considered as less crucial.[46]

Paradoxically, the role of healers ensures the survival of the social whole. They can undo and even displace risk by restoring hit points, alleviating the loom of character death by making them 'more alive'. In games where life and risk are quantified and mechanised through numbers, the ability to add numbers back to the health meter is inarguably an essential task.

Nevertheless, since the design of healers is to provide internal care for the group, instead of

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[44] Rose, *The Powers of Freedom*

[45] For more information on the class specifics of the Cleric: http://www.mjyoung.net/dungeon/char/clas009.html

[46] See: P. O'Malley, "Risk and Responsibility," in: *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government*, A. Barry, T. Osborne, N. Rose eds., (Chicago, 1996), p. 189-208; J. Wingard, "Rhetorical Assemblages Scales of Neoliberal Ideology" in: *Capital at the Brink,* p. 120 – 139, 130.

eliminating external risks, it is often a source for disrespect and ridicule. One example of this is how in the communities that form around online shooter games or RPG's are quick to hold healers responsible for any failings or errors that occur, despite their role as the team's fulcrum. In this Killscreen article by Ryan Khosravi, *Overwatch and the problem of caring labor,*[47] an outline is given for an attitude toward the work of healing and support classes as being thankless and taken for granted. This bears similarities with the devalued labour of care. Care labour forms such as nursery and healthcare are feminised, societally a negative connotation, for seemingly lacking an economically productive element to them. The value of caring labour is only recognised when it fails, as its purpose is to sustain and ameliorate life. Once it fails, workers are held accountable and are reprimanded for failing such a crucial task, while the contextual, material, institutional, or causal conditions which might have led to the failure in the first place are ignored and abstained from accountability.[48,49] In (digital) spaces of gaming, cultural bias and gender dynamics are replicated and applied to its parallel elements.[50]

It's 'just' a game: interactive fiction and the plausible deniability of play

This affect borne to a culture of masculine fantasy and testrionic display, in principal origins, is within the foundations for all future video games. These elements are inexorably entangled with the relationality between participant and play. Play, in the format of role-playing games, is the production of and the investment in an interactive narrative, not dissimilar to improvised theatre. Players create a role to play and project it into a fictional universe. The key difference between roleplay and improvised theatre is that the role of the individual player is formulated to be more important than the theatrical value of the scene.[51] There are premeditated conditions to a scene occurring within the shared group participation that prescribe, assign, or classify attitude and positions. That is to say, there is a set goal or predetermined conclusion to a scene that prioritises the production over player.

In role-playing games, by contrast, the format of group play is that of a participatory committee. A living story is told and overseen by the Game Master in which all players have a role in. They may influence the story through the actions available to their characters and the ingenuity of their own thinking. The outcome of any interaction with the collaborative fiction is dependent on the success (or failure) of a risk, meaning that no scene's outcome is truly set in stone, as is the case with

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[47] R. Khosravi, "Overwatch and the problem of caring labor" <27-02-2017> https://killscreen.com/themeta/overwatch-problem-caring-labor/ Last accessed <22-07-17>

[48] N. Folbre, "`Holding hands at midnight`: The paradox of caring labor", in: *Feminist Economics* vol. 1 (Oxford, 1995), p. 73 – 92.

[49] M. Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," in: *The Foucault Reader,* ed. P. Rabinow, (New York, 1984), p. 273 - 289.

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[51] J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in: *Theatre Journal,* vol. 40, no. 4 (1988), p. 527 – 529.

improvised theatre or even the earlier wargames. With fluid and interactive scenes, the focality shifts to each player and their agency. In this sense, the only true constraints are a game's mechanical rules – mediated and effected through the dice roll – determining whether a player's action or wager takes narrative, therefore concrete, hold.

This transaction between player, game, and narrative pries open room for what I will dub 'the plausible deniability of play', which will become an important concept for when I discuss more digital forms of game. The player, in such freeform gaming spaces, are offered enough lateral freedom to determine how they want to interact with the fictional and imagined world around them; there is ample choice. Of course, none of the actions are ontologically extant insofar that 'play' is conversational and improvisational; notions such as accountability and responsibility are fenced off by the idea that the game is a fictional – or apolitical – context.

The character, then, is a channel of play, a proxy for both idea and fantasy, and effect and power. As illustrated in the earlier-referenced articles, players who conduct vile or vitriolic behaviour through their (conduit) character exhibit the tendency to deny the political or interpersonal gravity of such actions. They are not *their* actions; moreover, they take place in a fictional realm. Since no dice-roll is involved – meaning no mechanical mediation of chance at failure and ensuring the absence of a negative affect –, there can be no rational objection to the input. Player-side moral, ethical, or emotional appeals to restraint are insufficient to redirect or inhibit the total capacity of a quantified and codified agency.[52] To emphasise an earlier sentiment: there is a *player-character,* that is, a fictional representation of the player, but there often is no *character-player,* a cross-boundary response of the player to the agency of their own character.

This is a microcosm of the neoliberal mindset behind the entrepreneurial self. Only risk permits the cognitive recognition of the possibility of failure and subsequent rational consideration. Ergo, the absence of risk means the inevitability of success, since there is nothing that might mediate an action's outcome. With the given that these actions take place in a separate, autotelic realm, actions effected by a character become difficult to trace back to the player. The excess of neoliberal individualism becomes manifest in a context of unrestricted *ethical* freedom: nothing present in early RPG rulebooks impede its possibility of occurring, since the politics and morals of interpersonal conduct have no rulesets or actuarial calculations of risk management assigned to them. In other words, it is 'just' a game. The character-specific fiction as narrated by a player is 'just' a story. In both classical liberalism and neoliberal technologies, this disavowing of accountability in everyday mechanisms of consideration and speech becomes important in its relation to ideas and practices and their manifestations of self-entrepreneurialism and the patterns of these various practices within their

[52] E. J. Horberg, C. Oveis, D. Keltner, A. B. Cohen, "Disgust and The Moralization of Purity" in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* vol. 97, no. 6 (2009), p. 963 – 976.

respective techno-social relations.[53]

The organisation around individualism and violence as a crucible of play is intrinsic to the game design format of role-playing games. It nourished an affect of male empowerment, one that eludes the social contract and behavioral norms, simply because within its fiction, the contextual reality of role-play's participatory fiction is pivoted on the basis of possibility of individual suggestion, not on the moral conventions of committee. What matters, as described here, is "how a given technology or space is combined, at a particular point in time, with various discourses, political and ethical ideals and already established habits to form a loose assemblage of governmental agency."[54] In this quote, 'technology' is interchangeable with 'mechanics', and 'governmental agency' becomes 'player agency'. Without a degree of political awareness of power dynamics in spaces of play, it becomes easy for privileged players to misuse or even abuse its areas of conscientious remoteness.

Changing the rules, changing the game, changing the player

Though the murky origins of modern digital play are the basis of my observations, it cannot be understated how much roleplaying games have evolved. Different from 40 years ago, the kinds of tabletop games have become more politically engaged, more critically aware, more women-inclusive and queer-oriented, less race-blind and more diverse. The developers of Dungeons & Dragons have made real effort in later editions to embrace difference and allow for non-cisgender, non-hetero, non-white character stories to be told.[55] An equally popular and influential franchise is the urban fantasy cyberpunk *Shadowrun* series. Its makers have openly and officially come out for inclusivity and openness, even saying about detractors and opponents of diversity in gaming: "This criticism is the desperate cries of dinosaurs as they struggle against the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction. It's loud and violent, and in the end it's just as successful."[56]

Rules and fiction are complementary and influence one another, and in response to the particular format of *D&D*, games emerged which began experimenting with either or both. The role-playing game *Apocalypse World* (2010) by D. Vincent Baker introduced a new ruleset known as *Powered by the Apocalypse* or *Apocalypse Engine.* This system is a massive sway away from *D&D's* expansive, strict, and rigorously-governed rules. It introduces a chiasmus of importance where rules did not clearly define the mechanical boundaries of the game-space, nor does it provide a predetermined fictional setting. Rather, rules are reduced to formulations of *moves*, which can be

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[53] C. Otter, "Making Liberal Objects: British Techno-Social Relations 1800-1900," in: Cultural Studies vol. 21, no. 4 – 5 (2007)
[54] T. Crook, "Power, Privacy and Pleasure: Liberalism and the Modern Cubicle," *Cultural Studies* vol. 21, no. 4-5 (2007), p. 568.
[55] J. Brickley, "Diversity in Dungeons & Dragons," Nerdarchy <21-06-2017> https://nerdarchy.com/2017/06/diversity-in-dungeons-dragons/ Retrieved <06-08-2017>
[56] The Official Shadowrun Tabletop Tumblr <05-04-2016> http://shadowrun.tumblr.com/post/142318502791/we-are-the-future Retrieved <06-08-2017>

understood as precise, descriptive inputs – as opposed to prescriptive – that influence the world *regardless* of outcome. The *Apocalypse Engine* explicitly states that players may not advise a 'cheat sheet' to know what their possible options are. They are urged to use their own wits to devise a strategy based on context clues and the information available to them. Only after describing what they would like to accomplish, does the Game Master tell what them to roll: *hack and slash, volley, defy danger, defend, spout lore, discern realities, parley, or aid or interfere*. While all these categories approximate the function of *strength, dexterity, etc.*-based action rolls in *D&D,* the reformulation of attributes as actions to perform emphasises that the intrinsic relationality between the fiction and the player-character, as well as the player and the game-space.[57]

Instead of rolling for a clear success/failure outcome, the *Apocalypse Engine* introduces gradations of success, or successfulness. Moreover, the Game Master does not roll for any of their actions even if they control in-game characters. This inverses the relationship of players reacting to the game: the game, through the Game Master, reacts to the players.[58] For instance, when rolling a net result of a 1 – 6, the action is deemed unsuccessful and the Game Master may directly penalise the player-character for it. The Game Master may only perform counter-moves in reaction to players failing (or succeeding). The onus of action is placed directly with the players in that failure is not merely failure, it is also repercussion. Even when rolling what the game calls a *partial success,* when rolling a 7 – 9, a player must actively choose a self-sabotaging measure. Only rolls of a 10 or higher, the least likely result even with numerical modifiers, lack any consequence of action. This adds an interesting component to risk management: it is reconceptualised as an ongoing dynamic, not as an engagement toward a win or fail state. Every single action undertaken becomes a considerable risk onto itself, instead of the situation as a whole. Paradoxically, the descriptive freedom of player-characters is deconstructed by mechanising penalty as a result of their actions. The fiction goes from negotiable to consequential, which makes accountability and awareness a core part of gameplay. The *Apocalypse Engine's* sparse mechanics and lack of predetermined setting deny unrelenting power fantasies from being transposed into the game-space. The neoliberal individualism of the role-playing heroic recalculates risk itself by making risk-as-play unattractive.[59]

There are also games that have been designed around telling the more uncommon For instance, *Monsterhearts* by Avery Alder McDaldno (2012) and *Monsterhearts 2* (2017) are two games in which players can assume the role of monsters posing as humans in a regular high school setting. Their true nature is a source of shame, shyness, and secrecy, and is something they can exercise little control over. It uses the *Apocalypse Engine,* but the available form of dice-roll is to *turn on,* sexually

[57] Juul, *Half-real,* p. 163 – 170.
[58] D. V. Baker, *Apocalypse World* (2010) http://apocalypse-world.com/
[59] Calleja, Herrewijn, Poels, "Affective Involvement in Digital Games", p. 42 – 45.

exciting player-characters and non-player characters. The game is overtly about bodies, shame, and queer sexuality; as McDaldno herself, a lesbian trans woman, has stated: "Monsterhearts is a game about the confusion that arises when your body and your social world start changing without your permission."[60,61]

If rules are about taking chances, then the fiction frames how chances are undertaken. A game's fiction lets players tell a story, their story. By liberalising – or queering – the fiction, the spotlight will shine a new light on the stories left in the dark. These games assert the true freedom of agential play, political in nature, and broaden focality to include marginalised voices, something which the established role-playing games have historically lacked.[62] Marginalised creators had to prove, on a market scale, that not only cis-hetero white men enjoy tabletop games before their stories became addressed and included. Diversifying fiction in a meaningful matter means, and this is something I personally attest as well, including real-world matters.

[60] L. Cohen-Moore, "The Sexuality of Monsterhearts" Bitch Media <31-12-2012> https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/save-vs-sexism-the-sexuality-of-Monsterhearts-story-games-teen-sexuality Retrieved <06-08-2017>
[61] A. A. McDaldno, *Monsterhearts* (2012), p. 43.
[62] M. Hitchens, A. Drachen, "The Many Faces of Roleplaying Games," (2009) https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/34193286/the-many-faces-of-role-playing-games_jrpg.pdf Retrieved <11-08-15>

Part 2 – Technics of the digital game: hubristic design and industry reaction

Backed against a history of a neoliberal masculinity intrinsic to the idea of table-top role-playing games, the second half of this thesis can fully explore the games which deal with the excesses, which provide meta-textual commentary, or even subvert the standardised, immersive agential violence. Rather than fully establish the theoretical differences between digital and table-top games, however, I posit that both mediums share a historical and technical paradigm which become apparent in each particular analysis. The ideas of rules and fiction apply just as easily to digital games as they are inherent to non-digital formats.[63] Video games have mechanics - their coding and programming. World boundaries, character movement, system management, and player agency; these central fulcra exist just as clearly and as definable as they are explained in the 400-page rulebooks of *Dungeons & Dragons:* 5th edition. The dice become random number generators, the setting becomes visual graphics.

Traditional vs. digital: a collaborative imagination and a tangible real

There are two key differences to be noted, however. Firstly, the video game is interactive, rather than collaborative. A video game will have tutorials which explain players the extents of their movement and agency – these are simple explanations of how to move the character model, what button corresponds to which action, and how to navigate menu systems. Whereas more traditional role-playing games heavily regulate player agency with their many rules in order to govern exactly player freedom, video games use visual-audio technical systems and presentations of fiction to involve players, demonstrate limitations, and affect feeling.[64] The video game itself provides feedback and response to player input, taking over the task of other players and the Game Master to keep rules enforced.

Secondly, as audio-visual media, they are capable of separating player from the real through a redirection of sensory attention, becoming an autotelic digital space that players can 'lose themselves' in.[65] The degree of distance between game and real is dependent on its level of simulation, or immersion. The more believable the game contours its digital space with recognisable constructs, the likelier it is that a player will feel a sensory focus and affective embodiment that sustains the suspension of disbelief.[66] The fiction is not real, but it *feels* real, which is where affect resides. Fiction,

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[63] G. Costikyan, "I Have No Words and I Must Design."(1994) http://www.costik.com/nowords.html Retrieved <11-08-2018>
[64] Calleja, Herrewijn, Poels, "Affective Involvement in Digital Games", p. 41.
[65] I. Kotsia, S. Zafeiriou, G. Goudelis, I. Patras, K. Karpouzis, "Multimodal Sensing in Affective Gaming", in: *Emotion in Games,* p. 61 – 63.
[66] G. Frasca, "Rethinking Agency and Immersion: Videogames as a Means of Consciousness-Raising" (Georgia 2001)

as demonstrated in the previous half, bridges player-game distance. The fiction of video games operates on more dimensions than the imaginary, however, in that by nature of the medium, it is interactable. The fiction of role-playing games operates on player-side make-belief, an active participation in the fiction through the sparsity of concrete visualisation, whereas video games have representational depictions. What is shown on the TV-screen goes through a cognitive process of perception and recognition.[67]

For example, a three-dimensional model of a tree will muddy immersion if it cannot convincingly influence a player's belief that it might represent a tree. Players respond instinctively out of a passive response to what they perceive as bad visual graphics.[68] The graphics, part of the fiction, require technical effort in order to help realise the game-space and prove itself to the player. The tree can be made hyperreal through graphical power to present an artificial representation with no basis in reality that approximates reality in perceptible ways, the game-space itself can construct the visually-unrealistic tree to seem consistent with the stylistics and charm of the remaining fiction of the world, therefore believable, or a combination of the two.[69]

Naturally, a player can simply decide for themselves whether or not the realism of a game-space matters to them, but this is a subjectivity and a semi-conscious decision. Moreover, what is considered 'realistic' is a temporal sentiment as game technology develops, shown by games released over twenty ago being heralded as being visually indistinguishable from reality.[70] However, the process of immersion is an affective one, ultimately tied to the memory of player experience – that is, how a player felt playing the game. From a production angle, It is in a game (developer)'s best interest to ensure that there is no external (game-side) stimulus or impetus to dispel the embodiment of play and disrupt the suspension of disbelief to optimise a player's experience, thereby the game's unique memorability (and cultural-commercial quality). The conundrum in this idea of design is that a game ought to be realistic, but should not remind the player of the reality they inhabit.[71]

On the other hand, there is ample room in the industry for experimentation with and the production of creative, off-the-beaten-path games, such as the puzzle game *Echochrome* (2008), which features a single figure walking along non-Euclidean, geometric shapes. However, immersion in the fiction requires cultural recognition. To draw from Jean Baudrillard, this recognition may be found within the faithful copy of reality, the perversion of reality, or the masking of a profound reality. The

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[67] B. Atkins. *More than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* (Manchester, 2003), p. 138 – 150.
[68] A. McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence", in: *The Video Game Theory Reader* eds. M. J. P. Wolf, B. Perron (2003), p. 86 – 106.
[69] K. Berens, G. Howard, *The Rough Guide to Videogaming* (London, 2001)
[70] C. Kohler, "The Most Jaw-dropping Game Graphics of the Last 20 Years", Wired Magazine <05-06-13> https://www.wired.com/2013/05/best-game-graphics-gallery/ Retrieved <11-08-17>
[71] Atkins, *More Than A Game,* p. 152 – 155.

video game is the medium which wavers between simulacrum and simulation: stretching from a reflections of reality in sacramental order to pure abstraction and artifice.[72]

Camera, action: The digitalisation of the self and the representation of bodies

The essentiality of display, looking, and representation of video games is best showcased with the existence of a controllable in-game camera. In any game, to view the digital, artificial world, a lens is necessary which simulates the behaviour of a real-world camera, though itself part of the digital world, lacking a physical form. Be it a direct first-person camera, over-the-shoulder, or a bird's-eye-view camera, the camera as the player's eye will see one character respond in realtime to real-world control input. It is a mimicry of filmic cinematography, but expounds it through the fact that a player can move the object of the lens around, a re-substantiation of the human eye.[73]

The in-game camera analogises vision: the player looks at the real world and the in-game camera shows the digital world, but the act of seeing both exists on the same continuous vector. The credo 'seeing is believing' becomes a truth in the credential dynamic between player and game. The simulation of an alternate reality through the looking glass works similarly in normalising the politics of its fiction. The relative phenomenological mundanity of existing makes experience a passive, entirely reactionary modality of being.[74] Games move in interactable patterns to which the player reacts. Everything that happens in a game, in terms of immersive affect, should. The shuttering off of player perception into a way of seeing a world that delivers itself as par-for-the-course, contributes to a conscious idea of a depoliticised state of games through a subconscious notion of the game as only sensory and affective experiences, not an artistic-cultural projects and political-societal artefacts.[75] They are ought to be, to repeat an earlier sentiment, 'just' games, bereft of all political sentiment and human commentary, despite the reflexive necessity of realism, immersivity, and relatability of their fiction.

Of course, it matters who exactly is playing games – seeing them – that bulks immersion. The representation of human stories in games means the optics of bodies – what is standard? Who gets shown? Who gets told? In her Giantbomb article about *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) *On Monsters, Role Playing, and Blackness*, black queer writer Gita Jackson speaks in first-person terms when referring to her in-game character. It is a body she has chosen, shaped, and created to represent hers.

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[72] J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Michigan, 1981)
[73] P. Burelli, "Game Cinematography: From Camera Control to Player Emotions" (Bern 2016)
[74] A. Varadharajan, "Afterword: The Phenomenology of Violence and the Politics of Becoming", in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* vol. 28, no. 1 (2008), p. 124 – 141, 137.
[75] G. Jackson, "On Monsters, Role Playing, and Blackness" Giant Bomb <15-08-2016>
http://www.giantbomb.com/articles/guest-column-on-monsters-role-playing-and-blacknes/1100-5479/
Retrieved <09 – 08 – 17>

This is not a thesis on the representational politics of video game fiction, but anecdotes such as these go to show that, like in traditional RPG scene, the possible consideration of player-characters as being non-normative matters. To allow players to play as – to be – a black body is to include blackness and the black experience as an integral part of the visual language of a video game.[76]

Speaking as a biracial, bisexual man, I find little immersion in the games that feature romance and character backstory – and there are plenty – where I do not get to engage in my own real-world sexuality or my own history in the black diaspora. That does not mean that I do not enjoy these games or that I cannot identify with the fiction on some level, but it is a hard time suspending my own disbelief when the player-character differs so surgically clear from my own gestalt. The lack of representation is one facet of what constitutes games as *de facto* political.

The inclusion of marginalised fictions, narratives, characters, and focalities of non-cisgender, non-straight, non-white non-male nature, however, seems to disrupt the suspension of disbelief and the affective immersion in societally-privileged gamers. We can best see this paradoxical idea of games as non-art in the existence of the hate movement *Gamergate,* a coterie of white men in their twenties who lash out against game developers for making fiction about diversity and dignity.[77] We can infer from the reactions to games that feature even the most succinct soupçon of diversity, for most white male gamers, to play as a 'politicised' body seems to clash with a falsely universal notion of an escapist, apolitical play.[78]

The room left by this asymptotic and largely sequestered approximation of reality is where neoliberalism leaves a significant inheritance. Neoliberal logic insidiously posits marginalised peoples as being themselves responsible for the lack of representation, denying the influence of ideology, industry, and economics.[79] The standardisation of the white, straight, male body as the universal player-character[80] is itself hardly interrogated by those who passively identify with it. Instead, criticisms are deflected by formulating games as imaginary, fictional spaces, untethered to any perceptive or cultural reality.[81] Preeminent to this argument is the idea that gameplay – much like

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[76] S. Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, 1997)
[77] H. Lewis, "Gamergate: a brief history of a computer-age war" The Guardian <11-01-2015> https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jan/11/gamergate-a-brief-history-of-a-computer-age-war Accessed <05-08-17>; For more information see The Guardian's directory on Gamergate at https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamergate
[78] Errant Signal, "Keep Your Politics Out of my Video Games", Youtube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_tdztHiyiE Retrieved <12-08-2017>
[79] Springer, "Violence of Neoliberalism", p. 5.
[80] D. Williams, N. Martins, M. Consalvo, J. D. Ivory, "The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games" in: *New Media Society* vol. 11, no. 5 (2009), p. 815 – 836.
[81] A. Bokhari, "#GamesSoWhite: Attempt to Inject Identity Politics into Gaming a Predictable Failure", Breitbart <04-06-2015> http://www.breitbart.com/london/2015/06/04/gamessowhite-attempt-to-inject-identity-politics-into-gaming-a-predictable-failure/ Retrieved <14-08-2017> NB: I am reticent to link to anything Breitbart, but it is unfortunately the awfully perfect example of this ideological buffer.

capital – treats every player, regardless of identity, as an equal subject to risk. Ergo, equality has been achieved through the ostensible democratic workings of meritocracy and the theoretical universality of access.[82]

As we know, that is simply not the case – rather, it is partaking in the neoliberal trend of denying its own influence in power dynamics while masking the ideology of its own. It leaves itself unnamed and unaccountable, claiming marginalised people are responsible for their own lack of diversity, though they by no measure hold a significant majority in the corporate-run video game industry.[83] The politics of representation and the plausible deniability of play converge here, shielding a central (white) masculine affect that predicates the supposed sanctity of male power fantasy within cultural gaming spaces.

The silent protagonist: Narrative hubris and affective severing in *Drakengard*

The concept of the player-character continues its existence in digital role-playing games, albeit under a different name (and mostly as a male form): the silent protagonist. Due to the technical constraints of character creation within video games in the early days of gaming, it was not always possible to program physical configurational systems for in-game characters to fully articulate a player's vision of representation. Instead, a placeholder was introduced: a character with a predetermined physical form – a body – but lacking means of verbal communication. From the earliest *Final Fantasy* (Square-Enix, 1987) to *Golden Sun* (Camelot, 2001) and even a recent example *Doom* (Id Software, 2016), these types of games concretise the player-character not as the player's direct self-insert, as is the case with *D&D,* but rather as an independent character.[84]

These characters possess over no personal thoughts or any significant way of verbal communication, hence the 'silent' protagonist, lacking meaningful modes of direct interaction with the fiction outside of the mechanics of player input and, rarely, movie cutscenes. They may move around the game-space, listen to what non-player characters residing within the game-space have to say, and engage in the game's challenges.

Digital role-playing games make central use of the story in order to place the player-character in a narrative trajectory from start to finish. A video game not only has an articulated, meticulous setting and fiction, it also has a beginning and an end. But this narrative vector has a ludic counterpart:

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[82] G. Borradori, ed., *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago 2003), p. 94.

[83] C. Ramanan, "The video game industry has a diversity problem – but it can be fixed" The Guardian <15-03-2017> https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/15/video-game-industry-diversity-problem-women-non-white-people Accessed <12-08-2017>

[84] J. M. Smith, "Beyond Self-Selection in Video Game Play: An Experimental Examination of the Consequences of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game Play", in: *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, vol. 10, no. 5 (2007), p. 717 – 721.

that of the fail state. If the player-character loses the mechanics of risk in the engagement of combat and their health bar runs out, thereby dying in-fiction, the game will end. The story, however, will not.

Unlike in traditional role-playing games, where new stories are written for new characters, the death of the character simply means the story is abruptly put on hold. After a character death, the player must try again from an earlier point in the in-universe sequence of events, resetting the idea of failure and giving the player a fresh reattempt. The fiction, intrinsically bound to gameplay and mechanics, revolves around the player-character. The silent protagonist that can only communicate with the game-space through nonverbal (violent) ways becomes the axle around which the fiction revolves, dependent on the player to be realised onto its conclusion. In effect, and in affect, the player is not so much burdened as they are supplied with hubristic knowledge of self-importance and the agential capacity of a game's rulesets to carry the plot to the finish. The player wields mechanics and furthers the fiction through gameplay.[85]

The narrative centralisation of player-character connects to the idea that agency is self-justified when risk is overcome. Risk, in the majority of video games, is a conflict of combat. Older Japanese role-playing game models make use of the 'random encounter' system. Merely moving around the game-space might trigger a monster to appear and a battle to occur, calculated through a random-number generator. Movement itself becomes a risk, every step a possible escalation into a dangerous situation. This model is known as the 'general aggression' model and been shown to induce hostile expectations through the pervasiveness of risk and danger.[86] When the game-space induces a wariness of hostility with unforeseeable algorithms, the world itself is programmed as to feel like an enemy.

The pendant to this model of programming can be the fiction itself, as demonstrated by the Cavia game *Drakengard.* Its lead writer and developer, Yoko Taro, has stated in interviews that "[the full potential of gaming is] being able to emotionally affect the player in an extreme or an otherwise substantial way."[87] With that philosophy in mind, let us take a look at his first game. It is recommended to watch the videos linked.

The game begins with a chiasmus of conventional game expectations. The protagonist and player-character of Drakengard, Caim, is shown to be talking in the first sequences of the game.[88] In

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[85] J. Simons, "Narrative, Games, and Theory", http://gamestudies.org/07010701/articles/simons Retrieved <12-08-2017>

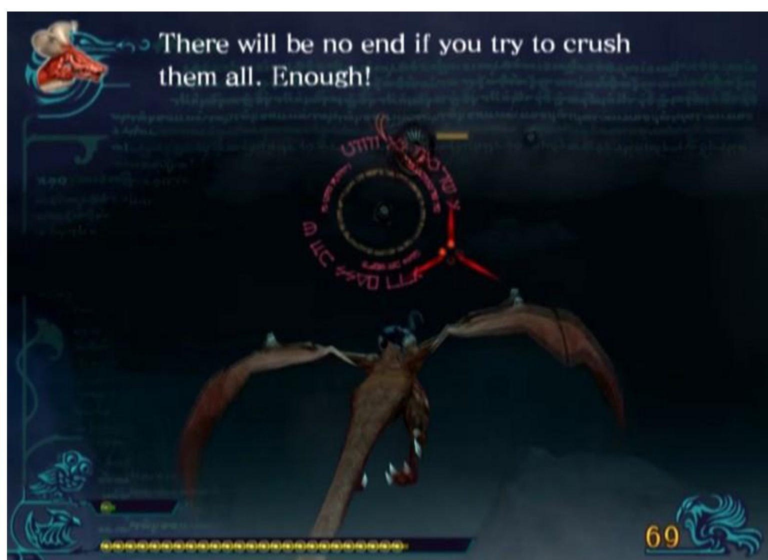
[86] B. J. Bushman, C. A. Anderson, "Violent Video Games and Hostile Expectations: A Test of the General Aggession Model" (2002) http://public.psych.iastate.edu/caa/abstracts/2000-2004/02bapspb.pdf Retrieved <13-08-2017>

[87] R. Ward, "NieR and Drakengard Creator Says NieR Was Inspired By 9-11" Siliconera <20-03-2014> http://www.siliconera.com/2014/03/20/nier-drakengard-creator-says-nier-inspired-9-11/ Retrieved <13-08-2017>

[88] "Drakengard – Opening", Youtube video <30-09-2009> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS2vp0n17BE

order to ensure his own survival, he makes a pact with the dragon Angelus, who strips him off his speech in exchange for his life, reducing him to a silent protagonist for the rest of the game. His cocky, standoffish, but chivalrous personality is stripped bare. In game cutscenes, when his comrades are shown speaking, the only ways he gets to communicate in are awkward poses, character expression portraits, and ellipses. The silent protagonist is portrayed as a puppet that does not communicate with their environs nor with the player, lacking even the dramatic-ironic introspection of vocalising their emotions. In the fiction, they act in service of others, simply because they have no means of refusal.

In *Drakengard*, this is inverted. Instead of being used as a stand-in and a narrative hook for player agency used to propel the story forward, the linear structure of *Drakengard* chronicles Caim doing what he wants. He loses the moral compass a silent protagonist operates on and experiences the complete, narrative freedom of the player-character. In the game, Caim fights against an empire, ostensibly to save his sister Furiae. This given motive loses credibility with each passing stage and cutscene, however, as Caim's madness becomes ever apparent. With the sacrifice of speech, the player can fully embody Caim not as Caim, but as the player-character. Caim's motivation is facile, serving merely as a brittle excuse as the story flakes away the façade that the mechanics are in moral employ of virtuous protection. Every stage involves destroying seemingly never-ending hordes of enemy soldiers.[89] It becomes clear that the motivation of salvation becomes an excuse for two forms of psychopathy: Caim's own, and the demand of video games to be able to kill. *Drakengard* itself, as shown in the screen capture above, comments on the slaughter that Caim, controlled by the player, commits.



Mechanically, *Drakengard* is repetitive in gameplay and player objectives. In order to reach the end of a stage, the game requires you to kill a certain enemies. Having played the game, I can attest that the gameplay feels droning and tedious, unflattering and valueless. There seems to be no real point to the gameplay itself, as there is As the game progresses, this objective morphs into killing enemies until an invisible timer runs out. Risk is entirely annihilated by the ease of play and the lack of

[89] "Drakengard - PS2 Gameplay 1080p (PCSX2)", Youtube video <21-02-2015>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZG3PnfXFOYY Retrieved <13-08-2017>

difficulty. These objectives underline how, even though Caim's descent into increasingly more atrocious acts of violence is programmed and scripted, it is something that the player advances. The game severs its non-personalised agency with an interruption of immersion through intra-fiction elements, suspending the suspension of disbelief in a retroactive clarity. It is a god-smack of negative affect, the rational approach in risk management eluded and momentarily forgotten, subjugating any sense of progression and forcing it into a perception of consequence. The game, breaking the fourth wall, holds the player as directly responsible for controlling Caim, thereby enabling the horrific and bleak events in the story. Para-phrasing Yoko Taro: "any game that centers on slaughtering hundreds in war shouldn't deserve a happy ending."[90]

True to Taro's words, *Drakengard* does not seek to reward the player. It neither seeks to induce a positive affect or ensure the removal of a negative affect, nor does it reward the player with quantifications such as experience points, level-ups, money, or items. It welcomes the negative affect through the mundanity of its events. The game is designed around violence as standardised agency, and how truly horrific that should be. *Drakengard's* mantra is that Caim's actions speak louder than words, and with his inability to communicate with the game-space, in a game where the only way of acting is violently, it invokes a meta-textual satire of the true reprehensibility of the unrestrained violence of underlying the concept of the player-character. Yoko Taro lets Caim the character do what he wants in order to expose the danger of a silent protagonist. By stripping Caim of a voice early on, *Drakengard* invites the player to take fiercer control of him – its violent and dark setting begets violence, blinding the player's experience and vision to the fiction of events either too late, or when the game makes harsh comment on it. The game seemingly punishes the player for indulging in Caim and the center role he plays in the game's own pre-set fiction: one of bloodshed, genocide, and destruction. Caim, though he is controlled by the player, cannot be controlled in a moral sense. Players have to bear witness to the destruction Caim wreaks in their command. The sudden awareness of responsibility of action and the moral abjection at violent freedom is a severe antithetical and modular design that addresses the one-way power of immersion.[91,92]

Drakengard is by no means an enjoyable game, in the sense that it does not attempt to mechanise or affect a sense of reward, contentment, or any joyous feeling. In almost an experimental madness, it inverts all notions of sensible and marketable game design – to make play enjoyable,

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[90] "『ドラッグ オン ドラグーン』シリーズ居酒屋座談会 with ヨコオタロウ on 仏滅。聖地・新宿で語られる『DOD』ぶっちゃけトーク" Dengeki Online <15-04-2013> http://dengekionline.com/elem/000/000/623/623397/ Retrieved <13-08-2017>

[91] B. Weiner, "On Sin versus Sickness: A Theory of Perceived Responsibility and Social Motivation" in: American Psychologist, vol. 48, no. 9, (2009), p. 957 – 965.

[92] J. M. Burger, "Negative Reactions to Increases in Perceived Personal Control", in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 56. no. 2 (1989), p. 246 – 256.

immersive, and adaptable – to present an *emotionally* terrible product whose intentional dismay in quality is an autotelic artistic statement, not wholly unlike Dada. It hyperbolises the neoliberal individualism of violence-as-play and ties it closely to the negative affect in a consequential awareness. It does berate violence as inherently bad, however: it posits that all violence are justifiable, but the act of violence will not always feel good.[93] Yoko Taro harangues conventions of digital game design that offer ludic and narrative remuneration for agential violence by inserting the idea of a negative affect as centrefold. In a metatextual sense, the pathos of *Drakengard* is the reward, offering player no digital spoils but instead serving them their own real moral disgust.

Drakengard 3: The spectacle of violence and player helplessness

Drakengard 3 is a defection from the first game's design philosophy in that it exchanges the negative affect of increased personal control for a voyeuristic regret made possible by the material separation of game-space and player-space. Placing the optics of the game camera and the focal lens of the narrative with a central protagonist, as role-playing games are wont to do, and as *Drakengard* satirised, entails that fiction has to be presented to the player-character. The player-character moves through a diorama of fiction, a Shakespearean stage whose elements are served in an intricately complex, but ultimately parsable manner. At the centre of the podium stands the player-character as an egocentric construct. Everything depends on their continued presence and agency in the game-space, after all, so the feedback to the player is conventionally marked positively and affirmatively. The player needs to know that they are doing well by the game's rules. The presentation of this feedback, the fiction, is strictly speaking ornamental, but by all accounts crucial and essential.[94]

Drakengard 3 literalises the theatrical set-up by having its main actor seemingly hijack the story, only to be reprimanded for it later, constraining the fiction of a game as a narrative to be viewed by an audience. In the opening of the game, the protagonist, Zero, literally kills off the man narrating the story.[95] She announces herself to the soon-to-be dead man and proceeds to wash a battlefield red with blood. Already, a lingering sentiment seems to be that the protagonist the player will control is not on the moral right of things. And this is confirmed by Zero's self-proclaimed motivations: killing her sisters. Rather than providing the player with a glamour of what agency goals towards, it contrasts with the first game by establishing Zero as unprincipled and hyperviolent, even sexually sadistic in some cases. The vector and presentations of the story makes no effort to hide that Zero aims to

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[93] "Drakengard 3 -- Philosophies of Violence", Youtube video <20-05-2014> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD6xCLlF5dY Retrieved <13-08-2017>
[94] Juul, *Half-real,* p. 141.
[95] "[1080p] Drakengard 3 Opening Cinematic", Youtube media <23-09-2014> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4Vwi0mFRCk Retrieved <14-08-2017>

plunge the world into chaos, having exposited that her sisters are responsible for an era of peace.

Drakengard 3 features a gameplay mechanic called 'Intoner Mode' is introduced, which is a separate gauge which builds up the more she kills. When the bar is filled (with literal blood), she can enter an invincible, boosted state preluded by a loud scream.[96] This audio byte, seemingly out of nowhere, comes as a shock to the player, disrupting the immersion. Luisa Valenzuela in her novel *He Who Searches* once wrote the following about screaming: "What goes unsaid, that which is implied and omitted and censured and suggested, acquires the importance of a scream"[97] This sign can be attributed to Zero's previously-established unquenchable anger, but as a categorical sound, it seems to signify pain.[98]

Still, there is a tonal difference with the first *Drakengard's* ever-worsening context. The combat mechanics are in themselves entertaining and the more people Zero kills, the more she levels up. Moreover, an in-game currency is introduced based on overall combat performance, which can be used to buy upgrades that enhance Zero's propensity for violence. That is, the player is rewarded in quantifications that provide a positive affect for play, although they are impersonalised to the fiction at hand. The player is delegated to being an audience member watching a story unfold, tasked with helping Zero succeed. The necessity of risk management, too, is consequentially reduced by the rationalisation that Zero is virtually omnipotent during gameplay sections, which are by no means difficult.

The only times that Zero truly can falter is, ironically, during cutscenes. Cutscenes, broadly, are sections of a game that show and explore the game-space in manners productive to the fiction, but are completely stripped of player agency or input, temporarily turning a game into a movie. During these videos of removed play, exposition and character dialogue takes over. They are ways for a game to focus the attention of players to the narrative without getting distracted by play. In *Drakengard 3*, peculiarly, virtually every single cutscene featuring Zero shows her getting hurt, maimed, or killed.[99] The gendered element of the physical abuse of female-coded bodies cannot be understated – especially since Zero's standard outfit is an exposing, sexualised garb. However, this relegation of on-

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[96] "Drakengard 3 - Full Intoner Mode (Bloodstained Garb)", Youtube media <04-01-2015> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PGUPBziWBg Retrieved <14-08-2017>

[97] L. Valenzuela, *He Who Searches,* (Michigan, 1977), p. 10.

[98] S. S. Tomkins, "Affect Theory" in: *Approaches To Emotion* no. 163 (1984) p. 163–195.

[99] "Drakengard 3 THE MOVIE", Youtube media <09-11-2016> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eUSiPgb2wE Retrieved <14-08-2017> NB: This video is 9 hours long, so I only advise watching it if the reader finds it extremely compelling.

screen violence done to the controlled character to un-interactable cutscenes poses an interesting, affective dynamic.

On the second mission in the game, the player has to fight a powerful 'boss' monster. This is a monster with greater numerical values of health and damage and often possess over a wide range of combat abilities, making them formidable risk factors. After the player succeeds in defeating it, a cutscene plays that shows it killing Zero – completely converse to the engagement mere seconds prior. Then, Zero is 'reborn' from the flower embedded within her eye, with an expression that I interpret as a numb unwillingness. Zero's in-game companion Dito comments "holy shit", which I interpret as the game implementing player reaction.

The fiction within *Drakengard 3* is not expositional or interactive, but rather voyeuristic in an affective sense. The fiction presents itself but never explains itself. Players are shown, through cutscenes, the violent demolishing of the ostensibly invincible Zero over which they can exert no influence. But they never receive proper explication of *why* it happens, simply *that* it does. Moreover, the game does not end when Zero dies. The cycle of the game over and the try again is transposed into a cycle of literal, on-screen rebirth: as a character, Zero is stuck in a violent loop where she kills and is killed.

In a thematically similar cutscene, dubbed 'Ending C – Vomit'[100], Zero defeats the final enemy of the game. The game, instead of reaching a satisfying conclusion, however, simply depicts Zero beginning to vomit uncontrollably before the screen fades to black. It instills player feeling through a

voyeuristic regret, rewarding a player for furthering the plot with scenes evoking a negative affect. From a design perspective, Yoko Taro knows that blood signifies having bled and that vomit signifies physical illness. Both signify a health hazard, a physical wrongness to the body. Yet, neither he nor the game explains *why* these happenings transpire; they only cares to show *what* that wrong is.

[100] "Drakengard 3 (Drag-On Dragoon 3) - "Ending C" Cutscenes {English, Full 1080p HD}" Youtube media <24-05-2014> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07kEWh303Ss Retrieved <14-08-2017>

Essentially, the game leaves it up to the player to make sense of these scenes by leaving the contextualisation of sequential logic and events nebulous and without definition. The idea is that players must trace back through game-space for an answer that is not guaranteed to satisfy. Much like how they must trace back their personal feelings of having been appointed witness to the unstoppable brutalisation of a character whose setting does not agree with her.

Drakengard 3 gives full control over a realised character shown to possess an indomitable agency, then takes it away from the player to force them beholden to a violent spectacle. It is an elegant transformation of player agency into spectatorship, or player *helplessness*. It goes beyond shock and horror by first granting players the full range of movement as mechanised by the game. The agential violence of play, as clarified, serves as the singular mode of managing the risk of game challenges. The violence is conducted in order to preserve the health bar and prolong the player experience. But *Drakengard 3* decides that the player-character must die, and emphasises Zero's death scenes are unpreventable by transforming them into in-game movies. This player helplessness is conducive to an affect of powerlessness and of visceral fear.[101]

Conclusion: Games, conventionality, and the affective power of un-reward

To be sure, the video game does not offer a totalising expression of neoliberalism or neoliberal logic, nor does neoliberalism offer a totalising expression of the video game. Rather, the video game, with its many facets and interstices, serves as the space for neoliberal ideas about narrative and agency to manifest themselves. Any number of neoliberal manifestations that appear in a video game may be applied to and reused with other types of entrepreneurial rationality, depending on the game in question. Gender divisions in labour replicated in role-playing roles, risk management and play, (self-)representation and fiction, agency and responsibility – the symptoms of the cultural work of neoliberalism persist as unnamed tendencies within the most base of game design and ludic rule implementation.

Risk as motivational actor and affective stressor proposes itself as the be-all, end-all to a player's dispositional stance toward the game-space and informs game design as mandatory risk in order to challenge. Inflicted with a history of wargaming and a sub-current of individualism within hyper-masculine fantasy novels, this concept of risk conceptualised itself in the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a personalised, physical danger. Any pace of movement deeper into the game-space should be counteracted by a possible risk at ending the persistence inside that game-space. Quantified health, enumerated ability, and actuarial assessors of danger bulks play in role-

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[101] C. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*, (San Fransisco, 2009), p. 25 – 73, 28, 33.

playing games with a competitive, entrepreneurial wariness. If the player is ought to be directly responsible for the player-character, then gameplay is a causality between input and control and a particular understanding of cause-effect, justified throughout multiple layers of fiction. Victory, as a prescribed combative achievement, is negating the source of risk which constitutes an absence of negative affect (no more danger) or the creation of a positive affect (the danger is overcome).

Player agency, through this neoliberal lens (represented by the camera), is a self-actualisation of action without moral pendant. This is achieved through game fiction's propensity, necessitating the presence of danger, to project a fictionalised game-space that is inherently hostile to the player and the player-character. The whole world is out to stop or even kill the player, meaning that each victory is plus one reason of legitimated play. The voluntary induction of playing a game and abiding its rulesets promotes an affective reward – winning means outsmarting a system designed to offer loss as reasonable outcome. In digital games, this has morphed into a nurtured egocentrism by emulously tying game, story, and narrative to the continued survival of the player-character. If the only condition triggering the game to end and the prewritten story to halt is the death of the player-character, then logically they are the most important construct in that ludo-narrative.

One corollary of such a conditional precarity of the role-playing game is that the plausible deniability of play. Neoliberalism is an ideology which does not name itself[102], its morphology reconfigured into the vacancy of moral or ethical conduct. If neoliberal risk is the great economic equaliser, then anyone who succeeds by the video game's rules is exempt from any measure unrelated to its mechanics. Pointing out any political or power-related query, then, is rejected on the basis that these autarkic meritocracies are what justify the existence of representational injustices.

Michel Foucault warned against the persistency of approaching non-economic matters through arguably economic rationalities. The entrepreneurial self is intrinsic to a life philosophy that centers scarcity and where any tangible positive gain must be a wager or worth competing for, applying this scarce-resource model to non-economic situations. The problematic element within this rational conduct is that it is only rational when articulated to this economic conduct.[103]

Thankfully, there are voices within the industry that are critical of such design. Be it *Apocalypse World*'s mechanics of sequestered action-response and active responsibility or through the queered game-space of *Monsterhearts,* non-industry productions of video game that are aimed at community and not as sales demographics are levelling the playing field, as it were. Even within the industry, there are severe attempts at undermining the apparent demand for violence-as-agency. Video games are not simply digital spaces of regulated fantasy and freedom – as artistic and cultural

[102] Springer, "The Violence of Neoliberalism", 4 – 16.
[103] M. Foucault, "28 March 1979," *Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, ed., Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, 2008), p. 267 – 289.

artefacts, they have stories to tell and messages of morality in them. The player should not be coddled for playing, they should be left to feel. If risk-as-play is “based upon a dream of the technocratic control of the accidental by continuous monitoring and management of risk”[104], then feeling as reward, not gauges of quantification and experience trajectories, might provide the revolution that breaks the mould and the hold of neoliberalism.

[104] Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, p. 235.

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