

Paradoxical Indie Games

A Critical Study of Game Violence in Multitudinous Indie Games



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Image on the cover: A big climate strike in Hamburg, Germany on September 20, 2019.¹
Added to the original photo is the shooting interface of *September 12th: A Toy World* (2003).

¹ "IN PICTURES: Germany takes to the streets in global climate strike," The Local, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://www.thelocal.de/20190920/in-pictures-germany-takes-to-the-streets-in-the-global-climate-strike>.

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Abstract

While game violence is a topic extensively studied in academics, both for its psychological effect on players and prevalence in game culture, it is mostly associated with the mainstream forms of shooting and fighting games, the armed men on the covers of billboards in retailers. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter ascribe these games to ‘Empire’, a capitalistic logic ruling the world, and restraining games to a military-industrial complex. Contrary to Empire is the multitude, a diverse and liberal force seeking liberation from Empire’s control, and in the game industry Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter see autonomously produced games as the force of multitude. As these games are generally produced by independent developers, they are indie games of the multitude. However, this paper nuances this two-way distinction with regards to game violence, since even indie games show they can employ violence just as well as mainstream games, although often in a different shape. This paper explains this shape as *implicit violence*, a symbolic form of violence that is more about its perceived value for game design than an offensively realistic representation. Contrarily, realistic, excessive forms are in this paper defined as *explicit violence*, common in mainstream games. While indie games of multitude employ a subtle, milder form of game violence, it is confirmative to the industry’s capitalist logic and therefore anti-compositional of the multitudinous messages these games try to convey. These games are therefore considered *paradoxical*, and have not capitalized on their potential as multitudinous games completely free from the constraints of Empire. This paper therefore conducts a critical discourse analysis of three case studies to make insightful how these games are paradoxical. The illustrated examples are *violence as a metaphor*, *violent environment* and the *everyday non-player character combatant*, three possible applications of implicit violence. Since discourse on these cases shows a limited consideration for this game violence, it is argued that violence is naturalized in traditional design practices, rather than a characteristic natural to games. This realization is vital for the change the multitude desires.

Honours Justification

The Humanities Honours Programme of Utrecht University has hugely enabled this study and helped to determine a critical approach to a relevant media phenomenon. The programme has suggested three qualitative requirements of the student's choice for making an Honours thesis out of a BA thesis: in-depth study within the student's field, interdisciplinary study within and outside of Humanities fields, and societal relevance. This paper can be interpreted as both in-depth approach to a relevant phenomenon within media studies and a study transcending its value within the field. This is mainly because this study is heavily embedded in critical theory and normatively conducted. It addresses issues relevant within the game industry, but likewise related to a more fundamental phenomenon: the dominance of Empire in today's society and media industries. While this study is essentially about game violence and its place in games of the multitude, this approach allowed for a more far-stretching relation between game violence and the capitalist logic of contemporary society in Empire. I am therefore thankful for the opportunity provided by the programme to realize a study to the full extent of my ambitions.

Introduction

Throughout the short history of videogames, critics have been wont to link the medium to violence. Historian Johan Huizinga precluded these takes, describing war as the most primitive form of play in *Homo Ludens* (1949). War as a play-element would be glorified, elevated to a form of divination by modern society.² Decades later, with videogames having emerged as popular media, violence is regarded a predominant feature in most games.³ Games like *Mortal Kombat* (1992) increasingly visualized ruthless violence to appeal to young male audiences.⁴ Such visualizations solicited media outrage, prompting censorship or banishment. Criticisms also spurred cultural debates over game content. Some claims suggested a causal link between in-game and real-world violence, while scientific research has highly contested these links.⁵ Other scholars, such as Matt McCormick, studied the morality of game violence altogether, inducing mixed conclusions.⁶ Ideological criticism of violence came from Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter in *Digital Play* (2003) and Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter in *Games of Empire* (2009). The latter offers solid bases for distinguishing morally objectionable games (*games of Empire*) from those providing better alternatives (*games of multitude*).⁷ When it comes to game violence, however, this distinction is not self-evident.

This paper therefore poses the research question: To what extent is violence prevalent in independent games of the multitude? To answer this question, this thesis employs the sub-questions: How is game violence constituted in both games of Empire and of the multitude? What is the purpose of a critical perspective on game violence? And to what extent is game violence contradicting the critical nature of games of multitude? The first requires conceptual reflection on notions of game violence, the second features this paper's embedment in critical theory and critical discourse methods, while the third calls for illustrative case study analyses.

Both *Digital Play* and *Games of Empire* provide a critical analytic lens on the system of the game industry. It is interpretable as *critical theory*, a sociocultural critique on relations of domination in society.⁸ Sara Grimes and Andrew Feenberg have proposed a framework for broader critical theory-inspired game analyses, because games rationalize capitalist practices.⁹

² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (New York: Angelico Press, 2016), 89-91.

³ Christina R. Glaubke et al., *Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games* (Oakland: Children Now, 2001), 9.

⁴ Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 249-251.

⁵ Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 163-168.

⁶ Matt McCormick, "Is it wrong to play violent video games?," *Ethics and Information Technology* 3 (2001): 286-287.

⁷ Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 187-188.

⁸ Raymond A. Morrow and David D. Brown, *Critical Theory and Methodology* (London: SAGE Publications, 1994), 10-11.

⁹ Sara M. Grimes and Andrew Feenberg, "Rationalizing Play: A Critical Theory of Digital Gaming," *The Information Society* 25, no. 2 (2009): 105.

Digital Play and *Games of Empire* are prominent examples. Game violence is according to *Digital Play* not merely an element of morally objectionable games, but an objectionable element central to the industry.¹⁰ *Games of Empire* claims that popular games tend to banalize military conflict.¹¹ Players are offered low barriers for virtually becoming an army general.¹²

These notions are evident from commercial aspects. The US' top ten most sold games in 2018 includes eight excessively violent games,¹³ while 2019 shows seven out of the top ten as such.¹⁴ A visit to physical game retailers reveals common billboards of men bearing arms or being in assault. These observations show the claims' plausibility. The categorization of games as either Empire or multitude, however, complicates matters. With these terms, Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter refer to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), where it is argued that the multitude, the social world's productive force, resists Empire, the apparatus in power.¹⁵ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter see this force in *independent (indie) games*.¹⁶ Their definition of multitudinous games resembles what Gonzalo Frasca coined *videogames of the oppressed*, specifically designed to stimulate critical thinking in the player.¹⁷ This multitude-Empire distinction must be considered too blunt. A study by Lars de Wildt and Stef Aupers indicates that even within indie game discourse, deviations of industry conventions would be socially taboo. Reproduction of the industry's hegemony would be inevitable.¹⁸ Furthermore, while indie games are regarded the opposite of *blockbuster (AAA) games*, indie and AAA are not translatable to 'multitude' and 'Empire' respectively.¹⁹ Some indie games are catered to the mainstream and thus labeled 'mindies'.²⁰ These are generally not multitudinous games.

Having nuanced Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter's distinction, this paper will conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to reveal the prevalence and shape of game violence in indie games of the multitude. Using Norman Fairclough's model for CDAs, this paper will perform case studies based on analyses of text, discursive practice and social practice.²¹ Since there is no definite list of multitudinous games, this paper focusses on cases critically acclaimed for

¹⁰ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 253-256.

¹¹ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 99-100.

¹² Ibidem, 116-118.

¹³ Jeff Grubb, "NPD 2018: The 20 best-selling games of the year," *VentureBeat*, January 22, 2019, <https://venturebeat.com/2019/01/22/npd-2018-the-20-best-selling-games-of-the-year/>.

¹⁴ Jeff Grubb, "NPD: The 20 best-selling games of 2019 in the U.S.," *VentureBeat*, January 16, 2020, <https://venturebeat.com/2020/01/16/20-best-selling-games-of-2019/>.

¹⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 61-62.

¹⁶ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 187-188.

¹⁷ Gonzalo Frasca, "Videogames of the Oppressed: Videogames as a Means for Critical Thinking and Debate" (MA diss., Georgia Institute of Technology, 2001), 76-78.

¹⁸ Lars de Wildt and Stef Aupers, "Indie-viduals: Videogames' Hegemonic (Re-)Production Culture," *DiGRA* (2018): 1-3.

¹⁹ 'AAA' games are considered the blockbusters of the game industry, developed by huge specialized teams. The distinction is further elaborated upon in: Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding Videogames*, 20-21.

²⁰ Patrick Crogan, "Indie Dreams: Video Games, Creative Economy, and the Hyperindustrial Epoch," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 7 (2018): 681.

²¹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 59.

advocating anti-capitalist sentiment in societal issues. The predominance of game violence in these cases illustrates a paradox with their messages, creating *paradoxical indie games*.

The established theoretical, methodological and analytical bases constitute the following structure. Chapter I provides the theoretical framework for this research, answering the first sub-question by conceptualizing a robust approach to game violence, while contextualizing the second sub-question within contemporary critical theory. Chapter II will relate this context to the CDA method and thereby answer the second sub-question, while establishing a method for answering the third sub-question. Chapter III analyzes three case studies using this CDA method, allowing for an answer of the third sub-question. The study finally summarizes its findings, answers the main research question, and points to limitations and further research.

CHAPTER I

Towards a Critical Understanding of Game Violence

Don't bring out the General in you!
– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari²²

The occasional player of videogames might struggle to name any recently played titles devoid of violence. An easy way out would be to name sports or *casual games*. The latter, however, is a category contrasted with *hardcore games*: smaller in size, appealing to audiences beyond young males, these games reject the traditional values of game design, Jesper Juul argues.²³ It therefore seems as if a 'real' game is meant to be inherently violent. It is therefore reasonable that news media criticize games for overabundant violence.²⁴ However, a conceptual problem then arises: what exactly constitutes game violence, and when is it excessive? *Digital Play* and *Games of Empire* provide ample starting points in their analyses. Game violence would be provocative "testosterone marketing",²⁵ and generally take shape in "murder simulators".²⁶

The centrality of violence in the game industry extends beyond these excessive forms, however. For a robust critical approach to game violence it is therefore necessary to theorize how game violence is also subtly constituted. Section 1.1 will therefore propose a definition of game violence and its variable forms. Section 1.2 will conceptualize violence for games of Empire. Section 1.3 studies the complex relation between indie games and multitude, before conceptualizing indie game violence. Finally, with the concepts in place, section 1.4 broadens the analysis to contemporary critical theory, creating insight in the purpose of this study.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.

²³ Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2010), 25-27.

²⁴ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding Video Games*, 164-165.

²⁵ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 248-251.

²⁶ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 155-156.

1.1 Conceptualizing Game Violence

“Does the game industry rely too much on graphic violence to sell its games?” Popular game critic Jim Sterling admittedly loves the predominance of violence in games, stating: “combat is the first language and premier currency of mainstream videogames.” Yet he also wonders about the alternatives: “there have been and will be games that can tell interesting stories and feature all sorts of exciting interactions without someone having to be bleeding on the carpet by the end of it”.²⁷ Whereas *violence as first language* closely resembles Kline et al.’s concept of *militarized masculinity*, games employing subject-positions of aggressive males, *bloodless interaction* proposes a polar opposite.²⁸ This section problematizes this two-way distinction because of its inconsideration for more subtle game violence, and offers an alternative theory.

The ambiguity of violence as a concept requires further elaboration in this study. The Oxford Dictionary defines violence as either “a behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage or kill someone or something” or “strength of emotion or of a destructive natural force”.²⁹ This paper convincingly enhances only the former definition, since the alternative is about emotionally immoral treatment of people. McCormick in this spirit referred to online multiplayer games in which players are *bad sports* to others, and therefore violent.³⁰ Defining violence as a *harmful act* of any kind would then incite endless debate.³¹ Similarly, since this kind is common in the physical world, specifying game violence becomes near impossible.

However, even the definition “physical force intended to hurt, damage or kill someone or something” is subjectable to criticism when translated to games. Jasper van Vught argues how game violence does not actually hurt or kill a living victim. He therefore makes three important distinctions: firstly, game violence is not an illegal activity, unlike most forms of real violence; secondly, the act and consequence of game violence differ from the actions they represent; and thirdly, game violence is playful and therefore purposeful.³² The importance of criticizing game violence is therefore mostly symbolic. Grant Tavinor notes that regardless of physical consequences, fictions can be believed morally objectionable. He distinguishes three forms of immoral game violence: the increasingly realistic representation of violence and gore in games; the player’s fictional involvement in a simulated real-world crime; and the violent

²⁷ Jim Sterling, “Being Slightly Critical Of Violence In One Particular Way (The Jimquisition),” YouTube video, 14:11, June 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKFafPSddGw>.

²⁸ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 254.

²⁹ “Violence,” Lexico, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/violence>.

³⁰ McCormick, “Is it wrong to play violent video games?,” 282.

³¹ Ibidem, 277-278.

³² Jasper van Vught, “Neoformalist Game Analysis: A methodological exploration of single-player game violence” (PhD diss., The University of Waikato, 2016), 17-18.

viewpoints expressed by game content.³³ Game violence is then what McCormick considers the cultivation of a wrong character. Playing a virtual murderer reinforces the wrong habits.³⁴

Game violence is therefore constituted by the translation of physical violence to virtual environments. This specification allows for an understanding of violence criticisms in *Digital Play* and *Games of Empire*. *Digital Play* attributes increasingly intense violence partly to its marketing value, especially in Sega and Nintendo's rivalry in the early 1990s. While Nintendo kept its family-friendly orientation, Sega successfully catered predominantly to young men; its uncensored version of *Mortal Kombat* (1992) outperformed Nintendo's censored version. Sega's tactic followed the popular logic of 'violence sells' common in television and film.³⁵ Kline et al. typify 'the violence game' as elevating popular consumption of violence, mostly because of such specialized marketing. Both the improved technology for visualizing violence and commercial successes shifted the dynamics of the mainstream industry to self-replication practices, since these became the most risk-averse way for developers to develop big games.³⁶

This contextualization within market factors is crucial in understanding game violence beyond the controversial titles. Kline et al. instead see violence as the central characteristic in all interactive games: it transcends genre (e.g. "shooter" games), is present in a great majority of games rated E(veryone) (79%, a study by Children Now finds),³⁷ takes center stage even in wholesome games (e.g. in *Pokémon*, where animals engage in combat), and must therefore be seen in the thematical complex coined 'militarized masculinity', because the industry forms a "semiotic nexus revolving around issues of war, conquest and combat that thematically unites games". They are 'masculine' for being closely related to the industry's male gender biases.³⁸

Yet this notion does not account for several specifications: how game violence is to be recognized, its various forms, and how the game industry has developed since 2003. *Games of Empire* fills in most of these blanks. It allows for a more directly political perspective on the game industry, arguing that games are media of Empire. Games have "originated in the U.S. military-industrial complex, the nuclear-armed core of capital's global domination" and shape consumers for increasingly militarized markets.³⁹ Games are therefore not merely a form of fiction, but directly relate real world practices; the forces of Empire are apparent from games of Empire.⁴⁰ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter see game violence manifested in 'Banal War', the

³³ Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 159-164.

³⁴ McCormick, "Is it wrong to play violent video games?," 285-286.

³⁵ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 132-134.

³⁶ Ibidem, 248-251.

³⁷ Glaubke et al., *Fair Play?*, 12.

³⁸ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 253-256.

³⁹ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, xxix-xxx.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, xxxiv-xxxv.

deep-rooted link between games and war, and ‘Imperial City’, violence in urban contexts.⁴¹ With *Banal War*, games treat war as a general phenomenon, lacking boundaries, portraying a way of life in which power functions with the threat of warfare. Militaristic games support a banalization of this vision.⁴² With *Imperial City*, power is concentrated in a global city, where life is controlled and exploited. It is an arena of zero tolerance, where the global hierarchy is consolidated.⁴³ While *Imperial City* games are typically criticized for their excessive violence (“murder simulators”), violence here only constitutes a symptom of inequality.⁴⁴ These forms combined constitute the following definition for game violence: a senseless representation of physical violence in games, banalizing excessive warfare and constituting power inequality.⁴⁵

This definition checks Tavinor’s boxes for offensive representation, simulated crime, and violent viewpoint. It is game violence as familiarized: the men bearing arms on the covers of best-selling franchises such as *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* and *God of War*.⁴⁶ Yet this account does not account for Jeffrey Goldstein’s distinction between violence and images of violence; between enacting violence and depicting violence respectively. These games contain both, but only because production values allow for realistic visualization.⁴⁷ Indie games contrarily offer less sophistication in graphical depictions of violence.⁴⁸ In contrast to *serious violence*, with a realistic context and depiction, they offer *comic violence*, absurd forms in a playful context.⁴⁹ There is thus generally no offensive representation in violent indie games: no humans spurting blood, but monsters popping with a silly sound effect. However, as Van Vught argues, while this kind of conflict hardly triggers social concern, it is nonetheless a form of game violence.⁵⁰

The next sections will therefore conceptualize distinct categories of game violence: *explicit violence*, common in AAA games, where offensive representations of violent imagery are commonplace, and *implicit violence*, common in indie games, where violence is symbolic and playful. The concepts are linked in two essences of game violence: firstly, that the player enacts violence and is thus violent.⁵¹ Secondly, as Graeme Kirkpatrick has illustrated, that the motivation comes from a tendency to associate audiences as young males primarily interested in aggressively masculine gameplay, which must be ‘cool’ and attractive, and thus violent.⁵²

⁴¹ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, xxxi-xxxii.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 99-100.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 153-154.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 155-157.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 166-167.

⁴⁶ Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, 160-164.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Goldstein, *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2-3.

⁴⁸ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., *Understanding Video Games*, 20-21.

⁴⁹ Glaubke et al., *Fair Play?*, 11.

⁵⁰ Van Vught, “Neoformalist Game Analysis,” 20.

⁵¹ Goldstein, *Why We Watch*, 59-60.

⁵² Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 89-98, Reader for PC.

1.2 Explicit Violence: Playing the Soldier

A provocative commentary on excessive violence in mainstream games is Jim Sterling's statement on the overabundance of violent content at *E3*, one of the largest game conventions in the world: "The concern to me isn't that the violence exists or even the excessiveness of the violence on display. For me it comes down to the rut it represents, the fact that every time I edit a montage of the year's releases (...) there are so many guns in the clips I use, it looks like it could be an NRA lobbyist's leaked sex tape."⁵³ His concern accurately resembles the relation between game violence and the ideological rule of Empire's militarism. This section illustrates how these themes are explained with the concepts of Banal War and Imperial City.

Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter explain Banal War similar to Sterling's NRA critique: war games are a by-product of the military-entertainment complex. 9-11 changed coverage of terrorism in media, precluding commercialization of the 'War on Terror' and related subjects.⁵⁴ David Nieborg argues that the game *America's Army* (2002) goes beyond the marketing of the U.S. army, but instead specifically designs its first-person perspective to effectively illustrate how the army is a freedom fighter. It would therefore be nothing short of propaganda.⁵⁵ Such statements are further elaborated on by Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter. War games are in the habit of portraying invaded non-western countries as terrorist malefactors in desperate need of western liberation. The enemies encountered in such games are often made faceless or at least portrayed inhumanly; their primary role, after all, is serving as the player's target.⁵⁶ They also die viciously upon hit, while the injuries allied characters suffer are instantly healed upon the player's request. If the player would eventually fall, a replay option is advocated.⁵⁷ In making all of these war simulations greatly accessible to the innocent civilian, every player is offered the opportunity to (uncritically) become soldier or even army general. It is thus concluded that the virtual involvement of the civilian makes "a home-front component" of militarism.⁵⁸

These notions are not limited to war games, however. 'Banal Soldier' would be a more accurate term. Consider the game *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (2016).⁵⁹ The player plays as explorer Nathan Drake, hunting treasure in foreign territory. Rival explorers usually employ entire armies set on killing Drake, cueing several shooting sections. When a player slaughters all enemies, the game moves on to the next section, unreflective of the amassed death toll.

⁵³ Jim Sterling, "Being Slightly Critical Of Violence."

⁵⁴ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 101-102.

⁵⁵ David Nieborg, "We Want the Whole World to Know How Great the U.S. Army is! – Computer Games and Propaganda," in *Gaming Realities – A Challenge for Digital Culture*, ed. Manthos Santorineos (Athens: Fornos, 2006), 77-85.

⁵⁶ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 105-109.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 111-113.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 116-118.

⁵⁹ Naughty Dog, *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* [Playstation 4] (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2016).

The second category of game violence, Imperial City, elaborates on the metropolitan background common to franchises such as *GTA*, which stimulate class separations similar to those in imperialism.⁶⁰ Readers familiar with *GTA* might most directly associate the games with excessive violence, as free play allows for direct assassination of almost anybody in the game's world. For this reason, *GTA* accumulated controversies and attempted censorships. Yet the focus of Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter instead is how the franchise sophisticatedly creates an urban environment in which players conceptualize the physical world through their experience with the virtual world of *GTA*. The problem here is that this world reinforces the dominant relations of power within society.⁶¹ When I was a child, I never played *GTA* games, because I believed them to "turn me into a crook". However, this claim remains unproven.⁶² For Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, it means that violent acts are banal player behavior in the game, yet attributed to specific ethnic groups. *GTA: San Andreas* (2004) in particular starred a black male protagonist, who's personality was likeable, but violent behavior stereotypical. It is perhaps best described as a sample of a multifarious game with homogenizing perspectives on social groups; players are inspired to understand and reproduce class separations based on ethnical stereotypes. These separations are "hard-coded into the very streets of urban life."⁶³

What both Banal War and Imperial City approaches to game violence have in common are generally two takes: first, that mainstream videogames have the tendency to make soldiers out of civilians by putting them in a (usually first-person) perspective to the fictional character played. Whether this is a soldier in a fictional War on Terror country or a criminal in the city is less relevant: it is rather about making the violent seem agreeable. Second, violence is often legitimized through propagandic or otherwise justifying approaches: enemies are portrayed either as non-humans (these are typically the many monsters or zombies terminated in games) or as clearly despicable human beings (terrorists, rapists and the like). Or, as is the case in the *GTA* games, the player takes the role of a character not necessarily identified with, and yet the violence does identify itself with the character: it is the stereotypical Italian mafia boss, or the black aggressive male. By limiting criticism to the visually explicit, however, *Games of Empire*'s criticism of game violence might mostly resemble movie violence. Tavinor notes that games at least use violence for gameplay purposes, while in movies the glorification itself is expressed.⁶⁴ Implicit violence, illustrated in the next section, is devoid of this comparison.

⁶⁰ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 153-154.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 155-157.

⁶² Jeffrey Goldstein, "Violent Video Games," in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 342-343.

⁶³ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 165-167.

⁶⁴ Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, 165-166.

1.3 Implicit Violence: The Multitudinous Indie and its Symbolic Violence

The analysis of Banal War and Imperial City as types of conventional game violence indicates ambiguity. The concepts can be ascribed to many games, whether they take place in warzones or multicultural metropolises. The notions extend to a huge majority of mainstream videogames and thus add to the original argument of *Digital Play*, that violence forms the semiotic nexus of games regardless of genre.⁶⁵ The emergence of indie games in-between *Digital Play* and *Games of Empire* shifts the consistency of the argument, however. The authors coined ‘games of the multitude as “the antagonist, the engine and the enemy, of Empire”’.⁶⁶ The catalyst of this force would be ‘autonomous production’, remaking practices of the game industry, which evidently points to indie games.⁶⁷ However, as David Bordwell et al. have correctly stated, independent media can be formed to blockbuster models, despite being produced outside of corporate restraints.⁶⁸ This section explores this paradox for indie games of the multitude.

The domination of Empire within mainstream games, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter argue, have simultaneously opened up possibilities for its overturning in new game forms, of the multitude.⁶⁹ The emergence of digitally distributed indie games in the mid-2000s might have sparked this link, and several scholars have noted indie games’ impact on the industry:⁷⁰ John Sharp witnessed increasingly creative and artistic games,⁷¹ Alexander Galloway thought unconventional games to be *countergaming* versus the mainstream industry,⁷² Mary Flanagan coined *critical computer games* as criticizing the dominant game culture from an outsider’s perspective,⁷³ and Gonzalo Frasca formulated the category of games of the oppressed when games stimulated critical thinking.⁷⁴ Inspired by such notions, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter propose six pathways for “playing against – and beyond – games of Empire”. Those pathways can be attributed both to games as multitudinous media, and player behavior as multitudinous activity. Since this study focuses on indie games rather than players, the relevant categories are: “*dissonant development*, the emergence of critical content in a few mainstream games; *tactical games* designed by activists to disseminate radical social critique; *polity simulators*, associated with the educational and training projects of the ‘serious game movement’”.⁷⁵

⁶⁵ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 253-255.

⁶⁶ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 187.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 213.

⁶⁸ David Bordwell et al., *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), 487-488.

⁶⁹ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 190-191.

⁷⁰ Paolo Ruffino, “Narratives of independent production in video game culture,” *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2013): 106-107.

⁷¹ John Sharp, *Works of Game: On the Aesthetic of Games and Art* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2015), 59.

⁷² Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 124-126.

⁷³ Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 223-226.

⁷⁴ Frasca, “Videogames of the Oppressed,” 76-78.

⁷⁵ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 191.

With *dissonant development*, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter find a contradiction in mainstream games: they can critically reflect on geopolitical issues, such as evil corporations, fear culture or neoliberalism, and yet mainly consist of violent gameplay. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter argue that this contradiction is conventional in the industry's central entertainment apparatus.⁷⁶ This is where indie games come in. As Flanagan noted, those outside of the game industry's apparatus are aware of reproduced stereotypes in mainstream games. Indie game developers use abstract design to reflect, both humorously and critically, on traditional game culture.⁷⁷ They are thus better suited than AAA games to critically tackle geopolitical issues.

Within *tactical games*, conventions themselves are made evident through specifically focused game design. The authors ascribe this category to indie games in particular: usually, activist individuals create these games to show the nature of the capitalist system that shapes these experiences in reality. Some tactical games make the player a corporate executive of oil companies, such as *Oligarchy* (2008), or restaurant brands, such as *McDonald's: The Video Game* (2005), while others provide political critiques (*September 12th: A Toy World* (2003)). Such games are usually easily accessible and free, easy to play, and have a critical individual as their author.⁷⁸ Frasca, the creator of *September 12th*, has labeled this critical development the videogames of the oppressed. His goal was to prove how games can be more than trivial entertainment objects: they can be simulations of systems and stimulate critical thinking with its players.⁷⁹ The use of violence in these games has mainly critical purposes. *September 12th*, for example, allows the player the opportunity to shoot at an Arabic town.⁸⁰ There are both 'terrorists' and villagers swarming about, and every accidental villager death creates terrorists. The message, 'violence breeds violence', is a political critique of the War on Terror.⁸¹

Finally, *polity simulators* conflict the player with real geopolitical issues and envision solutions. Instead of criticizing Empire as in dissonant development and tactical games, polity simulators mean to show alternatives to social issues and propose activist guides for players. Often, these games are individually designed and form part of movements advocating social change such as 'Games for Change' and *serious games*. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter see in these games the potential to make radical decisions for the long-term battle against Empire.⁸²

With categories in place, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter conclude that 'autonomous production' can remake the social practices of both game industry and social world, thereby

⁷⁶ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 194-197.

⁷⁷ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 226-228.

⁷⁸ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 197-199.

⁷⁹ Frasca, "Videogames of the Oppressed," 113-114.

⁸⁰ Gonzalo Frasca, *September 12th: A Toy World* [Windows] (Newsgaming, 2003).

⁸¹ Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 239-241.

⁸² Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 200-202.

presenting “practical tools that may be useful for its actualization”. To come to fruition, self-organized culture would only need more open uses for digital distribution.⁸³ The years after *Games of Empire* saw the emergence of mobile and digital distribution platforms, however, and the effect was opposite of what Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter hoped. The emergence of distribution platform Steam in 2012, which became the regulator for digital pc games, caused an ‘indiepocalypse’ of ‘mindies’ (mainstream indie games). Multitudinous indie games were only meagerly represented, as most developers preferred a viable revenue stream.⁸⁴ As Nadav Lipkin argued: “indie developers clearly presenting anti-establishment perspectives by their mere existence is ending”.⁸⁵ While some *tactical games and polity simulators* were able to amass global attention, such as *Inside* (2016) and *Paper’s Please* (2013), most multitudinous indie games show both “creative dissidence and profitable compliance”, applying violence.⁸⁶

Is this paradoxical to the multitude? “Games and gamers get out of the control of their corporate military sponsors” is what multitude is about, after all.⁸⁷ However, what happens if indie games are explicitly anti-Empire, but also employ game violence? They are comparable then to AAA games mentioned with *dissonant development*, but in a much subtler way. One example hereof is *Stardew Valley* (2016).⁸⁸ The game is essentially about leaving an office job in a major corporation for a farmer’s life in a rural town inhabiting about 30 people in total. The farmer can keep animals, but not harm them or sell their meat. The farmer produces only organic products. Yet the game employs some type of violence: fish can be caught and eaten, trees can be cut and monsters can be battled with a sword, which makes them vanish after a few swings. Because the game selectively determined friendly and evil creatures, Erik van Ooijen argues that the game discriminates the killable.⁸⁹ The case proves two things: first, that games of multitude can both employ game violence and support anti-Empire sentiment; and second, that the form of violence greatly differs in indie games due to more abstract, ludic representations of game violence. Before these indie games can be critically assessed for their overabundance of violence, it would be helpful to define and distinguish this kind of violence.

This paper suggests the term *implicit violence* for this form. Offensive representations of *explicit violence* are not common in indie games of multitude for several reasons. Firstly, indie games mostly don’t have the full technological capabilities to realistically represent war.

⁸³ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 212-214.

⁸⁴ Crogan, “Indie Dreams,” 673-681.

⁸⁵ Nadav Lipkin, “Examining Indie’s Independence: The Meaning of ‘Indie’ Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Co-optation,” *Loading...* 7, no. 11 (December 2012): 21.

⁸⁶ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 190.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 190.

⁸⁸ ConcernedApe, *Stardew Valley* [multi-platform] (Chucklefish, 2016).

⁸⁹ Erik van Ooijen, “The Killability of Fish in The Sims 3: Pets and Stardew Valley,” *Comput Game J* 7 (2018): 178-179.

Instead, their design is more focused on the nostalgic aesthetic of the 8- and 16-bit eras. This is simultaneously an inherent form of protest against AAA standards, where technological developments often drive the aesthetic.⁹⁰ Secondly, instead of representing reality in a slightly alternated context, indie games more generally create entirely fictional encounters in a fantasy world. Goldstein considered the immersion in fantasy worlds as explanatory for the tolerance of violence in these contexts.⁹¹ Hence violence is easily naturalized in indie games. The shape is mostly symbolic, offering no visual excessiveness, but representation of crime nonetheless.

With conceptual differences between explicit and implicit game violence established, what remains to be analyzed is the motivation for violence in games of Empire and multitude respectively. Van Vught considered five motivations for game violence: *ludic*, facilitating the process of play; *compositional*, helping construction of the game's narrative; *realistic*, making an experience referable to the real world; *transtextual*, referring to violence systems in older games; and *artistic*, when it contributes to the abstract shape of the game.⁹² A typical Empire game employs violence as a gameplay device (*ludic*); uses violence to bring a message across – even in propagandic proportions, such as in *America's Army's* case (*compositional*); values violence's realism (*realistic*); and, since blockbuster franchises typically rely on serialized production strategies, violence systems are often inspired by preceding titles (*transtextual*).⁹³ When indie games are violent, they conform to gameplay conventions (*ludic*); refer to classic game violence of 8- and 16-bit games (*transtextual*) and often use violence poetically, such as in *September 12th* (*artistic*). However, violence is often paradoxical to anti-Empire messages indie games propose. Because ludic violence motivations clash with the politics, indie games' violence is *anti-compositional*. The prevalence of violence in indie games is then to be seen in the context of indie games obeying mainstream production values.⁹⁴ The next section will therefore propose a critical perspective towards the industrial conventions of game violence.

⁹⁰ Lipkin, "Examining Indie's Independence," 10.

⁹¹ Goldstein, *Why We Watch*, 219.

⁹² Van Vught, "Neoformalist Game Analysis," 222-223.

⁹³ David Nieborg, "Prolonging the Magic: The political economy of the 7th generation console game," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 8, no. 11 (2014): 50-53.

⁹⁴ Lipkin, "Examining Indie's Independence," 19-20.

1.4 Games and Critical Theory: Indie and Industry

The last sections have defined and distinguished the different types of game violence and problematized *implicit violence* as unnecessarily confirmative to game industry conventions, which require further ideological criticism. This section therefore embeds game violence in *critical theory*, a normative critique of society's values. Raymond Morrow and David Brown argue that critical theory attempts to understand the complexity of dominant values and offers prospects of what these values are supposed to be.⁹⁵ This resembles what Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter attempt by viewing Empire as dominant and the multitude as necessary prospect for creating a new kind of society.⁹⁶ However, their vision is heavily impacted by contemporary critical theory, and historically by traditional criticisms of cultural industries. This section will therefore contextualize game industry criticism within critical theory, before returning to its meaning for this particular study of indie games as subjectable to game violence criticism.

The inspiration for both *Digital Play* and *Games of Empire*'s critical perspectives on the game industry is undoubtedly the work of critical theorists on what is regarded the 'culture industry', a theory originally adopted by Frankfurt School philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). They believed the commercialization of cultural production to conflict with the essence of culture. Culture, which is supposed to stimulate critical thinking in the individual consumer, would in an industrial model instead be confirmative to the ideological status quo and obstruct free thinking.⁹⁷ This ideological status quo in the game industry can concretely be found in *Digital Play*'s centrality of *militarized masculinity*, the banalization of physical violence in virtual games.⁹⁸ It is similarly argued by Horkheimer and Adorno that the maintenance of corporate control over the culture industry is established by creating false consumer needs for specific commodities.⁹⁹ This can likewise be retracted in *Digital Play*'s concept of "digital play as a cultural industry" in which interactive entertainment is directed towards themes of conquest and violence, structuring the industry.¹⁰⁰

However, both critical works are not merely translations of Horkheimer and Adorno's work to the game industry. They must rather be seen in the light of contemporary issues of critical theory. *Digital Play* already mentions the transition from the Fordist to post-Fordist market, and the way issues of corporate power reappear, to keep the continuity of criticism.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Morrow and Brown, *Critical Theory and Methodology*, 10-11.

⁹⁶ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 214.

⁹⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 98-100.

⁹⁸ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 256.

⁹⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 108-109.

¹⁰⁰ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 193-195.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 65-66.

“Critical media analysis”, Kline et al. argue, “must take account of these transformations, without lapsing into either utopian millenarianism or apocalyptic doomsaying.” Therefore, they consider Raymond Williams’ examination of the television medium as a framework for critically analyzing games, yet with three necessary updates: the key developments of the information economy, the postmodernization of culture, and the commercialization of the mediated marketplace. These now have to be taken into account for critical game analyses.¹⁰²

The concept of the culture industry as a framework for the game industry has likewise been transformed, most notably by Aphra Kerr and Nieborg. Kerr has extensively described the evolution of the culture industry from essentialist critique of industrialization to a more analytical approach for looking at how the capitalist system structures the commodities of media industries. She sees three characterizations of today’s cultural industries: the high risks involved in cultural production; high production costs and low reproduction costs of products; and the function of products and services as public goods. These characteristics can be linked to the game industry just as well as to traditional media industries. Kerr mentions the game industry’s hit-driven nature, incentives for reproduction through multiple platform ports and piracy wars as examples of these characteristics.¹⁰³ Multiple studies seem in line with Kerr’s argument: Nieborg has illustrated AAA games’ hit-driven nature by relying on blockbuster products garnering as much hype as possible to minimalize risks.¹⁰⁴ He also wrote of how AAA games regularly ‘refreshed the disc’ by creating purchasable add-ons for already bought games, often in the form of ‘downloadable content’.¹⁰⁵ Finally, the issues of piracy have been in-depth analyzed by Kline et al. as a major threat to the digital marketplace.¹⁰⁶

With both transformations to contemporary critical studies in place, it becomes logical why Dyer-Witford and De Peuter base their critical analysis on Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*. Hardt and Negri see *Empire* as “the sovereign power that governs the world”, which is, rather than any nation state, a single capitalist logic of rule which rules the entire civilized world and yet allows the possibility for liberation from *Empire*.¹⁰⁷ The liberation would manifest itself in powers of the multitude, the alternative and opposition to *Empire*. Hardt and Negri, and Dyer-Witford and De Peuter after them, consider this power to be autonomous and revitalizing.¹⁰⁸ Yet, if anything, the previous sections have illustrated precisely how in the game industry,

¹⁰² Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 60-61.

¹⁰³ Aphra Kerr, *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework and Gameplay* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 44-47.

¹⁰⁴ David Nieborg, “Fewer and Bigger: The rise of the über-blockbuster video game,” *Games and Innovation Research Seminar 2011 Working Papers* (2011): 19-22.

¹⁰⁵ Nieborg, “Prolonging the Magic,” 52-57.

¹⁰⁶ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 209-211.

¹⁰⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, xi-xv.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 393-395.

what was presumed to become the manifested form of the multitude in indie games, instead has become obedient to the dominant commodities of violence in the game industry. Paolo Ruffino argues that indie developers would be too reliant on the success of the final product, because of the risks of production in a cultural industry, and they therefore choose an extent of conformation which is economically safe. Indie games are in this sense merely an approach within the commodified industry.¹⁰⁹ Lipkin's analysis is similar: indie is a label in style only, since true independence has been made impossible by their commercialization.¹¹⁰ De Wildt and Aupers in this light see game design as the part of a cultural logic, of which it is socially taboo to deviate by developers, and economically advantageous to reproduce conventions.¹¹¹

Indie games are thus forced to abide the dominant commodities of the game industry. Mark Fisher has labeled such commodities quite accurately with *capitalist realism*, which he labels a "pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture (...) but also acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action." It is therefore obvious that culture is supposed to be run as a business.¹¹² Indie games would be no exception. Yet, in spite of the evident role capitalism plays in making indie games obedient and therefore also violent, it would be much more insightful to look at the prospect indie games have as games of multitude if they could escape this commodification. Jeremy Gilbert has remarked that commodification itself is not the issue, but the enforcement of commodification by capitalists, who promote the individualist's misconception of social reality.¹¹³ He also states: "capitalism may appear, at present, to be unshakably hegemonic (...), but the desire for forms (...) of life which it cannot tolerate has not gone away. Whatever that desire (...), there is the potential for positive change."¹¹⁴ Gilbert's hope resonates with the idea of the multitude; globalization allows for liberation from the self-appropriated commodity.¹¹⁵ Indie games fulfill this role.¹¹⁶

It is therefore, critical theory contexts considered, most insightful to consider in indie games a potentiality not completely fruited yet. As Patrick Crogan believes, the dreams of indie games are originally to be the creative realization and the potential for challenging the industry.¹¹⁷ With their multitudinous messages, there is plenty of promise. Yet the prevailing game violence makes these indie games *paradoxical*, and in need of adequate feedback.

¹⁰⁹ Ruffino, "Narratives of independent production," 114-119.

¹¹⁰ Lipkin, "Examining Indie's Independence," 19-20.

¹¹¹ De Wildt and Aupers, "Indie-viduals," 2-3.

¹¹² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (New Alresford: Zero Books, 2009), 16-17.

¹¹³ Jeremy Gilbert, *Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 124-125.

¹¹⁴ Gilbert, *Anticapitalism and Culture*, 167-168.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 239.

¹¹⁶ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 213.

¹¹⁷ Crogan, "Indie Dreams," 684-685.

CHAPTER II

Towards A Critical Analysis of the Violent Indie Game

Ever since words existed for fighting and playing, men have been wont to call war a game.

- Johan Huizinga¹¹⁸

The previous chapter conceptualized game violence and made *implicit violence* applicable to indie games of the multitude. This chapter makes these games subjectable to critical analyses of their violence. A *critical discourse analysis* (CDA) is the most prominent method for this proposed analysis of indie games. CDAs help to understand their inherent paradoxes between anti-Empire politics and game violence. Therefore, this chapter focuses on how Fairclough's CDA is essential for analyzing paradoxical indie games, which requires a vast understanding of the method's essence.¹¹⁹ To apply the CDA to the analysis chapter, Fairclough's model of textual, discursive and social analyses is made appropriate for this paper's case studies.¹²⁰

Section 2.1 thus contextualizes the CDA within discursive methods and motivates its use and characteristics. Section 2.2 will make the CDA method appropriate for game analysis. Section 2.3 reveals the CDA's compliance with critical theory. Finally, section 2.4 will return to indie games of the multitude, introducing the relevant cases analyzed in chapter III.

¹¹⁸ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 89.

¹¹⁹ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 10.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, 59.

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis as a Discursive Method

The CDA is one possible approach within the context of discursive methods. Consider the approaches mentioned by Marianne Jorgensen and Louise Philips: *discourse theory*, CDA, and *discursive psychology*. While all approaches are language theories, their poststructuralist influences vary. *Discourse theory*, for example, suggests the idea of discourse as constructive of meaning in the social world. Social hegemony would only be the dominance of a particular perspective, this theory proposes. In *discursive psychology*, the focus is on how individuals negotiate the available discourses of the social world. Instead of being subjected to hegemony, individuals are both producers and products of discourse. If this discourse would be translated to discussions regarding game violence and more specifically to the discursive hegemony of game violence as a convention, such as this study has now established, both methods are quite corresponding to this study; discourse theory could help in illustrating how meanings of game texts hinge on violent attributes of Empire, whereas discursive psychology further clarifies the resistance and obedience of games of the multitude to Empire. What then distinguishes the CDA from both these perspectives is its focus on discourse as a part of social practices rather than as the sole constructor of the social world. Discourse would use the established meaning of a dominant structure. Furthermore, it is *intertextually* constructed, hence an individual text draws on existing discourse and either reproduces this discourse (as in Empire) or combines elements in an original way, allowing for structural change in the social world (multitude).¹²¹ This hope for change aligns with this paper's perspective on paradoxical indie games. The remainder of this section will further elaborate on what the CDA concretely consists of.

Fairclough, witnessing the popularity of his CDA method and incorrect uses, considers three requirements for conducting a 'correct' CDA: it would be a systematic, transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of social practice; it includes some form of systematic analysis of texts; and finally, it is a normative analysis, addressing social wrongs in discursive aspects and possible ways of mitigating them.¹²² This study sees the first and third elements in the analysis' embedment in critical theory, further elaborated on in 2.3, while the second requirement is self-evident from the use of case studies and thus game texts. The validation for this study's CDA is then apparent. However, even Fairclough's description of CDA clearly allows room for multiple interpretations. It proves more valuable to consider his model for media-specific CDAs.¹²³ The next section applies the method to game analysis.

¹²¹ Marianna Jorgensen and Louise Philips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 6-7.

¹²² Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 10-11.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 72-74.

2.2 Fairclough's CDA for Media Analysis

Fairclough considers three levels of social ontology: *social structures*, the semiotic systems of language which constitute what is semiotically possible; *social events*, which actualize these structures in media texts; and *social practices*, the order of discourse controlling the selective actualization of structure in text and thus the mediator between them.¹²⁴ For specific analyses of discourse, he uses a three-dimensional model of *social practice*, *discursive practice* (text production, consumption and distribution), *text* itself, and their interrelations. An ideological reading of media starts with the interpretation of textual elements, before analyzing how these are articulated in orders of discourse.¹²⁵ Jorgensen and Philips have robustly reproduced this model in a figure (see Image 1), highlighting the discursive practice as mediating meaning.¹²⁶ This model will be used to make the CDA method applicable for critical game analyses.

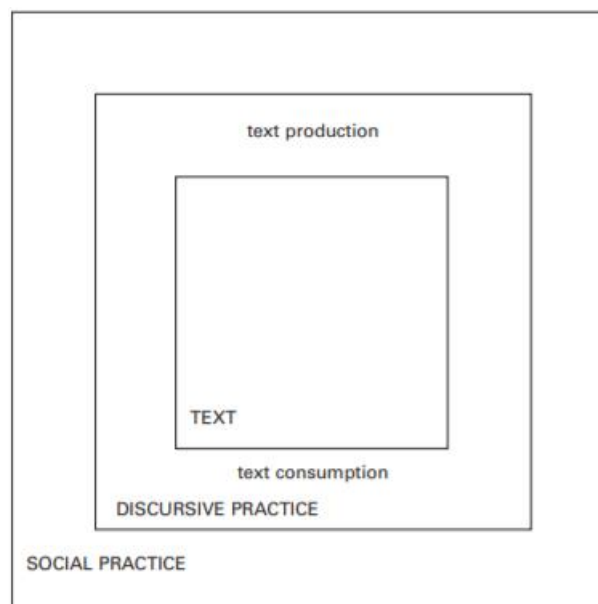


Image 1: The reproduced model of Fairclough's three levels of discourse by Jorgensen and Philips.¹²⁷

Any linguistic text, according to Fairclough, is both constitutive of meaning-making and an effect of the ideology behind the dominant discourse. The textual analysis therefore analyzes both the orientation of a text on social practices in discourse and how successfully it is realized in its linguistic, interpreted form.¹²⁸ Orientation and realization often contradict in videogames. As Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter point out, *Bioshock* (2007) is oriented towards criticism of 21st century capitalism, yet consists of “unashamed” first-person shooting.¹²⁹ It is

¹²⁴ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 74.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, 59-60.

¹²⁶ Jorgensen and Philips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 67-69.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, 68.

¹²⁸ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 75.

¹²⁹ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 195-196.

useful to consider a formalist approach to textual game analysis to reveal similar paradoxes in indie games. Clara Fernández-Vara has illustrated how making sense of game texts, which includes both the meaning of a particular game and its cultural significance, makes it possible to see games as more than just their marketable form and thus allows for critical analyses.¹³⁰ Textual game analysis entails knowledge of the *formal aspects* of a game; this includes the rules and control schemes of a particular game and the presentation to the player in narrative and audiovisual elements, as well as user interface design.¹³¹ Other scholars have illustrated even greater lengths of videogame formalism: Van Vught draws on neoformalist film analysis to suggest analyzing narratological, ludic and other formal elements of games equally, to find a game's meaning in its inherent functioning, and to make generalizable, yet flexible claims with regard to contextual interpretations.¹³² More radically, Ian Bogost claims that *persuasive games* effectively enhance *procedural rhetoric*, an argument constructed through a game's code.¹³³ These concepts prove helpful in determining the cultural significance of indie games.

What these approaches cannot account for, however, is the player's experience of the played game. Van Vught considers his approach limited for not including the different ways players interact with the formal aspects of a game.¹³⁴ Miguel Sicart has famously criticized Bogost's approach for not considering the player's input in altering the game's structure.¹³⁵ Thus the debate of approaching textual game analyses either as games-as-objects or games-as-processes is touched upon here. This is the distinction between respectively formal analysis of concrete game structures and the ways in which players tend to engage with these structures. The player who only follows the intended structure would inhabit *instrumental play*, whereas the player's experimentation with the game's possibilities resembles *free play*.¹³⁶ It could be argued that the CDA attributes the formal approach to text, while the player's subjectivity is only made visible in the discursive practice of text consumption (Image 1). Since this study conducts no interviews, the discursive practice consists of both the *context* of a game, as well as its *overview* (common interpretations).¹³⁷ Useful sources for this analysis are *game reviews*, *newspaper articles* and *developer diaries*.¹³⁸ It offers a limited, yet dominant interpretation of meanings made in games, linking it to social practice, which the next section elaborates on.

¹³⁰ Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 5-12.

¹³¹ Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 17.

¹³² Van Vught, "Neoformalist Game Analysis," 13-14.

¹³³ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2007), 29.

¹³⁴ Van Vught, "Neoformalist Game Analysis," 15.

¹³⁵ Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2011): http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap.

¹³⁶ Jasper van Vught and René Glas, "Considering play: From method to analysis," *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4, no. 2 (November 2018): 209-214.

¹³⁷ Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 14-19.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, 40-41.

2.3 CDA and Contemporary Critical Theory

The social structure analyzed in this paper is the game industry, its ideal commodity of game violence, and logical embedment in Empire and capitalist realism. Section 1.4 has extensively described the relevance of this study within contemporary critical theory. This section will therefore rather look at how the CDA method is complementary of this theoretical framework.

Perhaps most apparent is Fairclough's consideration of social change as restructuring discourses prominently. Discourses are contextualized (and thus likewise 'recontextualized'). The effect is a certain appropriation to the (new) dominant structure.¹³⁹ Morrow and Brown point to two defining traits for CDAs within critical theory in this light: it detects forms of communication linked to power and these are recontextualized to the social relations through which they are constituted.¹⁴⁰ Fairclough, who sees ideology as the relation between meaning of texts and the power of their dominant system, evidently fits the theory methodologically.¹⁴¹ More interesting therefore is the overlapping motivation of critical theory and CDA. Fairclough explains the *critical* in CDA as what "brings the normative element into analysis", "focuses on what is wrong with a society" and "how 'wrong' might be righted". Critique is grounded in values, he concludes.¹⁴² This undoubtedly corresponds to Morrow and Brown's notion of sociocultural critical theory as normative theory of values and "what ought to be".¹⁴³

What then remains to be discussed is how such normative claims can be made visible in CDAs of games. A few examples clarify the potential for ideology criticism through game analyses. Consider Bogost's notion of videogames as tools for "visualizing the logics that make up a worldview (...), the ideological distortions in political situations (...), or the state of such situations".¹⁴⁴ He illustrates this with the -previously mentioned- *America's Army*, which exclusively represents the US military's perspective on global warfare and is therefore ideologically motivated.¹⁴⁵ On the more progressive note, Joost Raessens has conceptualized *ecogames* such as *Walden, a game* (2017). These games could potentially change the player's worldviews and values through the specific organization of content. The goal is to encourage ecological attitudes by the player, contrasting with capitalist logic.¹⁴⁶ Ideology criticism can thus be made visible in both Empire and multitude games, making a paradox interpretable.

¹³⁹ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 76-77.

¹⁴⁰ Morrow and Brown, *Critical Theory and Methodology*, 262.

¹⁴¹ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 79.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, 7.

¹⁴³ Morrow and Brown, *Critical Theory and Methodology*, 11.

¹⁴⁴ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 74-75.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 78-79.

¹⁴⁶ Joost Raessens, "Ecogames. Playing to Save the Planet," in *Cultural Sustainability: Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. Torsten Meireis and Gabriele Rippl (London: Routledge, 2018), 239-243.

2.4 A CDA for Paradoxical Indie Games of the Multitude

Now that a critical theory of game violence and corresponding method have been established, it is time to look at how this paper's central argument can be illustrated through several case studies. One issue this analysis faces is a lack of 'official' multitudinous indie games. Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter only speak of "pathways of multitudinous activity that can be seen, sensed or speculated at the margins – and sometimes deep in the heart – of contemporary video game culture (...) many [games] are tentative, and some, skeptics may think, trivial."¹⁴⁷ This section motivates the selected cases, after having first clarified selection processes.

This paper, acknowledging indie games' potential of multitudinous revolution, regards the multitude to be most effective when played and praised globally. Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter wrote of a "recomposition of general intellect" if these games are played on massive scales. While Empire attempts social control of games within the global corporate-military structures, multitudinous games can revolutionize life, being "games with worlds to win."¹⁴⁸ This kind of success is traced only in few indie games. Consider the most critically acclaimed games of the last decade, according to review aggregating site Metacritic. Of the top 50, only about five are considered indie, and the highest ranked lists 20th.¹⁴⁹ Few indie games score above 85/100 on average. These are typically the games that succeed in culturally reinventing the game industry's status quo.¹⁵⁰ These are multitudinous when their praise is derived from anti-Empire qualities, resonating with Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter's pathways of *dissonant development*, *tactical games*, or *polity simulators*, and alternatively if they intentionally resist the rule of Empire, which Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter loosely label *street games*.¹⁵¹ When critically acclaimed, multitudinous games imply violence, a paradoxicality becomes apparent.

The selected cases therefore illustrate what has earlier been labeled *anti-compositional* game violence, where implicit violence is paradoxical to the multitudinous activity as praised and politically engaged.¹⁵² Two of those have garnered exceptional acclaim to the extents of a Metacritic *must-play* status:¹⁵³ *Celeste* (2018), a *serious game* about social health issues, and *Ori and the Blind Forest* (2015), a *regenerative* experience. Finally, *We Happy Few* (2018), a *critical dystopia*, illustrates how violence can be paradoxical to an indie game altogether.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁷ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 191.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 228-229.

¹⁴⁹ Jason Dietz, "Best Video Games of the Decade (2010-19)," *Metacritic*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.metacritic.com/feature/best-video-games-of-the-decade-2010s>.

¹⁵⁰ Crogan, "Indie Dreams," 672-673.

¹⁵¹ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 185-187.

¹⁵² Van Vught, "Neoformalist Game Analysis," 40-41.

¹⁵³ "New on Metacritic: Must-Play Games," *Metacritic*, accessed June 24, 2020, <https://www.metacritic.com/feature/metacritic-must-play-games>.

¹⁵⁴ Gerald Farca, "The Concept of Utopia in Digital Games," *Bielefeld Transcript* (2018): 32-34.

CHAPTER III

Paradoxical Games of the Multitude: Case Study Analyses

If it's natural to kill, how come men have to go into training to learn how?

- Joan Baez¹⁵⁵

In a first presentation of the *Playstation 5*, Hermen Hulst, *Playstation's* head of WorldWide Studios, argued that creating games was about “these constant trade-offs between the artistic vision and technical limitations”.¹⁵⁶ This philosophy is associated with what Nieborg thought of as the *über-blockbuster game*. As the game industry has evolved into a hit-driven business of technologically innovative AAA games, creativity of game design has instead stagnated, and most mainstream games now employ standardized formulas, limiting innovation mostly to technical features.¹⁵⁷ Indie games would be opposite to this logic. As Ruffino illustrates, they are free of technical restrictions, and instead “groundbreaking” and “creative” in their experimental design techniques.¹⁵⁸ This concretely shows in games of the multitude, which are culturally creative, and thereby potentially subversive, exceeding the uses Empire tries to confine them to.¹⁵⁹ And yet, in spite of this creativity, the implication of violence makes indie games simultaneously compliant.¹⁶⁰ The mission of this chapter is to illustrate this paradox by analyzing both multitudinous activity and implicit violence in three different forms. It does so among the lines of Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model of text, discursive practice and social practice.¹⁶¹ In the textual dimension, it focuses on a game's *formal aspects*: narrative in audiovisual presentation, and procedural rhetoric in its system. In the discursive practice on a game's *context* and *overview*, such as in reviews, interviews, articles and fora discussions. In the social practice, the analysis turns to critical interpretations of ideology within academics.

This analysis highlights three paradoxical indie games. Section 3.1 criticizes *violence as a metaphor* in the universally acclaimed *Celeste* (2018). Section 3.2 delves into the *violent environment* of *Ori and the Blind Forest* (2015). Finally, section 3.3 will turn to the *everyday non-player character combatants* of *We Happy Few* (2018) as detrimental to its reception.

¹⁵⁵ Taken from: Firaxis Games. *Civilization VI* [multi-platform] (2K Games, 2016).

¹⁵⁶ GameSpot Trailers, “FULL PS5 Future of Gaming Reveal Event,” YouTube video, 1:15:16, June 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGgfP87jZiA>.

¹⁵⁷ Nieborg, “Fewer and Bigger,” 19-25.

¹⁵⁸ Ruffino, “Narratives of independent production,” 110-111.

¹⁵⁹ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 187.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 190.

¹⁶¹ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 59.

3.1 Violence as a Metaphor: *Celeste*'s Fight with Inner Demons

Celeste (2018) is essentially a 2D platforming game about a girl named Madeline making her way up a mountain, while avoiding obstacles which upon contact result in a do-over.¹⁶² The journey of Madeline, however, is more of a metaphorical representation than just a fictional story. "If *Celeste* has helped you come to terms with mental illness, I just want to say that you deserve credit for that. That change came from inside of you, and you're capable of a lot more", director Matt Thorson exclaimed during his victory speech following *Celeste*'s Award for best independent game of the year 2018.¹⁶³ Upon the game's release, critics noted both the game's difficulty and forgiving checkpoint system, encouraging the player to try again and overcome the challenge. Oscar Dayus wrote: "After playing *Celeste*, I felt like I'd been on the same journey as Madeline. Her struggle is one made easy to emphasize with, her low points painful to watch, and her high notes exhilarating to experience."¹⁶⁴ In this sense, *Celeste* has often been regarded as a form of medicative treatment for mental health issues like anxiety and depression.¹⁶⁵ In tackling these issues, it employs excessive violence, this section argues.

Games used for serious purposes, such as health, are often referred to as *serious games* and are effective in confronting issues the young adult audience of the game industry are often dealing with, such as depression, Wouter Boundermaker et al. argue.¹⁶⁶ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter consider games aspiring social change in political, ecological and health crises as multitudinous examples, which makes *Celeste* an obvious example of this category.¹⁶⁷ With an 8-bit 2D typical nostalgic indie game style, one might wonder how it gets a message across at all.¹⁶⁸ For this, consider Galloway's notion of *social realism*, in which he argues that the correspondence to real life activities constitutes realism in games, based on the *congruence requirement*. Games would not necessarily require a realistic representation of the world, as is common in blockbusters, but rather accurately capture a social reality and inject it back in the social milieu of the player.¹⁶⁹ A concrete example of this congruence in *Celeste* is Madeline's main antagonistic doppelgänger, Badeline, representing her inner demon of anxiety. Although fictionally depicted, Badeline represents the real struggles of the depressed player (Image 2).

¹⁶² Matt Makes Games, *Celeste* [multi-platform] (Matt Makes Games, 2018).

¹⁶³ Thegameawards, "Celeste Wins Best Independent Game | The Game Awards 2018," YouTube video, 4:43, December 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Klplyc8Jfbk>.

¹⁶⁴ Oscar Dayus, "Celeste Review: More Than Just A Great Platformer," *GameSpot*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/celeste-review-more-than-just-a-great-platformer/1900-6416843/>.

¹⁶⁵ Nathan Grayson, "Celeste Taught Fans And Its Own Creators To Take Better Care Of Themselves," *Kotaku*, April 16, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/celeste-taught-fans-and-its-own-creator-to-take-better-1825305692>.

¹⁶⁶ Wouter J. Boendermaker et al., "Using Serious Games to (Re)Train Cognition in Adolescents," in *Serious Games and Edutainment Applications*, ed. Minhua Ma and Andreas Oikonomou (Cham: Springer, 2017), 307-308.

¹⁶⁷ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 200.

¹⁶⁸ Lipkin, "Examining Indie's Independence," 10.

¹⁶⁹ Galloway, *Gaming*, 72-78.

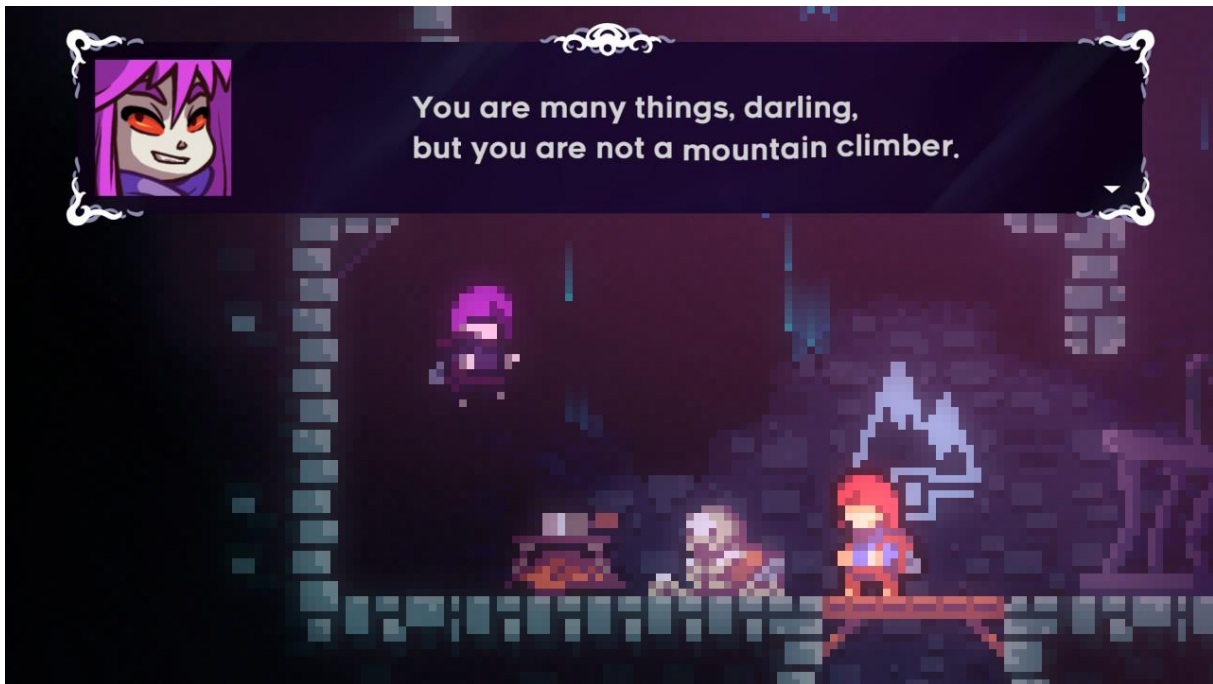


Image 2. As a fictional form of anxiety, Badeline questions Madeline's capability to climb a mountain.

Critics have extensively noticed these reflective interpretations. Aaron Riccio writes: “The mountain at the end of *Celeste* isn't just a metaphor for Madeline's struggles, but for our own. (...) Throughout, your failures are opportunities for improvement: to overcome a digitized representation of the things life puts in your way.”¹⁷⁰ Riccio's interpretation is an indication of the congruence requirement, since it showcases a *fidelity of context*, a devotion to the events in a game as related to the player's social context.¹⁷¹ These interpretations similarly suggest *Celeste* being an *expressive narrative unit*, employing a particular worldview on reality.¹⁷²

And yet, despite *Celeste*'s belonging to categories of Multitude and serious games, it does not avoid unnecessary violence. For example, any fall into spikes results in an “in-game death”. The effect is Madeline's teleportation to the entry point of the level. One is justified to wonder why death and revival instead of teleportation cause the replay of a level. It is thereby an example of what Van Vught regarded the transtextual motivation for violence, as its instant respawn possibilities are drawn from classic platformer games.¹⁷³ Not by accident did director Thorson recall: “The game *Super Mario Bros. 3* is a huge inspiration for *Celeste*, (...) obvious [for] anyone who's played it.”¹⁷⁴ More straightforwardly, *Celeste* employs a classic violence trope in games: ‘boss-fights’. Inner demon Badeline is only beaten in full assault (Image 3).

¹⁷⁰ Aaron Riccio, “Review: *Celeste*,” *SLANT Magazine*, February 3, 2018, <https://www.slantmagazine.com/games/celeste/>.

¹⁷¹ Galloway, *Gaming*, 78.

¹⁷² Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2006), 70-71.

¹⁷³ Van Vught, “Neoformalist Game Analysis,” 82-83.

¹⁷⁴ GamerHubTV, “2018 GDC Awards: *Celeste* (Audience Award Winner),” YouTube video, 3:44, March 22, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=95&v=z1SU6PnwITg&feature=emb_title.

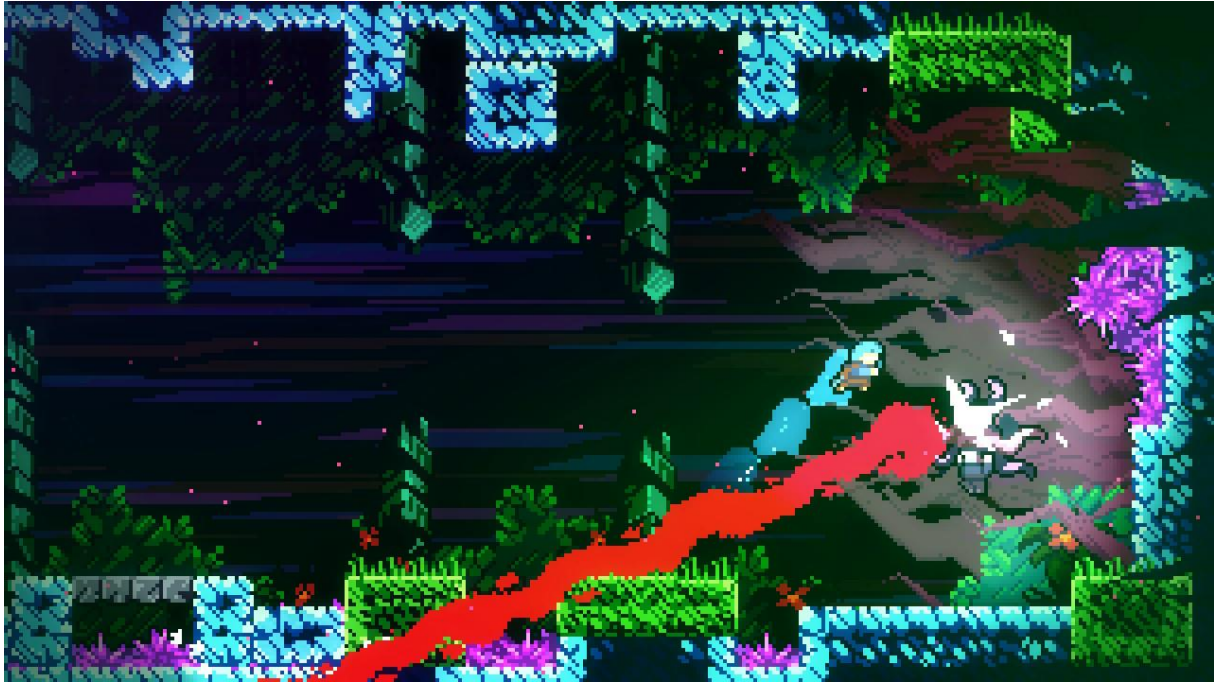


Image 3. *Badeline, unwilling to negotiate with Madeline, instead turns into a demonic monster, employed with savage lasers and fireballs which Madeline must dodge. Madeline physically counter-attacks Badeline to win.*

Boss fights in general are traditional sections in 2D games. They usually serve as climaxes for developed player skill and are the major obstacles for game progression.¹⁷⁵ Violent design of these fights originated from institutional origins within the 2D arcade game industry, although Kline et al. view these origins more as ideological than practical. In Nintendo's more family-friendly games, violence was often limited to implications, e.g. a jump on top of an enemy in the *Super Mario Bros.* series resulted in its bloodless vanishing.¹⁷⁶ *Celeste* shares this tactic.

Yet no matter how toned-down the violence in *Celeste* is, it is anti-compositional and excessive. The former, because it heavily contradicts the social realism it established with its visualization of inner demons. As Galloway argues, militaristic games are typically not realist, since they do not provide direct criticism of society's morals and are only realistic in the sense that they refer to material referents of weapons.¹⁷⁷ By unapologetically making a weaponized, murderous creature out of both Madeline and Badeline in the context of a final confrontation, war is banalized and made a sensible resolution, even of inner conflict.¹⁷⁸ It is also excessive, since Madeline – and thus the player, has no option but to physically attack Badeline. *Celeste* is about a girl climbing a mountain while resisting her anxiety. And yet it employs *violence as a metaphor*, translating the fight against one's inner demons into fully weaponized warfare.

¹⁷⁵ Kristin Siu et al., "A Programming Model for Boss Encounters in 2D Action Games," *AAAI Technical Report* (2016): 16.

¹⁷⁶ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 248-251.

¹⁷⁷ Galloway, *Gaming*, 78-80.

¹⁷⁸ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 99-100.

3.2 The Violent Environment: *Ori* turns Forest to her Will

“Ultimately, my moral defense of gaming would find its strongest support from an argument that videogames are art, given the precedents for this [violence] issue to be found in the arts”, Tavinor notes, discussing the morality of games.¹⁷⁹ Both *Ori and the Blind Forest* (2015) and its sequel, *Ori and the Will of the Wisps* (2020) might be fitting examples of this argument.¹⁸⁰ One only has to look at the review pages on Steam and Metacritic to see a dominance of user reviews frequently describing these games as “beautiful”, or a “work of art”.¹⁸¹ Perhaps most striking about these games is their visual beauty, which, unlike Hulst’s suggestion, require no cutting-edge technology, but are beautiful by aesthetic, and thus created by artists.¹⁸² As art products, *Ori* games thus resist Empire. Because approaching *Ori* from the artistic perspective would require embedment in Games-as-Art debates beyond the scope of this paper, this study instead analyzes how the aesthetic of *Ori* games contributes to their multitudinous function.¹⁸³ *Ori and the Blind Forest*, set in a mystical forest following a natural disaster, is in particular a *regenerative experience*, revitalizing the player’s appreciation for the natural world.¹⁸⁴ In approaching *Ori* as such, a paradox between environmentalism and game violence is found.

Environmentalism themes in media products are ever more apparent and discussed in times of global warming crises. Alenda Chang has argued how most games create a player-environment relationship based “almost wholly on extraction and utilization of nature, which are often effectively infinite.”¹⁸⁵ However, she also considers how games are *virtual ecologies* when they provide a space for “[playing] out countless environmental futures.”¹⁸⁶ Politically situated, these can be related to George Lakoff’s moral system of conservative [Empire] and progressive [multitudinous] framing of environmental thinking respectively. The conservative frame views man and market systems as above nature in the moral hierarchy; nature would be put on earth for humans to exploit, and greed is good. The progressive frame insists on man’s empathy and responsibility for the environment, since man is only part of nature.¹⁸⁷ *Ori and the Blind Forest* particularly visualizes the latter, *sublimely* depicting nature (Image 4).

¹⁷⁹ Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, 170.

¹⁸⁰ Moon Studios, *Ori and the Blind Forest* [multi-platform] (Microsoft Studios, 2015).

Moon Studios, *Ori and the Will of the Wisps* [multi-platform] (Xbox Game Studios, 2020).

¹⁸¹ “Ori and the Blind Forest,” Metacritic, accessed June 14, 2020, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/ori-and-the-blind-forest>.

“Ori and the Will of the Wisps,” Steam, accessed June 14, 2020,

https://store.steampowered.com/app/1057090/Ori_and_the_Will_of_the_Wisps/.

¹⁸² Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 98-99.

¹⁸³ The Games-as-Art Debate is highly controversial itself, posing the question whether players value fun over aesthetic. See: Felan Parker, “Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 77-100.

¹⁸⁴ Gerald Farca, “Regenerative Play and the Experience of the Sublime in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*,” *The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Copenhagen* (2018): 3.

¹⁸⁵ Alenda Y. Chang, “Games as Environmental Texts,” *Qui Parle* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 71.

¹⁸⁶ Alenda Y. Chang, “Playing the Environment: Games as Virtual Ecologies,” *Digital Arts and Culture* (December 2009): 3-4.

¹⁸⁷ George Lakoff, “Why it Matters How We Frame the Environment,” *Environmental Communication* 4, no. 1 (2010): 74-76.



Image 4. Ori collapsed near the Spirit Tree, the magical protector of the forest, which enables life itself.¹⁸⁸

With player character Ori, the tiny white creature on a branch in the foreground, collapsed in front of a giant illuminating tree towering over the forest, this image is a concrete example of what Gerald Farca aesthetically views as “the *sublime* that makes players feel *petty* in contrast to the wilderness they experience”.¹⁸⁹ The effect is a *regenerative experience*, as players come to understand the natural world better. These kinds of experiences often send the player on an ecological journey to restore balance in the environment.¹⁹⁰ *Ori* similarly does this: guided by the “light and eyes of the Spirit Tree” as a spiritual being, Ori is requested to restore the magic forest’s balance, thereby freeing the forest from the corruption poisoning lakes and trees. The designers compared the game to a coming-of-age story, not aware of the ecological reading.¹⁹¹

The game’s designer not understanding its themes is explanatory of *Ori*’s procedural rhetoric being inherently violent. As John Parham notes, many environmental media employ an ecological superhero, emphasizing the individual’s power over that of collective action.¹⁹² However, *Ori* takes this individualization to a higher degree and effectively makes a violent monster of Ori and its accompanying spirit. As depicted (Image 5), the environment is made antagonistic, justifying violent interaction, as Ori’s spirit becomes an all-destructive tool.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ All *Ori* screenshots taken from: ThatOneGuy, “Ori and the Blind Forest: Definitive Edition – Longplay – No commentary – 1080p@60fps,” YouTube video, 1:59, April 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BT9NSFWqz1g>.

¹⁸⁹ Farca, “Regenerative Play and the Experience of the Sublime,” 1-2.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 5-6.

¹⁹¹ Alex Newhouse, “E3 2014: Ori and the Blind Forest is a Beautiful Metroidvania,” *Gamespot*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/e3-2014-ori-and-the-blind-forest-is-a-beautiful-metroidvania/1100-6420507/>.

¹⁹² John Parham, *Green Media and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 48.

¹⁹³ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 119.



Image 5. Violence in *Ori and the Blind Forest*. On the left, a ‘corrupted’ plant fires a seed bomb at Ori, while on the right, Ori’s destructive spirit kills its ally in a few seconds, justified by the plant’s antagonistic function.

One might wonder why a regenerative experience feels the need for destructive violence, and finds *Ori*’s implementation to be resembling Van Vught’s *ludic motivation*: “A game device may be justified because it gives the player a goal to strive for, or an opponent to battle.”¹⁹⁴

Violence, in this sense, is only present for giving players ‘something to do’. Developers deem it necessary because, as Mia Consalvo and Christopher Paul argue, games are often judged for their gameplay. A game may have exceptional aesthetics, but if it does not allow much play time, it is generally considered less valuable.¹⁹⁵ *Ori* satisfies this inherent need, but its purpose is anti-compositional. One might recall Empire games where inhumane terrorists are shot, but *Ori* takes it to further extents, associating the player with a vicious, *violent environment*.¹⁹⁶

One might then again return to the argument that *Ori* is an artistic game. Tavinor made the argument that gamers have aesthetic interests comparable to traditional art appreciators, as they sense beauty, and acknowledge kinesthetic, interactive pleasures shaping the immersion of a highly imaginative world.¹⁹⁷ Suppose this is true, and thus that *Ori* is made with artistic motivation mostly. The typical headline for the critically more acclaimed *Ori and the Will of the Wisps* then counters: “Ori and the Will of the Wisps (...) – combat’s time to shine.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Van Vught, “Neoformalist Game Analysis,” 84.

¹⁹⁵ Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games: What’s Legitimate and What’s Not in Contemporary Videogames* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2019), 65-66.

¹⁹⁶ Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 109.

¹⁹⁷ Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, 180-184.

¹⁹⁸ Mike Minotti, “Ori and the Will of the Wisps hands-on – combat’s time to shine,” *VentureBeat*, June 14, 2018, <https://venturebeat.com/2018/06/14/ori-and-the-will-of-the-wisps-e3-hands-on/>.

3.3 The Everyday NPC Combatant: How *We Happy Few* suffered from Game Violence

“Everything about the idea behind *We Happy Few* is golden. The writing within the game is fantastic, the voice acting is superb (...) I want to love this game, but this game, as it stands, is dreadful.”¹⁹⁹ Sterling summarizes the critic consensus on *We Happy Few* (2018), a 3D, first-person cinematic action-adventure game in the dystopian setting of Wellington Wells.²⁰⁰ In contrast to the previous two cases, *WHF* is not a critically acclaimed title; instead, its reviews were rather mixed. Its ideas were generally praised, but technical issues made many reviewers write it off as “nearly unplayable.”²⁰¹ The conflict, this section argues, is a literal example of what this study means with paradoxical indie games: the story’s *critical dystopia*, as coined by Farca, is implicitly a critique of contemporary society and thus multitudinous activity.²⁰² Yet its aspiration to attract mainstream audiences dug the grave of *WHF*’s reception.²⁰³ *WHF* might in this sense be the culmination of *mainstream indie (mindie)* developments as a blend of Empire and multitude games.²⁰⁴ It hereby employs game violence, as argued in this section.

Wellington Wells is a war-torn city on an island of an *alternative history* version of England, where the Nazis colonized the island and only voluntarily left after the Wellies had done a “Very Bad Thing” in cooperation. The citizens collectively decided to forget it through constant use of the “Joy” drug, which made them forget reality and imagine a better existence. Both propaganda and police force see to this and drug-refusers are cast out of the town. This effective dystopia is made a playable world in *WHF*, where the main characters are only to be controlled by the player because of their rejection of the drug. It fits Farca’s definition of the *critical dystopia* in this sense, since it allows for a player’s participation in a dystopian world, while it also prompts a search for alternatives to the dystopian system.²⁰⁵ Farca distinguishes two variants: a critical dystopia in which the player has no impact on more utopian horizons, and one in which the player can become the catalyst of change. *WHF* fits the former category, since it follows a linear storyline.²⁰⁶ Nonetheless, it is quite able to incite a critical view in the player. Farca argues that such games can critically reflect on empirical societal issues giving the player the sense of *actively doing something* against it, as evident in *WHF* (Image 6).²⁰⁷

¹⁹⁹ Jim Sterling, “We Happy Few – A Joyless Broken Disaster (Jimpressions),” YouTube video, 15:49, August 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bx3kPmd9hjl>.

²⁰⁰ Compulsion Games, *We Happy Few* [multi-platform] (Gearbox Publishing, 2018). From here on abbreviated *WHF*.

²⁰¹ Nicholas Leon, “We Happy Few,” *GamingNexus*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.gamingnexus.com/Article/5759/We-Happy-Few/>.

²⁰² Farca, “The Concept of Utopia,” 32-34.

²⁰³ Crogan, “Indie Dreams,” 681.

²⁰⁴ Alistair Doulin, “Mindie – Bridging The Gap Between Mainstream And Indie,” *Doolwind*, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.doolwind.com/blog/mindie-bridging-the-gap-between-mainstream-and-indie/>.

²⁰⁵ Gerald Farca, *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player’s Aesthetic Response* (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2018), 85-86.

²⁰⁶ Farca, *Playing Dystopia*, 93-94.

²⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 115-118.



Image 6. The face and voice of Wellington Wells' propaganda announces in an unreleased video tape found by the player that the society of Joy is a lie, specifically turning to the first-person player to encourage action.²⁰⁸

The game optimally utilizes its first-person perspective when a cutscene starts, since it seems to direct a message to the player. A statement like “stop taking your joy” can in this sense be interpreted as “stop representing ourselves only full of joy on Facebook”, which, following an interview with the developer, is an actual inspiration for it.²⁰⁹ Charlie Hall accordingly read the game as an alternative Europe with the fall of democracy.²¹⁰ As contemporary historians such as Timothy Snyder remind us, anti-EU sentiment stimulated by digital fake news spread is an actual threat to democracy.²¹¹ The critical dystopia of *WHF* therefore does what games of multitude are about – providing criticism of the status quo in the product's presentation.²¹²

Yet once again, what proves to be a game of the multitude does not avoid the confines of game violence in design. In *WHF*'s case, this is even more evident from the critical lash at poor implementation. *WHF* features combat, but instead of conventionally carrying guns, the player carries all sorts of items utilized as weapons, such as umbrellas and tree branches. Next to learnable combat skills and the possibility for every non-player character (NPC) to fight and wield arms, *WHF* constitutes a combative first-person interface at every turn (Image 7).

²⁰⁸ Taken from: Visual Walkthrough, “We Happy Few (Ollie) Mission The Truth Shall Set You Free,” YouTube video, 20:43, August 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HPdZajozUs>.

²⁰⁹ “We are Compulsion Games, the developers of We Happy Few and Contrast, Ask us anything!,” Reddit, accessed June 15, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/391jii/we_are_compulsion_games_the_developers_of_we/.

²¹⁰ Charlie Hall, “We Happy Few is the story of what comes after the fall of European democracy,” *Polygon*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/8/10/17674798/we-happy-few-story-world-war-ii-england-fascism>.

²¹¹ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 99-100.

²¹² Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 195-196.
Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 395.



Image 7. Every street in Wellington Wells can suddenly turn violent, and every NPC is prepared to fight.²¹³

Violence not only involves everyday tools as weapons and everyday people as its combatants, but it is triggered by the meagerest examples of not conforming to society. “Dress the wrong way or act out in public, and the fine folk of the village will (...) beat the Joy back into you,” Brendan Graeber writes.²¹⁴ Obviously, one might attribute this dynamic to Wellington Wells being a drugged police state, but the design is highly selective: some learnable skill sets make the player magically invulnerable to these transgressions, and if violence does occur, “you can just run and hide. Even if you’ve killed someone, as long as you wait them out long enough, you’ll be fine.”²¹⁵ The “violence inherent in the system”, a much used in-game quote, is more than a critical note of society: it most accurately represents how light violence weighs in the context of gameplay. It must thereby be noted that violence does not limit itself to drugged sections of the town: the districts with sober outcasts just as viciously attack the player with the slightest transgression of etiquette. Perhaps most striking is how the developers mention their inspiration for combat to be *Dead Island* (2011), a game about killing zombies.²¹⁶ Since game violence caused technical issues destructive of its reception, *WHF* is anti-compositional in its most far-stretch, an archetype of the paradoxical indie game. If the *ludic dissent* against Empire is to come to fruition in indie games, violence must instead be rejected altogether.²¹⁷

²¹³ David Bakker, “We Happy Few Review,” *GameCritics*, October 2, 2018, <https://gamecritics.com/david-bakker/we-happy-few-review/>.

²¹⁴ Brendan Graeber, “We Happy Few Review,” *IGN*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/08/13/we-happy-few-review>.

²¹⁵ Leon, “We Happy Few.”

²¹⁶ “We are Compulsion Games, who made Contrast and We Happy Few. Ask us anything!,” Reddit, accessed June 16, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/PS4/comments/97izv4/we_are_compulsion_games_who_made_contrast_and_we/.

²¹⁷ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 196-197.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to make critical study of game violence in indie games of the multitude more robust. Chapter I has situated game violence as the nexus of the game industry, with representations of physical violence varying from offensively realistic in the *explicit violence* common in games of Empire, to symbolic, ludically motivated *implicit violence* common in indie games of the multitude. Furthermore, embedding the study in critical theory allowed for approaching game violence as the game industry's dominant commodity, of which deviation is hardly accomplished. A critical perspective on game violence is therefore necessary, and chapter II has established the critical discourse analysis as a valid method for analyzing it. Since the CDA constitutes a normative approach, it enables a critique of the dominant value in discourse and the suggestion of a better alternative. The three-dimensional model of text, discursive practice and social practice of the method also enabled a case study analysis, in which three distinct ways of implicit violence were further illustrated: *violence as a metaphor*, the *violent environment*, and the *everyday NPC combatant*. While the analyzed games were, as Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter put it, "out of control of their corporate military sponsors", "[opening] up the real possibility of [Empire's] overturning", mainly promoting social health, environmentalism and the value of the critical individual, violence remained central to their experiences.²¹⁸ The prevalence of violence in multitudinous games makes them *paradoxical*.

This paradoxicality spans further than the analyzed cases. The *ludic motivation* for violence appears to outweigh the *narrative motivation* of their critical narratives.²¹⁹ Even if the case is made that *We Happy Few's* violence stems from its police state society, there is no justification for making the player an all-powerful bearer of all kinds of weapons, gadgets and superpowers to easily defeat groups of antagonistic NPCs. Contrarily, the simulation of police state would be more convincing if the player was powerless in its eye. It is therefore argued that violence in these games is anti-compositional, paradoxical to the multitudinous message.

To answer the research question: game violence prevails in indie games of multitude, albeit in a different, less morally objectionable form of symbolic, implicit violence. However, despite this subtler, less offensive form, violence is still anti-compositional as it conflicts with multitudinous activity. It is thereby constitutive of the fact that even independently produced games are heavily constrained by the militarized market of Empire. Game violence is thus by no means the violent nature of play, and by all means a dedication to old-fashioned virtues.²²⁰

²¹⁸ Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 190-191.

²¹⁹ Van Vught, "Neoformalist Game Analysis," 84-86.

²²⁰ Goldstein, *Why We Watch*, 214-215.

Game violence is then more comparable to what Fisher described as the ideological position naturalized in the social world, being a fact rather than value, since ‘value’ itself is eliminated by contemporary neoliberalism.²²¹ There is no alternative to the fatalism inherent in the dominant capitalist system.²²² One might then wonder if violence is necessary for indie developers, or merely a commercial choice for appealing to the mainstream.²²³ The performed CDAs show that violence was hardly mentioned in the discourse of the indie games, neither positive nor negative. Even in *We Happy Few*’s case, not the implementation of violence, but its technical consequences were criticized.²²⁴ Game violence itself is therefore the effect of a structure, which Kline et al. referred to as *militarized masculinity*, a ‘cultural disturbance’.²²⁵

However, this study is limited in its confinement to three cases. Additional cases could be provided on the same fundamentals that this study has established. One might in this light claim that this study does no justice to multitudinous indie games explicitly resistant to game violence. *Dear Esther* (2012) is such an example. It took the viewpoint of a shooter game, but removed all combat elements. Critics have since derogatorily labeled it a *walking simulator*, a game without sufficient content. However, today the genre is commonplace in the industry, and it shows that multitudinous games can reinvent dominant conventions.²²⁶ However, this is only one success story, and further study of indie games is necessary to reveal the extents of violence within the field. It would thereby reveal whether violence is only what Horkheimer and Adorno viewed as the fabricated consumer need of an industry,²²⁷ or whether the industry must be seen through Michel Foucault’s concept of *episteme*, the *discursive apparatus* in any social field, constituting a certain form of logistics.²²⁸ A prevalence of violence in indie games of the multitude surpassing this thesis’ implications can suggest an *episteme of game violence*.

As it stands, this paper has established a critical perspective on interpreting violence in indie games of the multitude. With it, one can understand in which form, and to what extents, indie games use an anti-compositional form of violence, paradoxical to their multitudinous activity. The pessimistic conclusion is therefore that even indie games, as the creative force of the industry, use violence. However, since it is naturalized, it is left unremarked in discourse. Indie games therefore only have to realize – game violence is traditional, but never necessary.

²²¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 16-17.

²²² *Ibidem*, 53.

²²³ Crogan, “Indie Dreams,” 684.

²²⁴ Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, “We Happy Few is a bit of a downer,” *EuroGamer*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2016-07-27-we-happy-few-is-a-bit-of-a-downer>.

²²⁵ Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 194-195.

²²⁶ Consalvo and Paul, *Real Games*, 109-125.

²²⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 109.

²²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 196-198.

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