

LUDIC MATERIALISM

Critical Interventions in Game Studies' Material Turn



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Abstract

This thesis offers a series of deconstructive interventions in the academic field of game studies, inspired by the so-called ‘material turn’ that has slowly been gaining prominence within that same field over the last decade. Its central argument is that Johan Huizinga’s conception of play as a free and autotelic activity that is separate from ‘ordinary life’ is untenable, and that the notion of play as separable from the material stakes of ‘serious’ activity encourages a depoliticized view of the phenomena that game studies purports to study. Specifically, the field has been reluctant to engage with the politico-economic aspects of videogame. This thesis addresses the stated topic through a framework inspired by Marxism, post-structuralism, left-wing critical theory, feminism, and what it calls ‘critical-materialist’ game studies. Its interventions proceed to broadly cover three main topics, in the meantime engaging closely with the work of scholars such as Roger Caillois, Miguel Sicart, Espen Aarseth, and Joost Raessens. First is digital play itself—what does a critical-materialist theory of digital play look like? In order to understand how digital play is complicit in the reification of cybernetic capitalism we need to conceptualize digital play, following the work of Jean Baudrillard, as a fundamentally *seductive* world-making relation that is inseparable from the contexts in which it takes place. Second is the Gamer™, which is not an authentic identity but rather a *designed technicity*. This construct is not merely dependent on a set of identity markers but also on a set of learned behaviours and sensibilities with regards to the videogame medium which do not leave game scholars unaffected. The last investigation concerns game scholars themselves and the academic

institutions they inhabit. Especially the Humanities and its students are crumbling under the incessant pressure of neoliberalism, and even those who seek to use cybernetic technologies to move beyond these dynamics remain caught up in them.

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Preface

The ludic is everywhere, even in the ‘choice’ of a brand of laundry detergent in the supermarket. Without too much effort one sees similarities with the world of psychotropic drugs: for the latter too is ludic, being nothing but the manipulation of a sensorial keyboard or neuronc instrument panel. Electronic games are a soft drug—one plays them with the same somnambular absence and tactile euphoria.

– Jean Baudrillard

Politics in Videogames, a handy guide

Not Political:

- *military–industrial complex*
- *colonialism*
- *militarization of police*
- *social engineering*
- *digital information control*
- *surveillance*
- *fascism*
- *institutional oppression*
- *proxy wars*

Political:

- *womans*
- *gAy?*

– @SleepHussy

Despite the fact that it goes against what's normally considered an 'academic' style of writing, I should state beforehand that the title of this thesis ("Ludic Materialism") is purposefully ironic. The term 'ludic' acquires a double meaning throughout the chapters that succeed this preface. In contemporary game studies, the subject of my investigation, it's mostly a synonym for 'playful' or 'game-like', 'as relates to games' (from *ludere* 'to play', or *ludus* 'play/game'). However, in the work of French sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, the 'ludic' is a certain mode of being, not unrelated to the first meaning but definitely distinct from it. It implies that our fascination with closed systems like video-games or the 'free market' prevents us from questioning precisely their *closed*, often entirely self-referential natures. For Baudrillard, this kind of illusion (again from *ludere*, literally 'putting-in-play') of choice is not taking place in a separate layer of reality that we can somehow, in a revolutionary move, step out of. Instead, the 'ludic' has become reality itself, a model without referent, a *hyperreality*. The connections to Baudrillard's well-known theories on simulations and simulacra are clearly relevant, but the 'ludic' emphasis on how this affects and interacts with *play* is what drew me to it in the first place. Both game scholars and the general public are accustomed to viewing play within the tradition of Dutch cultural anthropologist and historian Johan Huizinga,

as a free and autotelic activity that separates itself from ‘ordinary life’; but in this framework there’s no such freedom, no such *separability*. The structures that we call ‘ludic’ aren’t separate from the everyday, nor are they innocent bystanders in the game of global capitalism. How do we rhyme that with a Baudrillardian understanding of play as a *seductive* relation that can challenge the status quo? While I suggest that the turn towards materialism in game studies offers a way to fruitfully engage with these issues, the adjective ‘ludic’ eventually comes to signify a particular uneasiness (on my part) about declaring academic theories about materialism and digital play to be a method of truly ‘escaping’ the physical and psychological horrors that capitalism has wrought. In the process, I am explicitly or implicitly in conversation with various recent and notable contributions to the field of game studies, to which I’m often also deeply indebted for their insights. These include Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter’s *Digital Play*, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter’s *Games of Empire*, Keogh’s *A Play of Bodies*, Wark’s *Gamer Theory*, Phillips’ *Gamer Trouble*, Chess’ *Ready Player Two*, Apperley’s *Gaming Rhythms*, and Ruffino’s *Future Gaming*.

I don’t address this topic from any sort of neutral position. My critiques of the theoretical and institutional shape of contemporary game studies come with the awareness that

I myself fit perfectly into the image of what a ‘game scholar’ is: a young, white, Western, able-bodied, mostly heterosexual, cisgender man with a long history of (and a great passion for) videogame play and a deep understanding of gaming culture. When I first forayed into the academic field in late 2016 by following a Game Studies and Cultural Analysis course at Leiden University, I felt fully at home. That feeling of homeliness has persisted for me throughout these past four years, during which I not only completed that course in Leiden but also graduated *cum laude* from a master’s programme in New Media and Digital Culture at Utrecht University, and am now on the brink of graduating at that same university from a research MA in Media, Art, and Performance Studies—provided that this thesis is to the satisfaction of my readers. In the meantime, I became an active participant in game research by publishing in journals and conference proceedings, as well as speaking at a handful of academic events and writing the occasional essay for a Canadian hybrid publication. My published work has—to my face, at least—generally been received quite enthusiastically by others, which again helps to sustain the feeling that *this is where I belong*. I’ve since become suspicious of that feeling, and have come to wonder on what conditions that belonging applies to me as a university-educated white man, and why

it doesn't apply to others who don't share my hegemonic socio-political position.

As I found myself moving politically farther and farther left in those same years, I also found myself increasingly frustrated with the politics of the University and with the apparent refusal on the part of many academics, including game scholars, to implicate their work in the political and economic state of the world at large. Fundamental critiques of patriarchal capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, and the ways in which the videogame medium is complicit in those systems seem few and far between, let alone truly mainstream. Difficult questions about what it means to be an academic in this day and age will occasionally come up during classes or informal discussions but almost always remain somewhat superficial. The question, "What kind of academic do you want to be?" is rarely taken as an invitation to wonder how one's position as an academic or academically trained individual enables or even *obligates* one to aspire to improve the world. That possible interpretation, in turn, shouldn't be a question of a neoliberal 'impact on society' that presumes a predetermined University 'outside' of society, but a question of how we envision the role of theory in praxis, in the struggle for social and economic justice beyond theory's radical aesthetics. Whether I'm able to make

a successful contribution to this struggle on either its theoretical or its practical side here remains to be seen.

I'm grateful to my supervisor, Ingrid Hoofd, whose support and guidance through the game of academia have been absolutely invaluable. Thanks for enthusiastically saying 'yes' when I pitched the earliest version of this thesis in April 2019, and for patiently sticking with me ever since despite the difficulties we both met along the way. That last part isn't necessarily a reference to COVID-19, but the pandemic (and the disturbingly lacklustre governmental response to it) certainly hasn't made things easy for anyone.

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Waddinxveen, August 2020

The Turn to Materialism in Game Studies

Let me begin with a classic hierarchical opposition that philosophers and academics like to posit from time to time: *play versus seriousness*. It exists in a great variety of academic and political contexts, but game scholars (or those who have engaged with game scholarship) will most likely be directly or indirectly familiar with it through the work of Johan Huizinga: “Play is a thing by itself. The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness” (Huizinga 1949 [1938], 45). Apparently unbeknownst to the author himself, and occasionally also to his numerous interpreters and critics (e.g. Caillois 2001 [1958]; Ehrmann 1968; Rodriguez 2006; Sicart 2014), this statement contradicts many of his core arguments. For Huizinga, play is separable from ‘ordinary life’ and has no ethical value. At the same time, it is also at the core of the creation of all culture, which in turn constitutes precisely whatever any community considers to be

ordinary life and whatever moral codes the people in that community tend to follow. He recognizes this paradox at times, especially with regards to the apparent seriousness of sacred rituals, but then also theorizes this through a lens of Western superiority:

In his magic dance the savage *is* a kangaroo. [...] He has taken on the 'essence' of the kangaroo, says the savage; he is playing the kangaroo, say we. The savage, however, knows nothing of the conceptual distinctions between 'being' and 'playing'; he knows nothing of 'identity', 'image' or 'symbol'. Hence it remains an open question whether we do not come nearest to the mental attitude of the savage performing a ritual act, by adhering to this primary, universally understandable term 'play'. (Huizinga 1949, 25; original emphasis)

Indigenous peoples have apparently not reached the same standards of modernity and reason that has allowed Euro-American societies, among other things, to separate and conflate play and seriousness at will—but through that same activity of play, these 'savage' societies *may* become able to. Huizinga insists on pushing his impossible, not to mention ethnocentric and racist thesis by concluding:

To be a sound culture-creating force this play-element must be pure. It must not consist in the darkening or debasing of standards set up by reason, faith or humanity. It must not be a false

seeming, *a masking of political purposes behind the illusion of genuine play-forms*. True play knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself, and its familiar spirit is happy inspiration. (Huizinga 1949, 211; emphasis mine)

Play can contain its opposite, and Huizinga demonstrates that it frequently does, but to be ‘pure’ it must (or should?) be *nothing but play*. All of human culture must make room for the play-element to progress, but at no point can that culture interfere with play because that would be to *destroy* play—and there is supposedly nothing worse than a spoilsport.¹ If true play knows no propaganda, what is there to advocate for?

I admit that *Homo Ludens* makes for an easy target some eight decades after its publication. Still, I have found it nigh impossible to avoid engaging with Huizinga over the past four years. He dwells prominently in the precious few game studies curricula in the Netherlands, he is well known (and liked) in the local independent game development scene, and his definition of play has been widely accepted, discussed, and reproduced by scholars both here and abroad (e.g. Frissen et al. 2015; Glas et al. 2019; Juul 2003; Raessens 2014; Salen and Zimmerman 2003; 2006; Stenros 2017). One of the reasons he is so easy to critique is that those who have engaged with him closely in the past decade or so, especially Dutch and other European scholars,

have come to similar conclusions. In a somewhat distorted form, Huizinga, the unwitting grandfather of game studies, yet continues to haunt the field. The most striking example of this is the concept of the “magic circle”: hardly mentioned or theorized at any length by Huizinga himself, but a crucial and highly controversial subject in contemporary game studies (cf. Calleja 2012; Consalvo 2009; Copier 2009; Stenros 2014). More subtly, one might say that several of the fundamental and fundamentally modernist assumptions about play that Huizinga espoused—play as an autotelic, free, and meaningful activity that takes place within previously negotiated boundaries of space and time that exist separately from ordinary life—are still dominant in some configuration or another in much game scholarship today (cf. Malaby 2007). Another assumption that is often left unquestioned is Huizinga’s neglect of the role of mediation and mediatization in play activities and his rejection of the idea that mass media could do anything else than damage a society’s capacity for play (cf. Frissen et al. 2015, 15–16), which is a curious oversight for a field so overwhelmingly concerned with *digital* play. What haunts contemporary game scholarship even more than the continued presence of these assumptions and concepts, however, is *the nearly total absence of political economy from any extensive theory of digital play*.

Theory Matters

Play versus seriousness. Leisure versus labour. Pleasure versus work. How is it possible that game scholars have paid so much attention to this opposition and simultaneously have given one side of the dichotomy hardly any thought? It would, again, be easy to blame Huizinga for the situation, but there is more to academia than theory. I argue that game studies is indeed generally unable to theorize and analyse digital play as always already embedded in politico-economic structures, and that this inability is in part rooted in its constitution as a field that has spent much of its short lifetime vying for legitimization within the academy. This striving for legitimacy, particularly the aggressive way in which it occurred in the early 2000s, has had a lasting and troublesome impact on the shape and content of game studies (cf. Moberly 2013; Phillips 2020b). In its current state, the field is dominated by Anglophone and/or European white men who for the most part fit the dominant image of who is a legitimate participant in (academic) games culture at large. They were, for instance, never the primary targets of #GamerGate, even when the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) was caught in the movement's crosshairs (cf. Chess and Shaw 2015; 2016). This privilege discourages the deeply critical engagement required of media scholars in a time when large

groups of people—including but not limited to women, queer/trans* folks, and people of colour—are systematically forced into precarity and made to feel unwelcome in those spaces that young, white, cisgender men like myself seem to inhabit more naturally (cf. Butt et al. 2018; Humphreys 2019). Moreover, such criticality is not only vital regarding these discriminations and injustices within the field of games and game studies, but also in the face of ever-accelerating global capitalist accumulation and the ongoing climate crisis it has brought upon the Earth's inhabitants (cf. Klein 2014; Morton 2010). Just as game scholars should not pretend that the virulent racism and misogyny of gaming culture and hate movements like #GamerGate are disconnected from similar white supremacist and patriarchal structures that are present in society at large, so too can they no longer view their favourite medium as separable from its *material* entanglements with and impact on both human and non-human entities.

Note that I write of a 'nearly total' absence of political economy from any extensive theory of digital play and in game studies more generally. Especially among other media scholars, game studies is notorious for its tendency to fall into a special brand of formalism. It tends towards a reduction of videogames to rulesets and mechanical interactions that may or may not have narrative capacities,

which in turn are seen as simultaneously similar and different from those of other established mediums. This early pseudo-ontological gatekeeping was rooted in an ill-defined theoretical distinction between games and narrative that prevented any serious academic debate from actually taking place (cf. Frasca 2003a; Koenitz 2018). Despite the reigning consensus that this was never a viable discussion to begin with, the game-narrative distinction continues to be taught as one of the central theoretical underpinnings of the field. I first encountered it in 2016 when I stepped into game studies at Leiden University, and it was still there for me as recently as 2019 in the lecture slides for introductory courses to new media and game studies after I had moved to Utrecht University. The debate that many insist has never happened continues to happen in classrooms and conferences across universities worldwide (cf. Vossen 2018, 238–39), and sometimes even in popular media articles (e.g. Bogost 2017). Moreover, it has been pointed out that this infamous distinction is inherently gendered to the detriment of women’s participation in the field (cf. J. H. Murray 2013 [2005]), and that its dominance within game research discourses has distracted us from more “ecological matters” (cf. Mejia 2016). Amanda Phillips has demonstrated strikingly, for example, how the ludological insistence on preventing the “intellectual colonization” of game studies has

resulted in a strand of scholarship that refuses to engage with existing cultural studies work when discussing topics like race or gender, and that has thereby contributed to “a hostile environment for marginalized scholars interested in joining the discussion” (Phillips 2020a, 52–53). In this sense, the ‘ludology versus narratology’ question is an excellent example of how concerns that appear primarily theoretical can have very practical and, in this case, mostly negative implications for who gets to conduct game scholarship, what kind of scholarship is seen as a legitimate part of the field, and vice versa.

Theory still matters, and so it matters who is writing theory and what kind of theory is written. As I have outlined above, what theory currently matters *for* is the struggle against the white/patriarchal hegemony in (academic) games culture and society at large, the struggle against global capitalism, and the climate crisis. The dominant areas of inquiry in contemporary game studies—of which ludology is the most widely known but which also include feminist (and queer) approaches to media representation, ethnographies of players and virtual worlds, and historical research—too often forego these concerns or relegate them to their footnotes. Even when individual articles or books within these areas declare an explicitly progressive political stance (as most often happens within feminist game

studies), there is a tendency to be concerned with singular categories like gender, race, or sexuality, but hardly ever in relation to each other or to capital and class structures. Sebastian Deterding describes, in his historical analysis of interdisciplinary game scholarship, how economic and materialistic aspects “don’t even figure” in most of our humanistic and theoretical discussions (Deterding 2017, 533). Such a staunch refusal to commit not only to progressive but also to *anti-capitalist* positions in our academic work diminishes our capacity to engage successfully with those problems that plague both our field and our planet. For this reason, I argue that what is needed is a general shift in these dominant discourses of game scholarship towards a paradigm of digital play that is informed by critical theory and various strands of materialism.

Materiality and Material Conditions

To an extent, the seeds for this shift have long been present in game studies and game scholarship more generally. Tom Apperley and Darshana Jayemanne point out that the work that would constitute this proposed *material turn* precedes the ‘official’ genesis of game studies and has slowly but surely become more prominent. For them, “work attentive to materiality has become a key thread in game studies and also a bridge to other disciplines” (Apperley and Jayemanne

2012, 7). This thread then falls into three broad methodological tendencies: ethnography and audience studies (e.g. Pearce 2009; Taylor 2006), platform studies (e.g. Montfort and Bogost 2009), and inquiries into digital labour (e.g. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2006; Kücklich 2005). All three of these methodologies frame videogames as “objects that exist in the world; however much their digital virtuality is celebrated they are enacted and produced in strikingly visceral—ontologically virtual—ways,” and this purposeful situating of videogames “*raises the stakes* of game studies considerably” (Apperley and Jayemanne 2012, 15; emphasis mine). In so doing, the material turn affords not only the opening up of game studies as a field to connect with other media studies disciplines and beyond, but also facilitates a re-politicization of its subject matter of the kind I am pursuing here. It does away with separability. It is able to take seriously the ‘serious’ side of ‘play versus seriousness’.

Nevertheless, game studies’ material turn as sketched by Apperley and Jayemanne warrants some critical notes. In their review, the concept of materiality, “a certain ‘stubbornness’ of material reality that introduces an aleatory or contingent element into what might normally be thought of as formalized and calcified structures (academic or otherwise)—bodies as sites of resistance and alterity” (Apperley and Jayemanne 2012, 7), is at the same time too broad and

too narrow. Too broad, because a ‘stubbornness of material reality’ threatens to become *everything* and therefore nothing at all, and the problematique of establishing what ‘material reality’ even entails is mostly swept aside. Too narrow, because in this definition materiality is exclusively a force of resistance; as if resistance and alterity are not constantly under threat from conservative and oppressive forces that are present in that same material reality. While I agree that alterity and resistance under the current conditions are desirable, possible, and present in almost any form, they are not automatically the dominant or prevailing mode. This is visible too in the examples that the authors provide: many ethnographic projects in game studies indeed focus on ‘resistance’, but primarily discuss resistance against implicit or explicit game rules, while socio-economic concerns remain marginal in their discussions. The latter also applies to much of platform studies and other more object-oriented approaches to videogames, for which Carly Kocurek has warned against the depoliticizing tendency in their fascination with technical objects and systems: “We do need to talk about games as material culture, as objects, but we need to talk about that the way Marxists do, talking not just about the things but *how they come to be*” (Kocurek 2018, 69; emphasis mine). At the same time, a disciplinary strand like platform studies certainly

holds much potential for progressive and anti-capitalist political engagement (cf. Apperley and Parikka 2018). A similar potential can be found in some of the subjects that the material turn has increasingly attended to since Apperley and Jayemanne's review was published in 2012, including research into the embodied experience of digital play and the production circumstances of videogame hardware. Moreover, for my current purposes I would propose to view the material turn not through the lens of methodology but through the lens of subject matter, in which case the strand falls into two axes, namely works that focus on *materiality* and those that attend to *material conditions*. I shall briefly introduce both axes, since their contents play a crucial role in the next chapter.

Unlike Apperley and Jayemanne, I employ "materiality" in a more media-specific manner, following the work of N. Katherine Hayles:

The crucial move is to reconceptualize materiality as *the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies*. This definition opens the possibility of considering texts as embodied entities while still maintaining a central focus on interpretation. In this view of materiality, it is not merely an inert collection of physical properties but a dynamic quality that *emerges* from the interplay between the text as a physical artifact, its conceptual content, and the interpretive activities of readers and writers.

Materiality thus cannot be specified in advance; rather, it occupies a borderland—or better, performs as connective tissue—joining the physical and mental, the artifact and the user. (Hayles 2004, 72)

This axis of the material turn encompasses those works that take up digital play itself as their subject matter and frame it as a fundamentally *embodied* relation (e.g. Anable 2018; Ash 2015; Crick 2011; Dovey and Kennedy 2006; Giddings and Kennedy 2008; Jayemanne 2017; Kirkpatrick 2009; Lahti 2003; Swalwell 2008). This is certainly one of the oldest theoretical positions in the academic literature on videogames, going back at least as far as the early 1980s with David Sudnow's monograph *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (Sudnow 2019 [1983]; cf. Keogh 2019b), wherein he autoethnographically describes the embodied process of playing, learning, and mastering the popular videogame *Breakout* (Atari, Inc. 1976) on the Atari 2600. While there is a valid critique to be made of Hayles' ironic perpetuation of a Cartesian mind-body dualism even as she seeks to resolve it (cf. Ingold 2007), the perspective that conceptualizes materiality as an emergent property that only exists in the interaction between artefact and user is one that maps onto videogames and digital play exceptionally well. According to Brendan Keogh, who is heavily inspired by both Hayles and Sudnow, this material and

phenomenological interaction produces the textuality of videogames. He writes:

This approach does not separate text and user but demonstrates that they are *inseparable*, that videogame texts and the meanings they produce come into existence through recursive, dynamic, and spliced bodies—actual and virtual, flesh and machine. In this hybridity, the player's experiences are not just textual *or* just embodied but *textually embodied*. As in a hall of mirrors, when I play a videogame, I am both here and there, my own being reflected back to me even as it extends into this world through the glass. (Keogh 2018, 49; original emphases)

This is the core of the materiality-axis of game studies' material turn; not only is digital play fundamentally rooted in bodies, feedback loops, and materials, it is precisely *from* those bodies, feedback loops, and materials that meanings arise and become available for analysis. The conceptual content of the videogame text is not unimportant or forgotten here, but the material turn facilitates a view beyond traditional notions of textuality that are rooted in classical conceptions of writing and the stability of texts. This provokes further questions, however, that are addressed less often by scholars focused on the materiality of videogames and digital play. Where do these bodies, feedback loops, and materials come from? How are they positioned in the

environment, in history, in society? I shift to the second axis: material conditions.

On this axis, political economy is brought back into the fold—although it was never truly gone, as I argue later on. It refers to *the material conditions in which digital play is created, facilitated, and situated*. It is concerned with where, how, and by whom the technologies upon which digital play relies are produced, distributed, and consumed. Scholars operating on this second axis are often followers of Marxism or New Materialism, which means that their investigations into issues such as the labour conditions of (independent) game developers (e.g. Bulut 2020; Kerr 2006; Lipkin 2019; O'Donnell 2014a; Ruberg 2019; Whitson 2019), videogame distribution and development platforms (e.g. Joseph 2017; Kerr 2017; Nicoll and Keogh 2019; Švelch 2019), and the history and workings of the “military-entertainment complex” (e.g. Crogan 2011; Der Derian 2009 [2001]; Lenoir 2000; Losh 2009; Stahl 2010) are generally driven by left-wing and progressive political motivations. Two crucial works on the material conditions of digital play are Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter's *Digital Play* (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter 2003) and its spiritual successor *Games of Empire* (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009). Both offer some of the most comprehensive analysis available in the field that

often still resonates with more contemporary scholarship. Nominally a materialist history of the videogame industry, *Digital Play* situates the videogame medium in the broader context of late-twentieth-century economic and political developments, and builds a model of the videogame industry as three intertwined circuits: technology, culture, and marketing. Subsequently, the authors posit that due to the industry's heavy dependence on the shift towards an information-driven global economy and the simultaneous post-modernization of Western culture, the videogame can nowadays be seen as "the ideal commodity of post-Fordist information capitalism" (Kline et al. 2003, 75). *Games of Empire* is notably more urgent and expressly politicized in its intention and style, but also chooses to follow a more optimistic path: "Our hypothesis [...] is that *video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire*—planetary, hypermilitarized capitalism—and of some of the forces presently challenging it" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, xv; original emphases). The historically entwined themes of militarization and global capitalism are popular leitmotifs in the material turn and these books are no exception, although recently it has been suggested that the focal point of contemporary game scholarship should be on "the mobilization of affect to manage the player experience efficiently toward the cultivation of significant financial returns"

(Lenoir and Caldwell 2018, 34). There is much ado in this axis about military videogames as recruitment and propaganda tools for the U.S. Army, but beyond that problem of in-game content there is perpetually the issue of the economic structure that supports it in the first place.

One of the reasons why I choose for the time being to frame game studies' material turn as two axes of topical foci as opposed to a collection of research methods, is that this approach demonstrates a certain gap more evidently: the two axes frequently take inspiration from each other, but deeper interconnections made between meaning-making and political economy, as seen in left-wing critical theory, are much rarer for game studies. It should, however, be observed that critical and cultural theorists like John Fiske (cf. Fiske and Watts 1985), Marsha Kinder (cf. Kinder 1991), Julian Stallabrass (cf. Stallabrass 1993), and McKenzie Wark (cf. Wark 1994) have historically led the charge in analysing videogames as phenomena that possess both internal and external economies which interact with and may potentially contradict each other (cf. Giddings 2018). This tradition is occasionally continued today, with recent examples available in excellent special issues on topics like "Baudrillard and Game Studies" (cf. Simon 2007), "Counterplay" (cf. Apperley and Dieter 2010), and "Ludic Economies" (cf. Giddings and Harvey 2018). Another such

example in contemporary game studies is Apperley's Lefebvrian analysis of how the global political economy of the videogame industry is enacted through the rhythms of everyday life and the bodies of players, in which he "traces the material, virtual, and social currents that intermesh to produce situations where play is possible" (Apperley 2010, 55). This is the central theoretical problem I am confronting at present: how to think of digital play (materiality) as embedded in and facilitated by politico-economic structures (material conditions). James Ash has pointed out that "while this materialist turn in gaming has begun to examine embodiment, these accounts tend to ignore the political implications of embodied play" (Ash 2015, 11). I myself have shown elsewhere how the strand of game studies that views digital play as specifically a form of *cyborgization*—a human-machine entanglement where the player gets caught up in the videogame's playful cybernetic feedback loops—rarely attends to the problematic history of cybernetics as a field that arose from American Cold War-era military technoscience, and that whenever it does so the topic remains a somewhat marginal issue in the discussion (cf. Jansen 2020). The notion of cyborgization offers a valuable perspective on the specificities of the phenomenon, but cyborgs cannot yet exist separately from the military-

entertainment complex that invented them, even if the cyborgs are in a sense metaphorical.

Conversely, works like *Digital Play* make hardly any effort to draw out these embodied connections beyond critiquing the contradictions inherent in the circuits of their model of the videogame industry. Despite their explicit allegiance to both social constructivism and technological determinism, and their discussion of the industry in terms of “cybernetic ‘circuitry’” (Kline et al. 2003, 59), Kline and his colleagues mostly address the idealized play situation of the industry’s preferred customers instead of the material contexts in which digital play occurs. This gap makes it difficult for the material turn to break through the depoliticized and formalist hegemony of contemporary game studies in full force: the materiality-axis largely refrains from fundamentally politicizing the technologies of digital play, while the material conditions-axis often forgets about the fact that global circuits do not only interact with each other but also with local actors—they are enacted *through* digital play. I argue that what is therefore needed is a theory that sees digital play as always already embedded in politico-economic structures, as an agent of so-called “cybernetic capitalism” (cf. Dyer-Witheford 2015; Tiquun 2020 [2001]). At the same time, it must advocate in favour of a digital play that fiercely resists that oppressive and destructive

system. I aim to show how accepting such an anti-capitalist theory into the beating heart of game studies can have both far-reaching implications for the academic content of the field *and* grant the possibility for game scholars, including myself, to reflect on their own position in and complicity with the neoliberalization of Euro-American academia.

Discipline and Method

The field of academic literature that I have so far been calling *game studies* (or ‘game scholarship’, or ‘game research’) is a set of such wildly diverse and cross-disciplinary bodies of writing that it is difficult to state any generalizations about them, except that they all concern themselves with (digital) play and games—mostly *videogames* (or ‘computer games’, or ‘digital games’, or ‘electronic games’, or even ‘video games’). That said, my discussion so far betrays a focus on a specific facet of game studies, namely that which is rooted primarily in the Humanities. The first reason for this is that this has always been my own entry point into game studies, despite my familiarity with other disciplines and methods (e.g. Di Pastena et al. 2018; Koenitz et al. 2018). My academic training regarding games was always in the context of a Media and Cultural Studies department, and my game studies teachers have always been either humanists or interdisciplinary design researchers. The second

reason is that often-cited authors and keywords from humanistic and social-scientific disciplines together account for a significant portion—roughly a quarter or more, depending on one’s definition—of all scholarship on games, with many citational and theoretical links to research from computer science, communications, and pedagogical science (cf. Martin 2018). Given that much of the most important contemporary theoretical work on games is produced with few exceptions by scholars in the Humanities, one might say that a more critical and thorough material turn in this branch of scholarship would therefore have a notable ripple effect across game research generally, in a similar way that the ludology versus narratology question arguably has. Moreover, Paul Martin’s analysis, in conjunction with earlier such efforts (cf. Coavoux, Boutet, and Zabban 2017; Melcer et al. 2015), corroborates in more quantitative terms what I have already noted above: Huizinga remains a prominent figure in humanistic game/design research; form is a major concern for many of the most-cited authors; and there is a “dearth of literature on the games industry” (Martin 2018, n.p.) regardless of discipline, with the work of Aphra Kerr being the only significant exception. With this in mind, I would offer a very rough circumscription of what I henceforth refer to, draw from, and critique as ‘game studies’: Anglophone,

humanistic (and to a lesser extent social-scientific) scholarship about videogames and videogame culture that is often published by journals like *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*, *The Fibreculture Journal*, *ToDiGRA*, and *Press Start*; with publishers like Routledge, MIT Press, University of Minnesota Press, and Amsterdam University Press; and in research communities like DiGRA and to a lesser degree ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) and ARDIN (Association for Research in Digital Interactive Narratives).

I proceed with this investigation and the aforementioned expansion of game studies' material turn by taking methodological inspiration from Marxism, phenomenology, and poststructuralism, and their offshoots into politically left-wing fields like cultural studies, critical theory, and feminist theory. In early cultural studies as practiced by Raymond Williams, the global and the local already come together quite naturally when studied from an emancipatory perspective: "Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind" (Williams 1989 [1958], 4). After the linguistic and ideological turns in the field, leading figures like Stuart Hall critically elaborated on this experiential focus (cf. Scannell 2015). Hall argues that the emphasis on the relation between individuals and structures, as seen in the Marxist axiom "men make history [...] on the basis of

conditions which are not of their making” (Marx, qtd. in Hall 1980, 67), facilitates an analytical method that relies

not on the simple exercise of abstraction but on the movement and relations which the argument is constantly establishing between *different levels* of abstraction: at each, the premises in play must be distinguished from those which—for the sake of the argument—have to be held constant. The movement to another level of magnification [...] requires the specifying of further conditions of existence not supplied at a previous, more abstract level: in this way, by successive abstractions of different magnitudes, to *move towards* the constitution, the *reproduction*, of ‘the concrete in thought’ as an effect of a certain kind of thinking. [...] Here, structuralism’s insistence that thought does not reflect reality, but is articulated on and appropriates it, is a necessary starting point. (Hall 1980, 68)

This movement between different levels of abstraction that Hall describes is precisely what I find most valuable in left-wing cultural theory; it enables a conceptualization and critical deployment of the ways that global structures are enacted (or ‘articulated’ as Hall says it) *through* local actors and processes. In contemporary feminist theory, the ability to move across global and local scales is for me best exemplified in the work of Donna Haraway (e.g. Haraway 1991a; 2008; 2016), who expertly weaves together the planetary and the microscopic while always remaining grounded in

materialism and socialist-feminism. This method's imperative to make 'risky' connections across abstractions and subjects without losing sight of one's core principles is an admirable one, and one I intend to follow.

Another central figure in my methodological approach here is Jean Baudrillard, most famous—or rather notorious—for his often-misinterpreted writings on media, simulations, and hyperreality (e.g. Baudrillard 1983). These have been met with a measured enthusiasm in game studies; especially among scholars whose work operates within broader critical-theoretical frameworks (e.g. Crogan 2007; 2011; Galloway 2006; 2007; Mitchell 2018; Wark 2007), and thus receive some attention in a later chapter. Moreover, his staunch critiques of Marxism's systematic privileging of the same concepts that drive capitalism (e.g. Baudrillard 1988b [1972]; 1975 [1973]; 1988c [1976]) and of the consequent lack of a truly radical criticality among leftist academics (cf. Baudrillard 2001 [1969]) are immediately relevant for the present deliberation on materialism and critical theory. Baudrillard argues that it is not the *mode* of production but the *principle* of production that left-wing critical theory should be targeting. For him, the Marxist critiques of alienated human labour power and of the separation of use value and exchange value have certainly been important for the development of a resistance against

capitalism and its quest for infinite accumulation; yet he also demonstrates how those very same concepts, in their allegedly un-alienated form, continue to underpin Marx's proposals for alternatives. "Marx shattered the fiction of *homo economicus*. [...] But he did so in the name of labor power's emergence in action, of man's own power to give rise to value by his labor (*pro-ducere*)," writes Baudrillard. "Isn't this [...] another wholly arbitrary convention, a simulation model bound to code all human material and every contingency of desire and exchange in terms of value, finality, and production?" (Baudrillard 1975, 18–19). The key problem is not that the surplus value of people's labour is stolen, but that *they are led to believe that labour is by default something to be quantified and thereby made exploitable in the first place*. The extension of production to "nature" is equally problematic, as this similarly transforms our environment into a quantifiable collection of potential resources to be given "a useful, objective end" (Baudrillard 1975, 32) according to the supposedly natural needs of humankind. We must therefore seek radical alternatives to the current politico-economic order by moving beyond analyses of whatever unjust material conditions are *produced* by that order—though I would say that the latter remains a worthy if limited endeavour. Instead, we should

be challenging production itself, that is, we should be challenging *the logics of capital*.

Of a certain methodological importance in this effort are the Baudrillardian concept of *seduction* and its underlying principle of *reversibility*. In his first work of theory-fiction, Baudrillard presents seduction as “*the irruption of a minimal reversibility within every irreversible process*, such that [production and power] are secretly undermined, while simultaneously ensured of that minimal continuum of pleasure without which they would be nothing” (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 47; emphasis mine). Both of these elements—seduction and reversibility—require some elaboration. Seduction operates at the level of appearances and signs, leading away (*se-ducere*) hierarchical oppositions and productive orders from their self-proclaimed truths by “making them shimmer” (Baudrillard 1990, 87) and demonstrating that supposedly infallible and/or unchangeable (or *irreversible*) systems are based on the same artifice as seduction itself. Their duality is unmasked as a secret singularity. In this exposing move, seduction activates, injects, or reintroduces a dose of *reversibility* into these systems. Suddenly, diacritical relations like nature/culture, feminine/masculine, and indeed play/seriousness are not so clean anymore. Suddenly, nature challenges the culture that has violently distanced itself from her, the feminine

challenges the depth, productivity, and rationality that the masculine has ascribed exclusively to itself, and play challenges the possibility of an entirely separable seriousness. Since it is precisely their dichotomous appearance from which these systems derive their oppressive power—without it, the hierarchy is meaningless, and thus its replacement becomes thinkable—they will always attempt to purge seduction:

This is why all the great systems of production and interpretation have not ceased to exclude seduction—to its good fortune—from their conceptual field. For seduction continues to haunt them from without, and from deep within its forsaken state, threatening them with collapse. It awaits the destruction of every godly order, including those of production and desire. [...] Every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility, absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning. *This is why all disciplines, which have as an axiom the coherence and finality of their discourse, must try to exorcize it.* (Baudrillard 1990, 2; emphasis mine)

Baudrillard takes aim at several different such disciplines, including second-wave and psychoanalytic feminism, Marxism, and even Huizingan play theory through the work of Roger Caillois.² His relationship with the latter is of particular interest, as he aligns himself with Caillois in some ways but diverges significantly from him in others (cf.

Galloway 2007). Their alignment is mostly found in their use of terminology: Baudrillard embraces Caillois' classification of games as *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *vertigo* and makes purposeful use of it across his work. He even follows Caillois' social analysis to some extent; for instance when he writes that "Caillois was perhaps correct in his terminology, and our whole culture is in the process of shifting from games of competition and expression to games of risk and vertigo" (Baudrillard 1988a [1983], 187). However, Baudrillard also recognizes that Caillois could see this development "only in terms of debasement" (Baudrillard 1990, 144), because like Huizinga he saw *agon* and *alea* as complementary opposites that work together to establish a similarly racialized "civilizing role" of play (Caillois 2001, 108). Multiple scholars have since disavowed Caillois for the same reason that I critique Huizinga above (cf. Fickle 2019), and Phillips extends this critique when she states that she regards both his work and "game studies' subsequent veneration of it [...] with great suspicion" (Phillips 2020a, 175). To be sure, Baudrillard himself is not innocent of writing about "primitive societies" (e.g. Baudrillard 1975; 1990) and their reliance on certain types of play over others, although he does so with a distinct mixture of irony and sympathy.

The racist history behind the term ‘agon’ prompts me to specify, before continuing, that in the following discussions my understanding of *agon* is somewhere between Caillois’ ideal of an adversarial relation taking place under conditions of “pure equality” (Caillois 2001, 19) and its supposedly perverted opposite—which Wark calls a deterministic “fatal either/or” (Wark 2007, §97). Taking into account the inseparability of play from everyday life and culture, *agon* must simultaneously be insistent on an adversarial relation (instead of an *antagonistic*, inimical one) while operating under the assumption that the dominant productive order will never consciously or voluntarily allow that to happen. Whatever ‘debasement’ of play there is can be located squarely in capital’s quest to eradicate seduction, and play never held a ‘civilizing’ function—although it might hold a *transversal* and *transformative* one. The implications of this specific use of *agon* in addition to the Baudrillardian reversibility principle are quite vast, because all dialectical philosophy is potentially at risk:

Suppose that all the major, diacritical oppositions with which we order our world were traversed by seduction, instead of being based on contrasts and oppositions. Suppose not just that the feminine seduces the masculine, but that absence seduces presence, cold seduces hot, the subject seduces the object, and to be sure, the reverse. [...] The diagonals or transversals of

seduction may well break the oppositions between terms; they do not lead to fused or con-fused relations [...] but to dual relations. It is not a matter of a mystical fusion of subject or object, or signifier and signified, masculine and feminine, etc., but of a seduction, that is, a *duel and agonistic* relation. (Baudrillard 1990, 103–5; original emphasis)

Even seduction itself, which is simultaneously *inherent to* and *opposed to* productive orders like capitalism and patriarchy, is constantly in danger. The insistence on reversibility, on issuing a ‘duel’ or *reciprocal* challenge to the systems that seek to destroy it, means that seduction is of its own accord always already open to that same challenge. Any such process is thus necessarily complicit in perpetuating the very same structure it is in the business of bringing down. The game that seduction plays is one in which “the risks are never-ending and the stakes absolute” (Baudrillard 1990, 154); it either leads to continued play or resolves with the violent end of the game itself because *production does not wish to play*. From this game arises no synthesis, only agonistic struggle with the potential consequence of death, both figuratively and literally. This is, for me, the key methodological insight—resistance is never pure or risk-free; *it is reversibility all the way down*.³

In my present endeavour, therefore, reversibility operates on three levels. First and foremost, at the level of

scholarship: any effort towards an anti-capitalist understanding of digital play cannot repeat the same logics of purity and teleology that haunt Huizingan play theory, and thus needs to take into account the inevitable complicity of digital play with the logics of capital. Second, at the level of academic institutions: given the increasing influence of neoliberal capitalism in universities and other academic spaces, we need to reckon with the fact that the mere *act* of writing such a theory entails a perpetuation of the university system as it exists today. This brings me to the third level of abstraction where reversibility operates, namely the subject who is currently writing that theory: myself. I issue a challenge to game studies as I have defined it above, but for all intents and purposes I do so largely from *within* that same field. I cannot effectively criticize the shallow formalism of ludology without engaging with and citing the viewpoints I oppose; I cannot claim that Huizingan play theory is unhelpful and outdated without again returning to *Homo Ludens*; and I cannot rightly argue that game studies is caught up in cybernetic capitalism and the neoliberal institutional politics of academia without recognizing that I myself am *also* caught up in those same dynamics—albeit from a particular position. To illustrate not only the closeness of play and seduction but also their circularity and internal redundancy, Alex Galloway

translates a passage from Baudrillard's *De la séduction* in a way that feels quite appropriate to my current situation: "The play of the seducer is *with himself*" (Baudrillard, qtd. in Galloway 2007, 379). As I challenge game studies, game studies challenges me.

To explicate and ground this reciprocal challenge throughout my present argument, I draw not only from theoretical literature about the patriarchal lineage of game studies as a field, broader scholarship on the Humanities (e.g. Derrida 2004 [1980]; 1984; 2002; During 2019), and critical writings on "the neoliberal university" (e.g. Slaughter and Rhoades 2000; Moten and Harney 2004; Gill 2014; Hoofd 2017), but also from my own experiences as a student at two Dutch research universities and as an active participant in game studies conferences and seminars. In other words, to account for the third level of reversibility, and thereby to include myself in the analysis at certain points, I turn to autoethnography. This allows me to move across different levels of abstraction and to demonstrate how general structures at 'higher' levels operate and come to fruition in lived experience, while also acknowledging that it is not possible to speak from outside or above such lived experience. Speaking *of* a field means speaking *in* that field, and speaking *with* it. This does not mean that escape

is untenable—simply that we will always already be escaping into a different field, as Jacques Derrida theorizes:

Far from sealing off anything, this solipsism conditions the address to the other, it gives its word, or rather it gives the possibility of giving its word, it gives the given word in the ordeal of a threatening and threatened promise: monolingualism and tautology, the absolute impossibility of metalanguage. The impossibility of an absolute metalanguage, at least, for some *effects* of metalanguage, effects or relative phenomena, namely, relays of metalanguage “within” a language, already introduce into it some translation and some objectification in progress. At the horizon, visible and miraculous, spectral but infinitely desirable, they allow the mirage of another language to tremble. (Derrida 1998 [1996], 22; original emphasis)

Moreover, academic writing is not only a situated but also an *embodied* practice, another type of play that is inseparable from those societal factors that are regularly inscribed on bodies, such as class, race, and gender (cf. Brim 2020; Haraway 1991b; Brogden 2010). As I stated above, in addition to *what* is written it matters *who* is writing. With this in mind, I take to heart Gloria Wekker’s recommendation to move beyond simply clarifying my own positionality at these intersections in an “I-trick”; that is, to avoid “a rhetorical gesture in which personal announcements about a hegemonic self are made within an identity-political

context, without making any attempts to break out of that context” (Wekker 1996, 64; translation mine). Attempting to break out is, instead, very much the point.

Questions, and What Follows

The central question I address is the following: *How should we think digital play in cybernetic capitalism?* In other words, *what should a critical-materialist theory of digital play look like?* From this primary theoretical effort flow two subsequent inquiries into the consequences of such a theory. First, for the academic content of game studies: *What are the consequences of a critical-materialist theory of digital play for game studies’ discursive and conceptual foundations—specifically, here, regarding the figure of the gamer?* Then, for those scholars who themselves are part of that field: *How can the explicitly anti-capitalist intervention of a critical-materialist theory of digital play be turned back onto game scholars, and offer a conceptual space for critical reflection on how they ‘play’ the ‘game’ of the contemporary University?* The following chapters are written in an essayistic style, and each chapter takes the close reading of a single videogame as its starting point and leitmotif in order to draw out and make tangible important aspects of its central concerns.

“Digital Play and the Logics of Capital” takes over the discussion that this first chapter has opened. If contemporary game studies is indeed unable to theorize and analyse digital play as always already embedded in political and economic structures, what needs to happen in order to make such a theory legible within that same field? Starting from a reading of the dystopian anti-adventure game *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* (Sundae Month 2016), this chapter argues that in order to understand how digital play is complicit in the reification of cybernetic capitalism we need to conceptualize digital play as a fundamentally *seductive* world-making relation that is inseparable from the contexts in which it takes place. Cybernetic capitalism attempts to reduce the seductive qualities of digital play, subsuming it under the category of *the ‘ludic’*, a *cold seduction* wherein the digital challenges the player without allowing itself to be challenged in turn, fearing the player’s potential subversion of the productive logics of capital. Through a critique of the recent work of Miguel Sicart, I argue that crafting a seductive theory of digital play invites game studies to fundamentally re-examine the discourses surrounding digital play. The lens offered by this conceptual addition allows game studies’ material turn (and hopefully, the field at large) to closely link material conditions and materiality, to see how each works within and through

the other and how those workings are traversed by seduction. From this, a playful and necessarily undecidable pathway to radical alterity may be opened.

“Gamers™, or: Designed Technicities and Preferred Customers” picks up this theory and then engages with broader game studies perspectives, especially intersectional feminist scholarship within the field. Following a textual analysis of the Indigenous speculative hyperfiction *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER* (Aveiro-Ojeda 2018), the chapter asks: if we can no longer think digital play without the structures it inhabits and challenges, what of the player, the *gamer*? It argues that the ‘gamer’ identity is not an authentic identity but rather a *designed technicity*. Like some intersectional feminist game scholarship does already, a critical-materialist strand of game studies emphasizes that the spectral figure of the gamer was constructed by the military-entertainment complex to drive profits; videogame companies do not require gamers but prefer *Gamers™* as their customers. This construct is not merely dependent on a set of identity markers (the Gamer™ is imagined as a young, white, Western able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender man) but also on a set of learned behaviours and sensibilities with regards to the videogame medium. The Gamer™ haunts videogame culture in general, of course, but this chapter demonstrates the

ways in which he can still be found within game studies as well, and that his continued presence in various forms—here exemplified mainly by the work of Espen Aarseth—hampers the potential for a more openly politicized and critical-materialist form of game scholarship.

“Playing the Neoliberal University” concerns game scholars themselves and the academic institutions they inhabit. Stepping out of the narrow view of game studies and taking stock of the University as an institution, an idea, an ideal, leads to the conclusion that neoliberalism has not done it much good. Especially the Humanities and its students are crumbling under the incessant pressure to economize, globalize, and professionalize. Moreover, I show through an analysis of the interactive essay *Nonbinary: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* (Jerreat-Poole 2019), and the middle-state platform where it was published, that even those ‘well-meaning’ academics who seek to use cybernetic technologies to move beyond these dynamics remain caught up in them. This is the context in which the establishment and continuation of the most critical and activist strands of game studies should be situated, and thus the context that my own investigation takes place in. Some work has been done on the aggressively masculinist way in which the early field asserted itself, but less has been written on how game scholars specifically ‘play’ the academy as a *para-*

critical subculture. If we accept anti-capitalism into the heart of the field, as arguably the feminist and queer strands of game studies are already doing, in this chapter I ask: how critical are we able to be before we run up against the ‘rules’ of the ‘game’—and what happens then? This question of institutional politics is addressed primarily through the work of Joost Raessens and his role in the mainstreaming of game studies in the contemporary (Dutch) University.

Finally, in a short coda titled “Ludic Materialism, a New Paradigm?”, I briefly address some of the potentials of and potential objections to this theory. This includes a note on criticisms of the undesirable ‘playfulness’ of poststructuralist critical theory in contrast to the supposed ‘seriousness’ of historical and dialectical materialism, as well as reflections on the futures of game studies and the University at large. The seeds for a critical-materialist game studies, what we might with some irony call a ‘ludic materialism’, have already been sown—all that is left to do is bring them to fruition.

Digital Play and the Logics of Capital

*“But something beckons you to the dark... Could your luck be
changing?”*

After a solid day of picking up and incinerating trash, all the while keeping a lookout for divine fetishes or lucky tokens, the interface suddenly becomes wobbly and all visible text nearly illegible. You spend 11.6 Municipal Credits at the nearest kiosk on a pill that changes your gender to something like “SUSAN SARANDON” or “HEALTHCARE IS A HUMAN RIGHT,” and the symptoms of dysphoria soon dissipate. You were saving that money for a good and safe-to-eat meal, but now you are resigned to a cheap meal from a stall that will not properly satisfy you and might cause food poisoning. The cursed skull that has been following you since your last bold attempt at a dungeon adventure through the spaceport’s sewers screams loudly in your ear. On the way back to your shabby

apartment, careful to avoid the military police officers who roam the streets in pursuit of their next shakedown, you pass market stalls filled with technologies and magical weapons that you could never hope to afford. One day, perhaps. If you get lucky. Later that evening, you write in your diary: *No progress today, needed to gendershift. Try again tomorrow.*

In *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* (Sundae Month 2016), you spend your time in a lush and vibrant cyberpunk spaceport where brave adventurers come and go to find quests and purchase equipment. Your world, however, is not the same as theirs: you are—or, alternatively, the player-character is—stuck in that same spaceport, dreaming of escape and glory while cleaning up after those who are living that very dream. None of the adventures are meant for you. Amidst the beautiful scenery of the markets and alien structures, you only have eyes for the garbage on the ground. Although prices for goods and services at the market fluctuate rapidly based on unknown factors, everything that is supremely desirable is always too expensive. Your daily salary is partially dependent on the amount of garbage you incinerate, but no matter how hard you work it is never enough to take away the sense of impending doom that both figuratively and literally haunts you every minute of the day. Access to basic necessities and small

pleasures alike is heavily restricted by market forces—even gender identity is commodified to the extent that one must be *bought* in order for the individual to function properly.¹ The only ‘real’ hope you have to break out of this frustrating existence is an appeal to divine forces and sheer luck. At some point, after much monotonous grinding and many dramatic financial setbacks, you have managed to scrape together enough resources to hire an adventurer who will take you on an epic quest to rid yourself of the cursed skull. You go to sleep on the night before; in your dreams, you see yourself triumphantly floating over the city towards the adventurer’s spaceship. The videogame’s end credits roll across the screen. When you wake, there is no adventurer and no spaceship for you to board. The cursed skull remains, as does the crippling poverty. This is capitalism for the marginalized working poor: desperate, dysphoric, and precarious. This chapter is concerned with how that system intersects with digital play, and how *seductive* digital play could (or could not) offer a path beyond its clutches.

Gamespace and the Great Neutral Aleatorium

Quite obviously, *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* starkly contrasts with the meritocratic and distinctly *productive* power fantasy that most videogames are said to replicate. In their digital worlds, pleasure and success are dependent on effort

and/or skill: “Fun from games arises out of mastery. It arises out of comprehension” (Koster 2005, 40). Systemic privilege and injustice are hidden or taken for granted. There is no question about who the hero of the story is in a military first-person shooter, no question about who is supposed to prevail at the end of a fantasy roleplaying game. For the videogame player, time is made reversible and death is inconsequential. History, according to Galloway, is violently reduced to “the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple,” and “the logic of informatics and horizontality is privileged over the logic of ideology and verticality” (Galloway 2006, 103). Like any strong productive order, the videogame power fantasy exceeds traditional ideological parameters—whatever else it may be, it is *always* an allegory (or ‘allegorithm’) for the logic of information that imposes itself on every aspect of our lives. Wark writes:

The game has not just colonized reality, it is also the sole remaining ideal. Gamespace proclaims its legitimacy through victory over all rivals. The reigning ideology imagines the world as a *level playing field*, upon which all folks are equal before God, the great game designer. History, politics, culture—gamespace dynamites everything that is not in the game, like an outdated Vegas casino. Everything is evacuated from an empty space and time which now appears natural, neutral, and without qualities—a gamespace. The lines are clearly marked. Every

action is just a means to an end. All that counts is the score. As for who owns the teams and who runs the show, best not to ask. As for who is excluded from the big leagues, best not to ask. As for who keeps the score and who makes the rules, best not to ask. As for what ruling body does the handicapping and on what basis, best not to ask. All is for the best in the best—and only—possible world. There is—to give it a name—a military entertainment complex, and it *rules*. Its triumphs affirm not just the rules of the game but the rule of the game. (Wark 2007, §8; original emphases)

Generally speaking, videogames accept this notion of the ‘level playing field’ wholeheartedly, while simultaneously always putting the player in a position where they are poised to win. They “present us with an algorithm for the purported comprehensibility, controllability, and monolithic character of the world. What greater power fantasy is there than that?” (Mitchell 2018, 33). They construct the ideal form of Huizinga’s and Caillois’ *agon*, but then ‘forget’ to mention the structural inequalities upon which its arena is built. *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor*, on the other hand, chooses to reveal the oppressive rigidity of that very same logic by having the player experience a frustrating and hopeless situation within the system and then asking them to attain the same standards as the privileged adventurer videogame protagonist. It demonstrates that the power

fantasy is a lie. It *does* ask who is excluded from the big leagues. It *does* dream of a better world, even though it seems to cynically conclude that this dream is impossible to realize for the Janitor.

Many aspects of this title are relevant for illustrating some of my central concerns in this chapter. Its refusal to conform to the commonly held belief that a videogame should primarily be ‘fun’ conspires with its scathingly ironic anti-capitalist message to politicize digital play (cf. e.g. Morrisette 2017). Its core gameplay loop, summarized in the pause menu as “eat, sleep, recharge,” exemplifies perfectly how play and work can become nearly indistinguishable under capitalism and in the digital systems that allegorize it (cf. e.g. Golumbia 2009). What is most significant, however, is its reversion of the usual emphasis on effort and skill. In a typical videogame power fantasy, the notions of chance and luck take shape as forces beyond the player’s control; at most, the random number generation (RNG) algorithm is influenceable by increasing an ‘ability’ that passively improves one’s chances of finding premium loot. Chance in the power fantasy is not only apolitical—everything in the power fantasy is presented as apolitical—but also *impersonal*. That is, while most aspects of the power fantasy concern the player’s ability to act within its world, RNG determines how the world *acts upon* the player in an

aleatory and supposedly fair manner. Chance does not discriminate; it applies to everyone equally in the level playing field.

Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor rejects this paradigm and refuses to accept that the randomness of RNG is truly random. Every morning, the Janitor can check their current “luck index” on a computer, and it becomes clear rather quickly that a higher index makes finding necessary items and getting a higher salary considerably easier. Every day, the player is therefore busy making offerings and giving prayers to any of the nine goddesses to improve that number—but they should never pray to the same goddess twice on a single day, for that impacts the index negatively. Placing lucky tokens in or around the Janitor’s home increases the index number. Talking to police officers reduces the index number. While all the unaffordable weapons and items offer bonuses such as “+15 Magic Damage” or “+1 Inventory Space,” the only items the Janitor can conceivably buy are either useless or beneficial to the index. Your luck is never changing by itself—you *change your luck*. The level playing field of the alien spaceport is not what Baudrillard names the “Great Neutral Aleatorium (G.N.A.)” but a space where, in accordance with his theory of seduction, “chance is summoned to respond, obliged by the player’s wager to declare itself either favourable or

hostile.” For Baudrillard, “Chance is never neutral, the game [transforms] it into a player and agonistic figure. Which is another way of saying that the basic assumption behind the game is that *chance does not exist*” (Baudrillard 1990, 143). Of course, players will often make similar appeals for chance to bend to their will in power fantasies—to *seduce* it: they will commonly beg semi-seriously to some God for a good item drop after a particularly difficult fight in a so-called ‘dungeon crawler’, or demand a good starting location for one’s chosen faction in a 4X (‘eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate’) strategy videogame. But again, in those genres the RNG is impenetrable and omnipotent, and in the end the player relies on their mastery of other systems to progress. *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor*, quite simply put, applies this meritocratic level-playing-field system to the very notion of luck itself. The game is “a venture for the seduction of chance” (Baudrillard 1990, 144): by forcefully challenging RNG to conform to the same logic as other aspects subsumed under gamespace, it causes the destruction of the former and exposes the superficiality of both. The anticlimactic ‘ending’ to the Janitor’s story is thus not merely cynicism; it is the final argument in its thesis that the playing field will *never* be levelled under capitalism. The objective neutrality of the G.N.A. is a lie, but this

is only made visible when the game finally admits that it was rigged from the start.

Cybernetics and the Military-Entertainment Complex

At this point, some further specification is required of the socio-politico-economic structure that facilitates digital play and that videogames allegorithmize. Baudrillard jokingly calls it the G.N.A.; Wark provocatively calls it gamespace—although she would surely object to some of what follows (cf. Wark 2019). My intention is not to capture it here in all its aspects, but to sketch it clearly enough in order to elucidate global connections to local practices of digital play. Other authors from whom I draw insight and inspiration have analysed the structure as it exists in our contemporary moment as a frantic, information-based “post-Fordist information capitalism” (cf. Kline et al. 2003; Morris-Suzuki 1986), through its reigning anti-democratic doctrine known as “neoliberalism” (cf. Brown 2015), or from an ecological perspective as the “Capitalocene” (cf. Haraway 2016; Moore 2016). That there are game-like aspects to this structure is reflected not only in Wark’s work but also in the critical term “ludocapitalism” (cf. Dibbell 2006; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009), as well as in more techno-optimistic narratives like the supposed

“ludification of culture” (cf. Raessens 2014). This is a global capitalist system that aims at an infinite exploitative accumulation of resources and wealth mostly to the benefit of multinationals and private individuals in the Global North, regardless of the cost for human and nonhuman life elsewhere. The violence required to upkeep this mode of production has historically been founded and enacted most severely upon the Global South by way of colonialism, anthropological racism, and the disciplinary necropolitics of slavery, genocide, and apartheid (cf. Mbembe 2003). In the home countries of white colonizers and slavers, the working classes were initially enclosed in similar structures that Michel Foucault termed “disciplinary societies” (cf. Foucault 1995), but these have during roughly the last half-century gradually been giving way to “societies of control” (Deleuze 1992, 3–4). The oppressive relation between North and South remains after colonialism was abolished in name; most visibly in the form of asymmetrical, heavily mediatized, intercontinental wars—first against communism and later against terrorism—and in the neoliberal economic interventionism of institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. At every level, we are seeing a capitalism that can no longer afford total enclosure to contain the possibility of social mobility and class struggle, and that thus reaches for other means to either physically or

metaphorically incarcerate the population: “Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt” (Deleuze 1992, 6). And so, the society of control looks to computers, with their extraordinary capacity for rendering the complex mess of reality calculable, manageable, and predictable. Through the proliferation of digital technologies in every sector of life, driven initially by the U.S. military industrial complex, it seeks to universally impose the logic of command and control through mechanical feedback loops as most prominently theorized by Norbert Wiener (cf. Wiener 1961 [1948]). It moves, in other words, towards a model of *cybernetic capitalism*.

The history of cybernetics as an intellectual field and of the conditions of possibility that facilitated its rise to hegemony are largely beyond my scope here (cf. e.g. Galloway 2014; Hayles 1999). But what better way to manage the risky and violent chaos of global capitalism than with cybernetics, “a theory of adjustment of individuals to system requirements, of an incessant shaping through feedback loops to the internalized constraints of social programmes, which are then experienced as the autonomous conditions of subjectivity” (Dyer-Witheford 2015, 195)? The anarchist collective Tiqqun has written at length about the consequences of applying this field to capitalism:

Cybernetic capitalism develops in order to enable the society devastated by Capital to re-form and offer itself for a further cycle to the process of accumulation. [...] Capitalism's crises as Marx understood them always come from a disarticulation between the time of conquest and the time of reproduction. The function of cybernetics is [...] an endogenous response given to the problem posed by capitalism, which is *to develop without fatal disequilibria*.

In the logic of Capital, the development of the piloting function, the "control" function, corresponds to the subordination of the sphere of accumulation to the sphere of circulation. [...] Despite an inability to tighten the conditions of exploitation, which would bring about a crisis of consumption, capitalist accumulation can continue nonetheless, provided that the production-consumption cycle accelerates, that is, as long as the process of production and commodity circulation both accelerate. What was lost at the static level of the economy can be made up for at the dynamic level. The logic of flows will dominate the logic of the end product. Speed will take precedence over quantity, as a factor of wealth. *The hidden side of the maintenance of accumulation is the acceleration of circulation*. The control apparatuses will have the function, consequently, of maximizing the volume of commodity flows while minimizing the events, obstacles, accidents that would slow them down. Cybernetic capitalism tends to abolish time itself, to maximize fluid circulation to its limit point, the speed of light, a point that certain financial transactions are already approaching. The

categories of “real time” and “just-in-time” attest rather clearly to this *aversion to duration*. For this very reason, time is our ally.

If repression has the role, in cybernetic capitalism, of forestalling the event, prediction is its corollary, insofar as it is for the purpose of eliminating the uncertainty that’s associated with any future. It is the major concern of the statistical technologies. Whereas those of the welfare State were completely focused on the anticipation of risks, calculated or not, those of cybernetic capitalism aim at multiplying the domains of responsibility.

(Tiqun 2020, 63–65, 74; original emphases)

Aside from its obvious centring of computers and digital technologies more generally, cybernetic capitalism relies on circulation, predictability, and speed. The global flows of capital and commodities are first expanded to encompass the entire planet and then accelerated at every level, made possible by high-speed communication networks, automated labour, and the ubiquity of digital media. These infrastructures produce and in turn rely on what Tessa Morris-Suzuki calls the “perpetual innovation economy,” wherein information itself becomes an exploitable resource, and whose survival partially depends on “the possibility of new knowledge being produced with the speed and consistency necessary to maintain corporate profits” (Morris-Suzuki 1984, 120). The many risks that arise from this

acceleration—to name only a few: ecological destruction in the regions where industrial and material labour remain the dominant mode; woefully insecure employment and working conditions at every stage of the production cycle; and armed resistance against the forceful capture of resources like oil and conflict minerals—are then supposedly ameliorated or eliminated in their entirety by cybernetic technologies as well. This is the creation of the level playing field that gamespace prefers: when reality is smoothed over and made manageable by interactive climate models, gamified productivity apps, and remote-controlled missile drones. According to Wark, this dynamic even produces a new “vectoralist class” that does not control capital but instead controls the “production of abstraction,” the flow of information that enables the level playing field in the first place (Wark 2004, §22).

As mentioned above, the technologies of computer modelling that sustain cybernetic capitalism quite evidently have their origins in U.S. military research facilities and Department of Defence-funded universities. The first videogames were programmed there too, on computers whose successors would run endless simulations of Soviet airstrikes and would train soldiers for active combat in the Middle East (cf. Crogan 2011; Lenoir and Lowood 2005). One of the primary vectors for spreading these technologies

from the military into private sectors was the entertainment industry, and one of the most culturally significant mediums to ride that cybernetic wave was the videogame. No wonder, then, that Wark employs the term *military-entertainment complex* to refer to the entire videogame industry—the difference is too close, the word only barely inaccurate. Pioneering videogame companies like Atari and Nintendo were crucial in bringing computer graphics technologies, initially developed and funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, to the entertainment market (cf. Lenoir 2000, 298–308). These companies, often with financial support from that same agency, then continued to further research and develop those technologies in order to implement them in videogame hardware. Later, software titles like *Doom II* (id Software 1994) were taken up and reprogrammed by the U.S. military for “commercial war-gaming” purposes (Lenoir 2000, 324). The military also maintains a clear presence in terms of hardware, even now. Contemporary input devices for missile drones resemble the standard videogame controllers we know from the Xbox and PlayStation systems, because they were specifically developed “to facilitate the training of operators by taking advantage of their familiarity with navigating and acting in [...] gameworlds” and “to leverage the research and development work done by the commercial games industry”

(Crogan 2011, 158). More recently, in 2017 the U.S. Navy started to use Xbox controllers to operate the periscopes of nuclear submarines, once again with the explicit reasoning that the operators would already be familiar with the technology (cf. Berents and Keogh 2019, 515). I agree with scholars like Derek Gregory that “characterizations of the drone missions as moments in a ‘video game war’ that inculcates a ‘Playstation mentality to killing’ may well be wide of the mark” (Gregory 2011, 197). Even if players are effectively being taught how to operate weapons targeting systems, they are not being taught to kill. However, I would stress that the intimate cultural, technological, and economic ties that connect the paradigmatic entertainment medium of cybernetic capitalism with one of the crucial innovations in accelerated asymmetrical warfare are too telling to be ignored here.

A few additional examples should elucidate the material entanglements of videogames and cybernetic capital even further. That is, just as the videogame is the ideal commodity of post-Fordist information capitalism, so too is the videogame industry a perfect storm of everything that cybernetic capitalism represents. According to Dyer-Witheford, the industry as it exists today is “an exemplary site of ‘immaterial labour’, [...] the recuperation of digital commons by the new forms of Web 2.0 capitalism,” and of

globalized supply chains that extend “from game studios to electronic assembly lines, conflict mineral mines and digital waste dumps” (Dyer-Witheford 2015, 11). The ecological consequences of videogame distribution and hardware production are unfortunately only recently beginning to receive substantial journalistic and scholarly attention (cf. e.g. Cubitt 2017; Gordon 2019; Mayers et al. 2015; Mejia 2016). In contrast, much has been said already on the typically precarious working conditions of game developers. The competitive spirit that haunts digital media industries in general and the pervasive romanticizing of game development specifically, even by developers themselves, function rather effectively as control mechanisms to maintain this situation, as has been observed regarding what is known as ‘crunch time’: “There exists a culture of overtime that is simultaneously requirement, expectation, and simply a product of passion. [...] Certainly, there are people willing to take your place if you can’t or won’t work long hours” (O’Donnell 2014a, 141). Making videogames is advertised as a playful, ‘fun’ job, while the industry’s chaotic and messy socio-technical milieu remains hidden to outsiders behind flowery discourses about passion and a legion of non-disclosure agreements. Here, the false dichotomy of leisure versus labour becomes an acute problem for workers and cybernetic capital alike.

Paradoxically but not unexpectedly, the same culture of passion and “playbour” (cf. Kücklich 2005) that serves to keep workers from seriously questioning their material conditions also exacerbates problems that could potentially slow down the production cycle, such as project mismanagement and the relative lack of veteran game developers who stay within the industry for their entire careers. Activists and organizers who speak out against these practices have even argued that, “given how hard it is for managers to predict how long software development will take, the widespread incidents of crunch demonstrate that many managers are likely budgeting the additional hours of crunch into the development cycle” (Woodcock 2020, 52). Disillusionment with the generally poor quality of life for workers contributes significantly to the industry’s rapid turnover, as one-third of all developers switches fields before their fifth year and half of them have done so in fewer than ten years (O’Donnell 2014a, 161). Not to mention that it is not just the artists, programmers, and designers who find themselves in this condition: game testers and other, less visible, ‘unskilled’ workers are often in even more precarious situations, where they may aspire to the ‘glamour’ of videogame development but will often remain stuck in repetitive play-testing jobs without employee benefits (cf. e.g. Bulut 2015a; 2015b). In the meantime, creative and

financial risks are mostly left to independent development studios that get caught in the games of “adventure capital” (O’Donnell 2014, 153–54). This too is characteristic for the perpetual innovation cycle that arises within cybernetic capitalism: only after their risks have paid off will these studios be acquired by established, risk-averse molochs like Activision or Electronic Arts, to have their potential value extracted with maximum efficiency and maximum profits. For those who take a creative risk and fail for whatever reason, there is no such stability.

Another illustrative trend is the spread of “platformization” (cf. Helmond 2015) throughout every facet of the industry, which has arguably had significant consequences for its “market arrangements, infrastructures, and governance of content production, distribution, and advertising” (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4281). Videogames, as digital commodities, have of course always been dependent on engine platforms for their production and on physical console platforms for their distribution and consumption. However, scholars of the industry have in recent years seen a shift towards a deepening “platform logic” (cf. Kerr 2017). Game development has to a certain extent been democratized, and distribution is increasingly occurring on heavily datafied and gamified digital platforms like Origin, Epic, and Steam. The ‘free’ availability of various platforms and

engines, such as Godot, Twine, and Unity, has made game development a more generally accessible craft than ever before (cf. Harvey 2014; Keogh 2019a). Yet, in that same trend is visible a clear “democratization *dispositif* that rationalizes and individualizes cultural work under neoliberal capitalism and which frames corporate strategies of enrolment as social benevolency” (Nicoll and Keogh 2019, 112). Under the current conditions, independent game development is framed as an aspirational craft, the largely free labour of which prefigures a ‘legitimate’ career in the industry at large. Moreover, platforms are not just increasingly accessible for developers and players—see the shift towards free-to-play, mobile gaming, and social media platforms—but increasingly inescapable. Legal game distribution on PC overwhelmingly takes place on Valve Corporation’s Steam, a platform which in itself has acquired a game-like structure with its seasonal sale rituals and its gamified trading card systems (cf. Werning 2019). Customers are expected to engage playfully with the platform itself, and videogame consumption thus becomes a sort of metagame for the purpose of player-driven value production. Mostly to the benefit of the vectoralist class, the commodification of play and the gamification of the marketplace have collapsed production and consumption into a “leisurely ‘prosumerism’” (Hoofd 2019, 150).

Meanwhile, the more traditional producers of value in the industry—videogame developers—are strongly incentivized to move their products to this digital distribution platform, where they are subjected to hefty service fees and in some cases enforced censorship of whatever the platform deems ‘inappropriate content’. By collapsing production and consumption into the same space, the platform establishes new forms of governance over videogames and the specific kinds of “productive play” that cybernetic capitalism will allow (cf. Joseph 2017). Daniel Greene and Daniel Joseph have called this a “digital spatial fix” (cf. Greene and Joseph 2015): the limits that physical videogame distribution posed for the acceleration of commodity circulation and profits are temporarily overcome by centralizing distribution on a platform like Steam, even though that same centralization will certainly stifle acceleration at a later stage and thus demand another ‘fix’. It is widely agreed upon among the critics cited above that the current conditions under which the videogame industry operates are unsustainable and undesirable. The question is not *if* this order will be challenged, but *when*.

Speed and Cold Seduction

One might at this point be reminded of the work of Paul Virilio, who writes, “when they invented the railroad, what

did they invent? An object that allowed you to go fast, which allowed you to progress. [...] But at the same time they invented the railway catastrophe” (Virilio and Lotringer 2008 [1983], 46). From technological acceleration arises risk; Virilio would even say that modern technology ultimately relies on the proliferation of accidents (cf. Virilio 1991 [1984]). Therefore, the role of cybernetics in contemporary capitalism is twofold: it is both to facilitate the ever-increasing speed of circulation and to *minimize* the multitude of contingencies that result from its own speeding-up. It is made to manage itself, yet in that same effort it only increases the possibility of a devastating accident occurring. The space-time compression enacted by the remote-controlled missile drone, for example, keeps its operator out of physical harm’s way. However, Gregory points out that in the asymmetrical wars seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, “it is formidably, *constitutively* difficult to distinguish between combatants and civilians.” This fundamental problem would continue to exist even if the video feed was perfectly transparent, because “the ‘intimacy’ of time-space compression produced by the new visual technologies is highly selective” (Gregory 2011, 200; original emphases). Thus, even the most accurate missile drone will continue to produce civilian casualties, accidents which are “*incidental* to what is deemed to be concrete and direct military

advantage” (Gregory 2011, 199; original emphasis). The fallout from such incidental accidents is seen across the Middle East today—there are even videogames about it. Gonzalo Frasca’s well-known *September 12th* (Newsgaming 2003), though allegedly facile in terms of its rhetoric, manages to capture this remote destruction as well as the self-justifying cycles that arise from it. Imperialist violence incites violent resistance, which in turn only invites more missiles to be launched at some urban centre across the Atlantic. The cycle continues until the city is completely destroyed or the aggressor decides to stop playing—the eradication of violent resistance is not a possible outcome. The greatest secret of gamespace is also ultimately its downfall: it will never achieve “zero risk,” it will never truly be frictionless (Tiqqun 2020, 74).

That single fact does not stop the military-entertainment complex from trying to attain universality, and the videogame medium presents its most desperate efforts in a heightened and aestheticized form. This is especially visible in the design and discourse of serious games, both of which mostly leave unquestioned the pervasive assumption that the accidents produced by cybernetic technologies can, without difficulty, be addressed in an emancipatory manner by the further proliferation of cybernetics. A similar assumption and structural refusal to engage with this

contradiction is noticeable in scholarship about (serious) games as well—but this is a point for discussion in a later chapter. In contrast, by drawing on Virilio’s notion of simulation technology as a “museum of accidents” (cf. Virilio 2006), Ingrid Hoofd argues:

It is the new technologies’ aesthetic properties themselves—rather than simply a narrative and its repetition of dominant ideologies—that grant a ‘fantasy of connection, wholeness, and mastery’ through interactivity as if it was an immediate and transparent property of the gaming subject. What is therefore at work in serious games [...] is a form of *double* objectification. The illusion of constructive engagement with a pressing social issue through these seemingly ‘clean’ and ‘neutral’ technologies, combined with the distancing effect brought about by these technologies from their actual (social and environmental) implications, make the gamer complicit in the neo-liberal endeavour that paradoxically precisely leads to contemporary speed-elitist disenfranchisement. (Hoofd 2007, 13; original emphasis)

This complicity of serious games in a Virilian “accident of the real” (cf. Virilio and Wilson 1994) by *playing with* virtual accidents in order not to expose the actual accidents that they may or may not simulate is crucial, but also more messy than is desirable from the perspective of capital. An independently developed videogame like Joseph DeLappe’s *Killbox* (DeLappe and Biome Collective 2016) viscerally

simulates both sides of a drone strike with civilian casualties *and* is undeniably critical of what it depicts.² It offers a similarly clean interface as other serious games but simultaneously calls attention to that false cleanliness and, paradoxically, makes visible the same problem of visibility and combatant-civilian distinction that Gregory addresses (cf. Altomonte 2019). Such critiques of cybernetic technology would surely lose a portion of their effectiveness if they were not themselves complicit in the proliferation of cybernetics. What better device to show the shortcomings of cybernetics than cybernetics itself? In a similar vein, Patrick Jagoda argues that “games that seek to complicate or resist transnational capitalism can never escape complicity with it. And yet not all forms of complicity are equivalent, and the work of adjudicating among them constitutes critical intellectual work” (Jagoda 2013b, 123n25). The problematic of intellectual responsibility and complicity returns in a later chapter, in the meantime, this notion of complicity in capitalism as inevitable for videogames—and by extension, for digital play—is especially pertinent for the topic at hand.

The idea that the logics of capital are present in the rules of videogames is hardly contested anymore, and many videogames indeed make no attempt whatsoever at hiding their capitalist frameworks: they can be unabashed

celebrations of the American Dream, centre themselves entirely around the process of consumption, and construct their worlds as virtual marketplaces without any significant complaints about the invasion of working life into playing life. One illustrative trend that deserves more space than I can devote to it here is the rise of “player monetization” and “microtransactions” in nominally free-to-play games (cf. Nieborg 2015; Whitson 2012), which in fact does meet with some resistance from some players (cf. Scully-Blaker 2019; Švelch 2017). The serious games that Hoofd critiques are another example, though they still offer the pretence of striving to *solve* the very problems that capitalism helped create. Regardless of pretension, videogames’ participation in the further proliferation of cybernetics and the society of control is inevitable; “the playful video game may metacommunicate ‘this is play,’ but it can never avoid also being informatic control” (Galloway 2006, 105). The specific kind of informatic control that characterizes videogames manifests as what Ash names “the interface envelope” (cf. Ash 2015). He claims that a videogame’s design attempts to *envelop* its user by establishing “a localized opening of space time, or emergent effect of the continuous transductions between a player’s body and the technicity and resolution of objects they engage with when they use an interface system” (Ash 2015, 83). That is, the interface

enfolds the player into a phenomenologically captivating environment by selectively facilitating relations between its technical objects and the player, and in doing so produces an *envelope power* that works to “shape human capacities to sense space and time for the explicit purpose of creating economic value for the designers and creators of these interfaces” (Ash 2015, 3). This production of value, according to the theory, is achieved by attuning the player to sets of normalized affects and modes of perception which entice the player to continue their engagement with game systems. While Ash repeatedly emphasizes the post-anthropocentric and even *reciprocal* qualities of the relations built in the interface envelope, he still concludes: “In dividing space and time into ever smaller units of temporality and spatiality, the capitalist system also creates new territories of attention to be mined and exploited” (Ash 2015, 147). In this sense, cybernetic capitalism does not merely accelerate the circulation of commodities but also accelerates human perception itself. That acceleration of the sensorium, in turn, serves the creation of a so-called “attention economy” (cf. Crogan and Kinsley 2012), in which our learned perception of microscopic points in space-time is a source of untapped resources and potential surplus value for the vectoralists, much in the same way that nature has been for every productive order.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the power fantasy as an algorithm for the logic of information, which we now know as the logic of cybernetic capital that works both isomorphically and experientially through the rules and technologies of that same power fantasy. Capital is present allegorically, algorithmically, and *materially*—and in this last regard especially, the military-entertainment complex makes no effort to hide itself, being present even in our input devices. The fact that this is all taking place ‘out in the open’ is both the point and the problem: precisely by presenting itself so blatantly and then enveloping the player so smoothly, cybernetic capitalism makes itself appear natural. This is crucial to creating the frictionless environment that the military-entertainment complex desires: if there is no serious ideological challenge to acceleration, or if those challenges can be recuperated, the acceleration may continue unperturbed. This is why gamespace forms “a *ludic* universe, where everything operates as possible simulation” and where “the pleasure principle is defined in terms of the conjunction of desires and models (of a demand and its anticipation by simulated responses)” (Baudrillard 1990, 157; emphasis mine). If cybernetic capital is ubiquitous and is able to capture our imagination even in supposedly ‘interactive’ entertainment media, it is likely to snuff out

any dissent even before that dissent develops into a coherent thought.

We may include the videogame medium, too, in Baudrillard's observations on how cybernetic control is operationalized through contemporary technologies to prevent any structural accidents from being exposed or ideological accidents from occurring. In the videogame, the two meanings of the term 'simulation' encounter each other most spectacularly. It is simulation in a technoscientific sense, an algorithmic model with a set of initial conditions that facilitates prediction and visualization over time, and in the Baudrillardian sense, a closed, completely self-referential sign system that generates a *hyperreality*, "a real without origin" (Baudrillard 1983, 2). While the former kind is not inherently closed or fully self-referential—plenty of simulation technologies are open-source—the latter tolerates no intrusion that it has not accounted for within its initial conditions; and it is this model that cybernetic capital prefers because it does not rely on overt disciplinary or surveillance measures. Instead, players are willingly caught up in and unilaterally seduced by a '*ludic*' simulation, that "encompasses all the different ways one can 'play' with networks, not in order to establish alternatives, but to discover their state of optimal functioning" (Baudrillard 1990, 158). The videogame exemplifies "the

cybernetic absorption of play into the general category of the ludic” (Baudrillard 1990, 159), and digital ‘play’ should be taken as the ultimate expression of

the modern meaning of play, the “ludic” sense, connoting the suppleness and polyvalence of combinations. Understood in this sense, “play,” its very possibility, is at the basis of the metastability of systems. It has nothing to do with play as a dual or agonistic relation; it is the cold seduction that governs the spheres of information and communication. And it is in this cold seduction that the social and its representations are now wearing themselves thin. (Baudrillard 1990, 163)

Freedom to play inside the materiality the game without the factual agency to alter the material conditions of play—the parallels between this ‘ludic’ sense of play and neoliberalism’s free-market dogmatism are almost too obvious (cf. Baerg 2009; Muriel and Crawford 2020). It is not *agon* but *antagonism* that rules the ‘ludic’, because it sees the player not as a worthy adversary but as a threat to be either managed or eliminated completely. This is seduction without reciprocity, a game without stakes, a one-sided and totally risk-averse challenge, the most cowardly soldier in what Patrick Crogan has called the “war on contingency” (Crogan 2011, 36). Such a ‘cold’ seduction is the work of both medium *and* message: videogames offer a *ludologically*

'ludic' vision of the world by way of the power fantasy, but they also enforce a *materially 'ludic'* experience by facilitating cybernetic interactivity without ceding full control of their parameters to their players. When the 'choices' available in a videogame simulation are those made beforehand in the service of the level-playing-field, is there any actual choice to make except *not* to play?

Naturally, this narrative is as one-sided as the challenge of 'ludic' simulation itself, and its pessimistic conclusion is far from satisfactory. For one, the opposition between 'cold' and 'hot' seduction is as reversible as any other. Kline and his colleagues claim that there is still always a risk to capital inherent in cold seduction and the commodification of play: "The more the player knows that as they plug in and log on they are being played on by a vast technomarketing apparatus, the more disenchanting the virtual experience risks becoming" (Kline et al. 2003, 285–86). Hoofd, in a piece on civic engagement through videogames, hypothesizes that such engagement will inevitably lead to disaffection and unrest, because "the performance and experience of empathy or leadership [...] will forever stand in tension with actual moral and material global effects that [are] in part caused by [...] 'cold' seduction" (Hoofd 2019, 150). Finally, Seth Giddings argues that this understanding of the medium as "a closed notion of

simulacral ideology isomorphic with neoliberal subjecthood” is not the only possible view, because the videogame may just as well be read as “a seedbed for new formations and resources for behaving and imagining differently within and against the prevailing cultural and political economy” (Giddings 2018, 780). These are crucial notes to make, for accounts of cybernetic control and simulation like mine on occasion risk being overly deterministic and totalizing about the accuracy of the simulation and how players respond to it. Baudrillard recognizes this as well when he writes that, “nobody, one might add, is completely taken in. [...] The masses respond to the simulation of meaning with a kind of reverse simulation; they respond to dissuasion with disaffection, and to illusions with an enigmatic belief” (Baudrillard 1990, 163). This has been, in a sense, the key insight of cultural studies, too: negotiated and oppositional readings are still possible despite the strength of preferred hegemonic readings (cf. Hall 2006 [1980]). One of the central elements of *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* (or at least, of my reading of it) is precisely that the game does not uncritically accept the underlying logic of cybernetic capitalism. Instead, it *heightens* the falsehood of the level playing field by challenging it to make good on its totalizing aspirations, strongly suspecting that it will fail to do so in a classic case of imperial overstretch. Gamespace only

functions correctly when it is invisible, and yet at any moment the play that its 'ludic' universe is supposed to contain can spectacularly—and seductively—turn against it. Seduction, after all, never single-handedly destroys the existing order but relies on a *duel* challenge, on the reciprocal injection of reversibility, to make the order enthusiastically participate in its own destruction.

The Seduction of Digital Play

So what, despite its commodification and its complicity in establishing the principles of gamespace, is it about digital play specifically that makes it a force of seduction and a potential vector for anti-capitalist praxis? I posit that digital play, like Baudrillard's seduction, should be understood as *agonistic*, but also as a fundamentally *embodied*, *material*, and *situated* relation that exposes both its human subject and its cybernetic infrastructure to a high-stakes *duel challenge* wherein hierarchical systems may be destabilized and transformed. We will not find this specificity in the formal definition of play that Huizinga (and Caillois) popularized:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it *a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious"*, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is *an activity connected*

with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga 1949, 13; emphases mine)

The contrast between this definition and the foregoing discussion is notably immense. In gamespace, play is not opposed to ordinary life and seriousness—*there is nothing but the 'ludic'*. As Galloway writes of Baudrillard's position on play: "The real is play. The 'virtual' is emphatically not the gamic for Baudrillard; it is this world that is the game. The magic circle is part of the here and now" (Galloway 2007, 378). Baudrillard himself has warned that the Marxian opposition of play to work supposes that the former is situated in an imagined "realm beyond political economy called play, non-work, or non-alienated labor, [...] defined as the reign of a finality without end," and thereby reproduces the very same bourgeois "problematic of necessity and freedom" that capitalist production relies on for its justification (Baudrillard 1975, 39–40). In this theory, to imagine a sphere beyond the current value-based politico-economic structure is *also* to presuppose the existence of such a structure to begin with. Such a denial of 'material interest' in

play and of its separability from political economy—which, as I have shown and demonstrate further in this section, also appears in the work of Huizinga and his intellectual descendants—is rather questionable. For instance, Thomas Malaby argues in a fundamental critique of game studies that games are “semibounded arenas that are relatively separable from everyday life, and what is at stake in them can range from very little to the entirety of one’s material, social, and cultural capital” (Malaby 2007, 96). To introduce or raise the stakes of a game is not an impure form of play as the Huizingans and even the Marxists would have it, because *stakes are at the very heart of play*.

As I also posit in the first chapter, the suggestion that (digital) play is not as cleanly separable from ‘everyday life’ is nothing new to game studies. Following Malaby’s critique and the philosophy of Bruno Latour (cf. Latour 1992), T.L. Taylor, one of the veterans of virtual ethnography, has argued that digital play is constituted by an assemblage of interrelated “actors (system, technologies, player, body, community, company, legal structures, etc.), concepts, practices, and relations that make up the play moment” (Taylor 2009, 332). In his “markedly post-Huizingan” and formalistic description of play (Sicart 2014, 104n6), Miguel Sicart claims that “play is contextual,” by which he means that it “happens in a tangled world of people, things, spaces, and

cultures” (Sicart 2014, 6). Casey O’Donnell draws from the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz on Balinese cockfighting and “thick description” (cf. Geertz 1973) to show that play is “deeply imbricated within/of/as culture,” rather than a Huizingan culture-creating force that precedes the “empirical moment of play” (O’Donnell 2014b, 407). Finally, Benjamin Litherland argues that a return to the cultural studies concept of “radical contextualism” would allow for a player-centric strand of videogame history that emphasizes the historical play situation as almost deterministically shaped by social interactions (cf. Litherland 2019). All of these authors recognize the important fact that play should be understood as fundamentally *material*—that is, rooted in material conditions and medium-specific materiality—and therefore should always be conceived of and analysed as a phenomenon in-context. However, another important recognition here is that there is really no question of whether play occurs within a context or not. Rather, we should maintain that context is always-already present but never self-evident, and that establishing the relevant context is therefore an inherently *political* effort (cf. Seaver 2015). Politically, it matters that many of these authors either neglect to mention political economy or position it as just another contextual element among many equally important others. It also matters that my

own theory of digital play was preceded by a lengthy but necessarily partial description of the material conditions in which digital play is created and embedded.

It is, at this point, at least theoretically impossible to neglect the context of digital play and especially impossible to neglect the *politico-economic* context of digital play. Why are such material conditions at all relevant for understanding the medium-specific materiality of digital play? This has to an extent been addressed by my reading of *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* and the expansive contextualization that follows it. The logics of cybernetic capitalism work their way into cybernetic media in both an ideological and a material sense, by simulating the level playing field and commodifying the very activity of digital play itself in order to make it profitable. Interestingly, while Sicart does not wonder about many of the elements addressed in this chapter, including the mode of production and consumption that the videogame industry perpetuates, he does offer useful theories on “why play thrives in the age of computing machinery” (Sicart 2014, 4) and how “play and computational thinking need to help each other imagine new ways of being in the world” (Sicart 2014, 98). He maintains that play is not just inseparable from its material context but temporarily *appropriates* that context and uses it for its own expressive purposes. Sicart characterizes play as a

“reontologizing activity” that “redefines the nature of the world and radically changes it. To play is to appropriate the world—to create a world where we can play, one where we engage in meaningful activity and where we can express ourselves” (Sicart 2018, 257). This closeness of play and computation is rooted in their shared capacity for reontologization, which Sicart finds in the computer’s nature as a calculating machine that transforms its environments into databases which it can use to perform systemic operations and which it can share through networks. As he argues: “We can view the rules that algorithms use to reontologize the world through the experiential lens of play, and we can design technologies that cue the relational strategy, that makes things want to feel like play” (Sicart 2018, 259). Videogames are then the most instinctively obvious example of how play and computation collide—they are algorithmically designed, playful reontologizations, and also technologies that actively construct the relationship between user and computer as a playful one.³

What is crucial for Sicart is that this playful relation is also a *negotiation* between the two processes of reontologization involved, where the pleasure lies in both *submission* and *resistance* on either side. In the same way that Don Quixote occupies “a negotiated world between his deranged fantasy and the real world, between his creative

engagement with the world [...] and the world that resisted his interpretation” (Sicart 2018, 260), the world-building that occurs in the realm of videogames is not entirely frictionless. Computation will use its databased abilities to create a context to be appropriated and creatively disrupted, and play’s expressive qualities will prompt new calculations, operations, and networks. The props that allow us to appropriate computational worlds for our own expressive purposes (i.e. videogames) are necessarily not free from this negotiated involvement, even though they are ostensibly meant to reduce or eliminate computation’s resistance to the reontologizing effects of play. To take a canonical example: one of the first programmes we might label as a videogame, *Spacewar!* (Russell, Graetz, and Witaenem 1962), was a student experiment on a PDP-1 computer originally meant for use in military-funded research at MIT; in other words, it was an early instance of a playful appropriation of computational processes—not to mention an early example of the intimate connections between the videogame medium and the military-entertainment complex. However, the world of *Spacewar!* was inevitably shaped and limited by the hardware it was created on and the specific military-academic culture in which it was conceived. The lines that appear on the oscilloscope were meant to depict missile trajectories, and the

creators themselves were immersed in “a culture dedicated to the everyday contemplation of nuclear megadeath” (Kline et al. 2003, 248) while they were designing the game. As a result, the initial purposes of the hardware being appropriated shine through within the actual play experience.

For Sicart, precisely because the worlds of videogames are the result of “humans and machines intertwined in the collective action of play,” there remains the possibility for “submissive resistance” on the part of both human and machine (Sicart 2018, 252, 262). At a glance, this theory of digital play as negotiated reontologization comes quite close to the Baudrillardian conception of seduction/play as a *duel* challenge: what arises is indeed an *agonistic* relation between the human player and the cybernetic medium. Sicart even recognizes that play, by default, is capable of transcending the initial conditions of the play situation:

One cannot understand the playing of games without the rules of the game, but both are in constant motion toward and against each other; *they are constantly redefined, negotiated, adapted, and denied by the other*. The beauty, value, and politics of play reside precisely in the ways in which players solve this loose coupling, that is, the ways in which players engage with the ambiguous spaces between the rules and the actions and give meaning to their experience as it evolves over time. *Playing is negotiating a*

*wiggle space between rules, systems, contexts,
preferences, appropriation, and submission.*
(Sicart 2014, 89–90; emphases mine)

I should note that this presents an explicitly idealistic notion of play, and Sicart rightly argues against a form of game/play design that limits this agonistic negotiating quality. At no point, however, does he elaborate on *why* game design is stifling to this aspect of play and *why* that kind of design is dominant; he states only briefly that he envisions a kind of play that rejects the “instrumentalized, mechanistic thinking on play championed by postmodern culture industries” (Sicart 2014, 5). The lack of a substantial discussion about material conditions beyond this fleeting invocation of the Frankfurt School makes Sicart’s agnism as romantic as Huizinga’s and Caillois’. Sicart implicitly presents human play and cybernetic computation as equals with similar stakes in the game—it occurs on an idealized plane, its very own *level playing field*—but they are far from equal when one of the parties involved in the duel is historically primed to destroy the other without any home casualties. He ultimately follows the same logic that gamespace proposes, but what is necessary is a far more radical reversal of that order. This begins not with a fantasy that still relies on the same bourgeois oppositions that Baudrillard criticized in Marxism—which Sicart

perpetuates when he writes, “We need play precisely because we need freedom and distance from our conventional understanding of the moral fabric of society” (Sicart 2014, 5) without addressing the political economy of that ‘moral fabric’. Instead, a more fundamental recognition is required: *play, too, has been folded neatly into that fabric, and there is therefore no way of thinking about play as an agonistic relation without taking into account that irreducible complicity.*

That said, I would still contend that Sicart’s account of play is one of the better starting points in contemporary game studies for building an anti-capitalist, critical-materialist theory of digital play—after significant supplementation. The transformative capacities of digital play should indeed be able to target the ‘rules of engagement’, but of course the point of most ‘ludic’ simulations is that the rules are fixed and extraordinarily *difficult* to change. The legal aspects of videogames as products are immediately relevant here, because a document like the End User License Agreement will often place significant restrictions on which rules can and cannot be broken before the player is subjected to disciplinary measures, either from the publisher or the State (cf. De Paoli and Kerr 2010). More broadly, if games are indeed as Marshall McLuhan has argued, “extensions of social man and of the body politic”

(McLuhan 2013 [1964], 255), it is unsurprising that the videogames produced under cybernetic capitalism would mostly be power fantasies that construct digital play and players as agents of capital. It is equally unsurprising that the videogame industry would strive to ensure that any attempt to enact a more transformative digital play, for instance through the modification of game rules or other aspects of the simulation, is recuperated smoothly into gamespace: “Modding does not only allow players to cross the line that differentiates the traditional order of work into producers and consumers [...] but modding is also a means of adding value to the products of the game industry” (Sihvonen 2011, 77). Even at their most transformative—or *especially* when they are being transformative—players are creating value.

Still, the transformative aspects remain clearly perceptible and have been noted by various scholars, often as forms of design-centric “countergaming” (cf. Galloway 2006) or “critical play” (cf. Flanagan 2009), and as a more player-centric “counterplay” (cf. Apperley 2010; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Meades 2015). Apperley argues for an approach to digital play as “situated gaming” by centring the “gaming body” in order to examine “how particular cultures of use emerge at the nexus of the digital game ecology and the everyday life of the players,” which in turn

“highlights the numerous ways that digital games are used to critique, re-imagine, and reinvent everyday life” (Apperley 2010, 36). This media-ecological angle is crucial in moving beyond the—equally crucial—observation that digital play is an *embodied* meaning-making process (cf. Keogh 2018), because it connects the global material conditions to the local medium-specific materiality of digital play by conceptualizing the body-at-play as “open and connected to the wider world, rather than locked in an inward-looking circuit of cybernetic feedback” (Apperley 2010, 38). Moreover, the interaction between the general and the specific is not at all smooth or frictionless; play continues to open up sites of resistance in moments of *counterplay*. In this framework, with digital play embedded solidly in both everyday practices and global circuits of cybernetic capital, Apperley theorizes counterplay as that which

challenges the validity of models of play that suggest digital games compel the players to play according to encoded algorithms, which they must follow exactly in order to succeed. Instead, it opens the possibility of an antagonistic [and here I would say ‘agonistic’ instead of ‘antagonistic’] relationship between the digital game and player. An antagonism that is considerably more high stakes than the player overcoming the simulated enemies, goals and challenges that the game provides, rather it is directed towards the ludic rules that govern the digital games

configurations, processes, rhythms, spaces, and structures. (Apperley 2010, 102–3)

For Apperley, there is a distinction between “playing the game” and “playing *with* the game” (Apperley 2010, 102; emphasis mine). Playing *with* is positioned as the activity with counterhegemonic force, exemplified by players who change the conditions of ‘ludic’ simulations through hacking, refuse to decode their intended messages and create new messages within them, and so forth. This separation is common in other theoretical accounts of counterplay as well: Alan Meades places it “in contrast to restrictive game-play” (Meades 2015, 23), and Espen Aarseth speaks of “transgressive play” as a superlatively “unique, against-all-odds play event” (Aarseth 2014 [2007], 188). A useful distinction to be sure, and one that resonates with Baudrillard’s tautological view of play, but if we are seeking to build a theory of play that relies on its transformative aspects and is willing to break its own boundaries, one has to wonder what kind of digital play people are engaging in when that activity is not explicitly or implicitly aimed at such transgression or transformation.

Especially salient in our current moment, then, is a thinking of play itself as *always already a form of counter-play*—an understanding of play as inherently disruptive; one which constantly insists on amplifying the ever-present

“creative margin” (Apperley 2010, 142) of videogame engagement and thus refuses to let that creativity be absorbed by the cybernetic control of gamespace. This idea of play-as-always-already-counterplay is, of course, an old idea. Even Huizinga notably reckoned “tension and uncertainty” among the common characteristics of play; in his words, “There is always the question: ‘will it come off?’ This condition is fulfilled even when we are playing patience, doing jig-saw puzzles, acrostics, crosswords, diabolo, etc.” (Huizinga 1949, 47). There is always *agon*, a certain element of challenge or competition, regardless of whether that challenge is levied at oneself, one’s surroundings, another being, a computer, or at the play situation in itself. But the stakes (as Malaby says, there is always something *at stake* in *agon*) are doubled, and this challenge is not unidirectional, as Sicart’s argument about reontologization shows. The world—in this case, the computer—challenges players in turn, and in challenging the computer they inevitably open themselves up to such a challenge. Digital play is therefore a rather *risky* endeavour for all parties involved. A player’s body or life might be changed beyond the confines of the digital play situation, for better or for worse, and the videogame might come out of the encounter broken or modified beyond recognition. In this multi-directional notion of digital play, it is insufficient to see the

‘synthesis’ of their dialectical relationship as *nothing but* a metaphorical cyborgization. It is not merely the convergence of an organic and a machinic body; it is the convergence of a great many structural forces that cannot help but work through such organic and machinic bodies in order to preserve the level playing field. Yet, it is precisely in this encounter that it might find their ultimate destruction, and the longer capital remains present in these spheres the greater the chance of its destruction becomes. Digital play then becomes a *seductive* force, fundamentally concerned with *the destabilization of hierarchical systems of opposition by challenging them and exploiting their weaknesses while also opening up the players themselves to a similar challenge*. A critical-materialist theory of digital play therefore emphasizes the effort of breaking the ‘ludic’ simulation, of finding the radical alterities or pleasures that exist in those spheres of meaning unthinkable to the capitalist reliance on acceleration, production and exchange value.

Counterplay and the Possible-Impossible

It has likely not gone unnoticed that my account of the material conditions and medium-specific materiality of digital play is an aporetic one, constantly seeking to break the boundaries of gamespace but coming up short almost every time. While it is easy to demonstrate that the seductive

force of digital play is omnipresent, it is much more difficult to name examples where reversibility truly destroys the cybernetic order. Videogame mods and protocological “exploits” (cf. Galloway and Thacker 2007) may highlight or criticize gaps and other shortcomings in the ‘ludic’ simulation, but the commodification of digital play often recuperates those critiques almost instantaneously. Paweł Frelik has suggested that there is a “special symbiotic relationship between modding and triple-A games,” and that smaller or independent titles hardly ever see the same level of critical engagement that big-budget videogames enjoy (Frelik 2016, 169), which indicates that in this respect, too, capital has successfully absorbed the creative and transformative potential of digital play (cf. Coleman and Dyer-Witheford 2007). Here, again, we see that digital play is increasingly made complicit in a collapse of production and consumption, a form of recuperated ‘playbour’ rather than a critical practice. The speedrunning community, which normally focuses on completing any given videogame as fast as possible, takes the use of exploits to its extreme when so-called “tool-assisted speedruns” transform into instances of “total control” (cf. Scully-Blaker 2014; Mitchell 2018). The ‘ludic’ simulation is first traversed in the most efficient way and is then taken over completely, often with its original purpose overwritten to make the software respond to arbitrary

code inputs and even instantiate entirely different games. This clearly seductive form of digital play does require an immense level of mastery, making it not only quite inaccessible to everyday players but also eternally complicit in the logics of acceleration and control of which it implies a critique. In search of “truly subversive, radical, or civically engaged play,” Hoofd looks to even more radical—and often illegal—practices like “malicious hacking” to subvert cybernetic control (Hoofd 2019, 151–52), a notion which is attractive and probably effective, but even more inaccessible to the average player than speedrunning.

Digital art projects like DeLappe’s *Killbox* or his earlier and more notorious *Dead-in-Iraq* (DeLappe 2006; 2008) have rightly been cited as prime examples of how video-games themselves can be vectors for societal critique and protest (e.g. Altomonte 2019; Chan 2010), and yet these projects also do not actively *reverse* any established order, nor do they constitute a reciprocal challenge on the part of their audience. The players of *Killbox* have no alternative options but to execute its horrors, for instance, and again the only ‘choice’ is *to not play*. However, this choice is at the heart of projects like *//////////fur////* art entertainment interfaces’ *PainStation* (Morawe and Reiff 2001): the challenge is precisely to cause one’s opponent enough physical distress to force them to quit before either party incurs actual burn

wounds to their hands, and according to Crogan, “this physical extension and *intensification of the stakes of the game* enables a theatricalization of the gaming situation” (Crogan 2011, 138; emphasis mine). That is, it stages a “theatrical rematerialization of a more sublimated form of what game theory calls a zero-sum contest” (Crogan 2011, 140), and performatively and reflexively calls attention to the violence that underlies the normally pleasurable (ant)agonism and cybernetic feedback loops of videogame hardware. Capital nevertheless managed to exercise some control over this last example: following a copyright lawsuit by Sony, its name was changed to *The Artwork Formerly Known as PainStation*.

My discussion of *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* suggests that there is seduction at work in that videogame, specifically in the challenge it poses to gamespace to make chance conform to the logic of the level playing field. The effect this has on players is likely quite varied, but for me the game is primarily a frustrating experience. Unlike Sicart’s idealized videogame, it does not make me ‘want to feel like play’ because the standards to which it holds both the player and the RNG are completely disproportional when compared to the typical power fantasy. The way in which it gives the lie to the level playing field is a peculiarly *dis-simulating* experience—not in the sense of

concealment, but in the sense that it *undoes* a simulation; it unfolds the interface envelope and engages in an open duel with the ‘ludic’, which is both a critical and deeply uncomfortable situation for a player to find themselves in. One might argue that it follows a “broken toy tactic,” described by Anne-Marie Schleiner as a form of “sabotage that breaks the spell of the game’s movement and procedurality, thereby illuminating its operability in a critical light” (Schleiner 2019, 134). *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* even goes a step further: instead of just sabotaging its own simulation, it sabotages gamespace as a whole. However, this seductive quality does not seem to have reached everyone, as demonstrated by the completely ‘ludic’ walkthroughs posted to the Steam forums where players offer neat lists of which foods are safe to eat, which items to sell, and which strategies to follow to increase the Janitor’s luck index.⁴ Then again, this is the risk of complicity that the seducer will always run when tangled in its duel challenge. Some would prefer to stay within capital’s unilateral challenge and remain fascinated with finding the most efficient routes through a ‘ludic’ simulation, rather than accept a seductive invitation to change the game.

Yet, a critical-materialist theory of digital play that is strongly rooted in game studies’ material turn, critical theory, and Baudrillardian seduction should maintain a

careful optimism even in the face of what Derrida has called “the possible-impossible” (Derrida 2007 [2003], 453). We cannot expect digital play to produce alternatives to capitalism, because it is itself a product of that very system—and that system will not allow those alternatives to flourish. We cannot ‘use’ digital play strategically to somehow invent anti- or non-gamespace because, “if there is invention, it’s possible only on the condition of being impossible” (Derrida 2007, 451). Baudrillard would not have approved of such a predetermined and functionalist approach to play either; not only is the fantasy of a total escape from the ‘ludic’ a false dream, but even “even as transgression, spontaneity, or aesthetic disinterestedness, play remains only a sublimated form of the old, directive pedagogy that gives it a meaning, assigns it an end, and thereby purges it of its power of seduction” (Baudrillard 1990, 158). Play does not precede culture (Huizinga) and/or political economy (Marx), nor does it unidirectionally challenge either of them. This is why I recommend speaking of digital play as a ‘force’, a ‘relation’, or a ‘vector’ rather than as an activity or a state of mind: its strength is in creating the kind of agonistic undecidability that gamespace finds absolutely intolerable. The open-endedness is built-in, and its containment is the business of the ‘ludic’ more than anything else. The contribution of this theory, then, is to

clarify that digital play is never ‘innocently’ contained by cybernetic capital and that its liberatory qualities cannot help but be complicit in perpetuating the very same material conditions that they might aim to transverse and transform.

Gamers™, or: Designed Technicities and Preferred Customers

“We augment our bodies to be closer to each other, not to dominate the Earth. Your obsession with physical upgrades as a power fantasy... is concerning.”

When *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER* (Aveiro-Ojeda 2018) begins, it is immediately clear that something about the narration is off. Who is telling this story? Is it you, who wandered out of the city that rejected you to find a different way of life? Or is it the AI chip on your temple that, despite having been declared obsolete, still informs you about your surroundings in reductive binaries (men/women, Self/Other) and quantified variables like “suspicion” and “hostility”? The hypertext’s interface features limited sketches of your surroundings, the sounds of the distant city and of your own cyborg body are tense and uncomfortable to hear. When you meet the indigenous folks who are living as unnetworked cyborgs in a desert village, who is

asking the questions—and with what purpose? In a desperate search for clarity, help, and information, you find that the villagers are just as unreliable as you are, although their opacity is of a different nature than your own. You ask what their relationship to AI is, what they mean when they say that they want to “become the AI, itself,” why they call certain bodies “vessels,” whether they can help you get rid of that chip in your skull. But every question you pose about their understanding of cyborg-being is answered indirectly and met with great caution. They do not know who you are. Why *do* you want to know how they see the relationship between body and mind? Why would you even expect them to tell you anything about their culture, just because you want them to? Why should they trust someone from the city that colonized their lands and forced its dehumanizing cybernetic technologies upon them—some of which they are carrying with them at this very moment? “How about I flip the question back to YOU?” Your heart speeds up. You weren’t supposed to be the one being interrogated.” The challenge was not meant to be reciprocal; your position was not to be questioned. There are multiple ways that the encounter can finally play out, but most of the endings involve either more despair and frustration or simply death. And of course, neither the protagonist nor the player comes close to reconciling the two radically different views

on technology that meet ever so briefly in that desert settlement.

In this encounter, Western cyberpunk meets Indigenous Futurism, and the colonialist faults of the former are dismantled by the latter. For its creator, Santo Aveiro-Ojeda, this decolonizing move foregrounds the ways in which the Indigenous people of the continents now known as the Americas were always already using technology against settler domination, even if those technologies were not evidently ‘cyber’. As they state in an interview, this is “the main idea of cyberpunk—to use technology to overthrow our oppressors” (Carter 2019, n.p.). According to Cameron Kunzelman, “There’s no shortcut terms like ‘replicant,’ and at every turn the villagers explain things on their own terms. [...] They refuse to be forced into a comfortable or categorizable colonial framework” (Kunzelman 2018, n.p.). Here, I would argue, we see another instance of seductive digital play that meets the challenge of cybernetic capitalism head-on by reversing its colonizing logics of information and transparency. Especially when the player makes every effort to *hide* these logics by choosing the most apologetic and careful dialogue options, this effect is strongest: the protagonist leaves empty-handed and their AI fatally short-circuits because it simply cannot conceive the possibility of not receiving any information to subsume

under its preconceived categories. The player is faced with and implicated in “the same duel [complicity] as a stroke of wit, where everything is exchanged allusively, without being spelled out, the equivalent of the allusive, ceremonial exchange, of a secret” (Baudrillard 1990, 112). The secrets of the villagers do not wish to be known, and so they resist those systems that seek to render them intelligible. This opaque quality of the narrative elicits significant discomfort for its white players, who describe their experience as one of “unjustified failure,” and for whom even the effort to reach the ‘good’ ending—in which the protagonist cuts out their AI with a knife—is confrontational and laden with self-reflexivity: “By the end I was ignoring all conversation by following numbered routes along a specific track, stripping everyone of humanity and character in the pursuit of a categorical victory. It felt hollow and poisoned” (Carter 2019, n.p.). *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER* frustrates the logics of capital even as it asks the player to occupy them, both with its narrative and as a media product—it is only available on the independent distribution platform Itch.io on a pay-what-you-want basis. But evidently, like *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor*, it is also deeply frustrating to the sensibilities of those who enact and engage with digital play, and who are the subject of this chapter: *gamers*.

The Gamer™ Was Made for the Power Fantasy

First, I return to the power fantasy—it is, after all, the dominant form in the videogame landscape today, the one unquestionably favoured by cybernetic capital and gamers alike. In the previous chapter I touched briefly on the colonial and imperial relations that capitalism has historically been built upon, and noted that these relations continue today unabated if in an altered and more diffuse manner.¹ For the power fantasy, as for capital, this colonialism is central to the way that it constructs itself and the space wherein that Self exists. Colonialism is, in a sense, ‘hard-coded’ into one of the most distinct formal qualities of videogames, namely their *spatiality*. In one of the earliest texts on spatiality in videogames, Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins draw a comparison between the power fantasies produced by Nintendo and New World travel writings from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which are both said to reproduce “heroic metaphors of discovery” (Fuller and Jenkins 1995, 59). Both are a type of “locodescriptive project” that constitutes “at once both an alternate, more diffuse kind of justification for the discovery and motives and informational resources for a repeat performance” (Fuller and Jenkins 1995, 63). In videogame power fantasies, the player effectively swoops into hostile territory with the stated intention of acquiring *mastery* over it in every

aspect. If the frontier is not presented as uninhabited, which many games are wont to do regardless of medium (cf. Loring-Albright 2015), then it is inhabited by almost exclusively hostile creatures who need to be ‘cleared’ by the player in order to access the newly-discovered land’s resources. Just as it is the case in any system of production that “Science and Technology [...] fulfill the essence of Nature by indefinitely reproducing it as separated” (Baudrillard 1975, 55), so too does the power fantasy reproduce nature as an Other to be conquered at the heroic cyborg hands of the player. In this process, characterized by Fuller and Jenkins as a “confident, masculine ‘thrust outwards’” (Fuller and Jenkins 1995, 70), the landscape, its inhabitants, and their ahistorical histories become increasingly encyclopaedic, legible, and smooth. As was noted earlier regarding the logics of information and cybernetic control, nowadays this colonizing movement is visible across genres, from big-budget roleplaying games (e.g. S. Murray 2018) to grand strategy (e.g. Mukherjee 2015), from city builders (e.g. Magnet 2006) to mobile games (e.g. Euteneuer 2018). In the same way that gamespace colonizes actual reality, the power fantasy “opens new spaces for exploration, colonization, and exploitation” (Fuller and Jenkins 1995, 58) in the digital realm. The fog-of-war that initially covers a videogame’s world map is gradually cleared away,

new landmarks become available as checkpoints or fast-travel services, and archival databases are filled with increasingly detailed background information. What is played out is the ultimate dream of cybernetic capital: a fully knowable, predictable, *conquerable* world. This, too, is the dream of the gamer.

This colonial, neoliberal, patriarchal power fantasy was made for the gamer, but I would also consider that *the gamer was made for the power fantasy*. To illustrate this basic point, we should become acquainted with this rather troublesome figure of the ‘gamer’. In a sense, this term is almost universally applicable under cybernetic capitalism: “You are a gamer whether you like it or not, now that we all live in a gamespace that is everywhere and nowhere” (Wark 2007, §1). However, while the gamer is most certainly implicated as an agent of cybernetic capital, some further specificity is required. Especially in game studies’ infancy, much was made of videogames as a specifically masculine-coded cultural space in which (often implicitly white and cisgender) women, or ‘girl gamers’, would tend to get the short end of the stick. For example, shortly before the ‘official’ start of game studies, Justine Cassell and Jenkins published an edited volume on this topic that grappled with the position of women in videogame culture in various ways (cf. Cassell and Jenkins 1998). Moreover,

Taylor in her early work already responded to the aforementioned frame by investigating the “multiple pleasures” that women might take from videogame play, seeing them not as anomalies but as legitimate players in their own right (cf. Taylor 2003). Even *Digital Play*, a book that was—and in some ways still is—far removed from the dominant discussions in game studies at the time, contributed to this feminist strand in the field with its often-cited concept of “militarized masculinity” (cf. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter 2003, 253–56). However, as Phillips has noted, there is also a significant “earlier history of work on video games that is full of women authors and feminist approaches,” which was suppressed mainly by way of the inaugural issue of *Game Studies* and the field’s founding myth known as the ludology versus narratology debate (Phillips 2020b, 21). Adrienne Shaw traces this history as far back as 1984, to the media effects work of Patricia Greenfield (cf. Shaw 2017). In more recent years, feminist game scholars have continued to write prolifically about the people who identify as gamers (e.g. Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017; Shaw 2012), about who are hailed as such by the videogame industry (e.g. Cote 2018; Kirkpatrick 2015; Kocurek 2015), and about those people who are in themselves offensive to the sensibilities of gamers (e.g. Condis 2015; Gray 2014; Kagen 2017;

Mortensen 2018). From these and many other accounts, one can safely conclude that the gamer is still implicated in “the perpetuation of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy” (Phillips 2020a, 63), both within and beyond the digital sphere.

Consider, then, the ‘ideal-type’ gamer as this vast body of work usually imagines him—and it is most definitely a *him*. The gamer is young, white, Western, able-bodied (this is often forgotten), heterosexual, cisgender. He most likely comes from a middle- or upper-class household, with plenty of access to up-to-date hardware that runs the most popular videogame software at any given time. The gamer plays a lot of videogames; if he is a masculine-coded “hardcore” gamer, he is not a feminine-coded “casual” gamer (cf. Newman and Vanderhoef 2014). Without a second thought, his large hands expertly curve around a gamepad that was specifically designed for them, and which is consequently “largely unusable by women around the world and by many men, especially men outside the West” (Kocurek 2018, 69). When he places his left hand on a QWERTY-keyboard he touches the Shift (little finger), A (ring finger), W (middle finger), D (index finger), and Spacebar (thumb) keys automatically. The gamer prefers violent and/or antagonistic power fantasies that contain many different cybernetic systems for him to acquire dominance and configurative

mastery over. Narrative and emotional affect are perpetually secondary to ‘gameplay’ for him. Consciously or not, and somewhat paradoxically given the clear post-anthropocentric implications of cybernetics and envelope power (cf. Hayles 1999), he imagines himself as a “liberal rational subject” that is able to leave his socially unmarked body behind whenever he dives into cyberspace (Keogh 2018, 173). The gamer is, like the colonizers in *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER*, primarily fascinated with cybernetic technology as a means of conquest and self-improvement rather than cohabitation. He dislikes it when not-gamers, who are frequently women, people of colour, or queer/trans* folks, disrupt his envelopment and complain that *his* preferred videogames are sexist or racist or *political* in any way. The gamer is therefore willing to go to great lengths to protect *his* medium from legal censorship, parental interference, and feminist critique—all of which, according to Phillips, appear to him as the same phenomenon, as “the visceral memories of government attempts to regulate video games mingle with the convenient target of a woman with an opinion on the internet” (Phillips 2020a, 36). To the gamer, as tends to be the case with members of privileged groups, even a minor inconvenience or criticism feels like oppression.

Of course, if we consider the term ‘gamer’ to simply be the word for any people who play videogames, the description above is evidently false and dangerously stereotypical: it has long been established that the demographics of videogame players are quite diverse, though they are spread unequally across genres and platforms (cf. Kerr 2006, 103–28). But it is unsurprisingly still the white masculine demographic who tends to accept the label of ‘gamer’ as part of their identity. I, too, am a gamer. Or at least, I actively labelled myself as such until I read up on #GamerGate and other harassment campaigns supposedly conducted in the name of “free speech” (cf. Salter and Blodgett 2012) or “ethics in games journalism” (cf. Braithwaite 2016), and found that they were really about policing the boundaries of who gets to be a gamer and who does not—or perhaps more to the point: to whom the videogame medium *belongs*, and to whom it does not. It does not, apparently, belong to the women and feminists who called attention to rape culture in the wildly popular *Penny Arcade* comics and who leveraged even the most basic criticisms against the host of misogynistic tropes prevalent in videogame power fantasies. It became evident to me quite quickly that this sense of ownership is rooted in what Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett would later term “toxic geek masculinity” (cf. Salter and Blodgett 2017),

which allows many gamers to “exhibit the sexist and racist behaviors enabled by white masculine privilege while simultaneously claiming injury as members of an alternative class of masculinity” (Phillips 2020a, 39). According to Suzanne Scott, this “spreadable misogyny” (and racism, queer-antagonism, dis/ableism, etc.) that pervades internet-based fan cultures agitates not simply against spoilsports but against any attempt by non-hegemonic bodies to participate (cf. Scott 2019, 81–90). Gamer culture had grown into, or in fact *had always been*, an essentially toxic space that is fundamentally exclusionary to people who do not look like me, and so I distanced myself from it by vehemently rejecting the label. My videogame consumption habits, in the meantime, remain largely unchanged: I, too, prefer the power fantasy.

Feminist critiques of this toxicity are both badly needed and vastly underappreciated, with game studies being no exception in any sense—our field was implicated quite directly during some of the initial waves of #GamerGate harassment, for instance (cf. Chess and Shaw 2015; 2016). By now, this kind of scholarship has fortunately become fairly commonplace, following calls by David J. Leonard for a “race- and gender-based game studies” (cf. Leonard 2006), by Shaw to include LGBTQIA+ perspectives into the field by “putting the gay in games” (cf. Shaw 2009)

which has resulted in the creation of a “queer game studies” (cf. Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Shaw 2015), and by Mia Consalvo for feminist game scholars to confront head-on the “toxic gamer culture” described above (cf. Consalvo 2012). The result of these and other calls (e.g. Russworm 2018) is a laudable game-scholarly resistance against what bell hooks so aptly names “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 2000, xiv), and I would certainly argue that it is within this intersectional feminist and queer game scholarship that we find the closest thing to an anti-capitalist game studies today.² Many contributions to the scholarly discourse about exclusionary gamer culture, for example, recognize that the videogame industry has “imagined an audience filled with young, White, heterosexual males” (Braithwaite 2016, 1), “ignored minority gamers in character, video game content, and advertising” (Gray 2014, xxiv), and that personal identification with the ‘gamer’ label appears to depend heavily on “not just the construction of the gamer audience, but also the construction of games as a particular type of media” (Shaw 2012, 39). It is especially in this last statement that an opportunity for a more radical interpretation is opened up. The gamer is in this critique both an imaginary figure that the military-entertainment complex has consistently aimed its marketing at, and a kind of *pedagogy*, a “technicity” which

“encompasses not just a set of tastes or attitudes but also very specific kinds of skill [...] in relation to technology” (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 113–14). I henceforth address him as the *Gamer*TM, whereby the trademark symbol ironically highlights his ontology as an industry-created construct, rather than being an ‘authentic’ identity that is socially constructed and partially inscribed into bodies in the same way that race or gender is. The *Gamer*TM intersects and interferes with those kinds of identities in various ways, but one should be suspicious of any effort to assign the label a similar status. Instead, he is an industry-approved set of methods of relating to and making sense of videogames that align with the interests of cybernetic capital, which are made manifest as a spectre that haunts every facet of videogame culture. Indeed, the power fantasy was made for the gamer, but *the Gamer*TM *was made for the power fantasy*.

The *Gamer*TM as Designed Technicity

Several pre-existing historical trends made the historical and material cultivation of the *Gamer*TM thinkable. Most significant for its gendered silhouette are the exclusion of British and American women from computer work after they had helped create the first computers during World War II (cf. Abbate 2012), and the masculinist hacker

mythos that arose in the field of computing technology in the decades after the war (cf. Turkle 2005 [1984]). While the earliest protagonists of any standard videogame history are overwhelmingly men, the medium itself was never exclusively masculine. For instance, Laine Nooney has traced the history of Sierra On-Line, an American videogame company founded in 1980 by game designer Roberta Williams and her husband Ken, to show how women have structurally been involved in the building of Western videogame history from its very beginning (cf. Nooney 2013; 2020).³ Regardless, the videogame medium was discursively and materially constructed as a masculine space in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and thus coexisted with, for instance, the rise to hegemony of neoliberalism and cybernetic capital. Kocurek writes of the early phases of this process that “the video game arcade became a point of articulation for anxieties over economic, cultural, and technological changes,” which industry-owned trade journals, news media, and Hollywood worked to alleviate by presenting the Gamer™ as “an emergent ideal of masculinity—one associated with youthfulness, technological competency, intellectual abilities, creativity, boyishness, and a particular type of militarism” that she names “the technomascu-
line archetype to the meritocratic narratives surrounding

some of the most prominent vectoralists of contemporary cybernetic capitalism, including “powerful tech-business icons like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg” (Kocurek 2015, xxi), which indicates that our understanding of the Gamer™ should not only frame him as inseparable from capital but should position him at the very heart of the proliferation of cybernetics through the political economy and wider cultures of Euro-American countries.

In a study of British videogame magazines, Graeme Kirkpatrick locates the definitive shift of the Gamer™ to an exclusively masculine figure halfway into the 1980s, a period during which the presence of women in videogame culture first became contested and was then gradually erased by the insertion into the culture of a hypermasculine framework. This was done through sexist advertisements that either represented women in sexualized ways or simply not at all, a steep reduction in the number of female authors, and an intense focus on digital play as somehow an inherently masculine activity. As a consequence, Kirkpatrick argues, “even the way that gameplay is appraised has become saturated with the notion that winning games is a sign of masculine virtue” (Kirkpatrick 2015, 118). Videogames are, in this frame, to be evaluated as technological objects first and foremost, which means that the nebulous notion of ‘gameplay’ becomes of utmost

importance—with ‘graphics’ acquiring a solid second place—whereas feminine-coded properties like ‘narrative’ and ‘character development’ have been swept aside completely. Kirkpatrick notes a symbiotic relationship between videogame companies and popular magazines, and comments at length on the economic incentives behind this masculinist colonization of gamer culture:

[...] the decisive articulation of gaming discourse that made gamers and games masculine was, initially at least, resisted by elements of the hobbyist computer culture. Far from inheriting the exclusionary values and practices of a prior technical culture, *gaming produced gender bias partly in its struggle to detach itself from that setting.*

[...] the voice of the magazines was *a shaping force for the industry as well as a reflection of it.* As gaming became a bigger business with fewer firms and more money at stake with each game produced, companies were guided in their investment decisions by the preferences and values expressed in gaming discourse.
(Kirkpatrick 2015, 103–4, 111; emphases mine)

I would add that these were not simply interactions between users and producers, but between different companies: those in the videogame industry, the computing industry, and the publishers linked to those industries. Kirkpatrick brushes over this point rather quickly, but it is

not at all a stretch to posit that each of these corporations benefited from this gradual establishment of what he, in a Bourdieuan fashion, calls the “gamer *habitus*” (Kirkpatrick 2015, 19). In fact, Amanda Cote has shown that this construction of the Gamer™ as exclusively masculine was later harshly enforced and reinforced by Nintendo’s marketing apparatus when the “girls’ games movement” arose in the early 1990s (Cote 2018, 480), and still in the twenty-first century these kinds of campaigns continue to crop up from time to time. Similar critiques have been formulated about how the imagined whiteness of the Gamer™ erases the fact that also “Black and Latino youth assisted in propelling the video gaming industry into a million-dollar industry by spending time and money in arcades” (Richard and Gray 2018, 114), and that people of colour make up a significant portion of the industry’s *actual* audience (cf. Gray 2014). While corporate and neoliberal media representation is surely no reliable measurement for emancipation or liberation, the fact that videogame companies themselves continue to push back against diversifying their marketing *does* indicate once more that the Gamer™ serves the interests of cybernetic capital as well as those of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy. Of course, we know from Haraway that these systems are deeply intertwined and interdependent (cf. Haraway 1991a). They must, therefore,

be theorized simultaneously and struggled against in the same fashion—all at once, all or nothing.

The Gamer™ is an archetype and a stereotype, a *habitus* and a pedagogy, a consumer identity and a theory-fiction. If the Gamer™ is indeed an identity—or rather, a construct to *identify with*—then he is specifically a “designed identity,” which Shira Chess explains as

a hybrid outcome of industry conventions, textual constructs, and audience placements in the design and structure of video games. In this way, *designed identity is always an ideological construction*—it is not something that is planned or motivated in clear-cut ways. It is a result of larger social structures and expectations. These expectations, in turn, seep into game texts. [...] Designed identity functions ideologically—*it is about idealizing an assumed audience and reformatting that audience in an understandable and digestible way*. (Chess 2017, 31–32; emphases mine)

Chess is careful in her theorizing here, but there are some motivations and plans to be ascribed with relative certainty to the construction and continued existence of the Gamer™, many of which can be traced back to cybernetic capital’s acceleration imperatives and the required control measures that come with them. After all, an ‘understandable and digestible’ audience is a manageable one, and such management is quite necessary when that audience consists largely

of prosumers who are intimately involved with the production of value. Chess emphasizes the design of videogames themselves as the site where this ghostly identity is cultivated. For instance, she later draws on the Marxist concept of “productive consumption” to show that free-to-play shopping games design an essentialized feminine (and white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender) “Player Two,” who is currently the industry’s only viable alternative to the Gamer™. According to her, these games construct “a perceived feminine desire, which cannot be disentangled from shopping, purchasing, and consumptive practices. At the same time, those very consumptive practices are *allowing* her into the space” (Chess 2017, 130; original emphasis). Perhaps it is at this point redundant to state that participation in videogames and gaming culture is conditional not only on one’s social position, but also on one’s ability, capacity, and willingness to embrace prosumerism.

That the Gamer™ was *designed* is beyond question: he has been carefully and purposefully catered to by the military-entertainment complex, residing permanently in design standards and in marketing campaigns. However, to view him as a figure around which an *identity* is formed remains problematic. It is undeniable that some have indeed crafted a Gamer™ identity for themselves, or at least have superficially co-opted the discourse of identity

politics to maintain the illusion of having done so; many of the virtual foot soldiers of #GamerGate come to mind, as do the trolls who accused Emma Vossen of “racism against gamers” when she wrote about “the phenomenon of calling all diverse content in games ‘political’” (Vossen 2020, 38–39). It is similarly undeniable that their primary points of reference for that identity are either industry-approved images or other Gamers™ who in turn draw from that imagery. Moreover, the term ‘identity’ appears to forego the pedagogical and techno-political aspects of the Gamer™ that are otherwise so strongly foregrounded by Chess’ adjective ‘designed’ and by Kirkpatrick’s and Kocurek’s historical accounts of videogames as a cultural space. The Gamer™ does not engage with interactive digital media the way he does out of pure instinct or any inherent gendered or racialized qualities of the technology in question—he was *taught* how to consume. To further explicate this techno-pedagogical quality, I propose to view the Gamer™ as a *designed technicity*. Technicity here is understood not solely as a different term for Kirkpatrick’s Bourdieuan notion of the gamer *habitus*, nor as an idealized technological identity that emphasizes either a masculine-coded “hacker” or a multitudinous Harawayian “cyborg” approach to the medium (cf. Dovey and Kennedy 2006; Keogh 2016; 2018). While this approach is generally valuable and necessary

even for the present argument, I have shown elsewhere that it often falls into the trap of focusing too sharply on the symptomatic problems of videogame consumption and culture without addressing their underlying causes (cf. Jansen 2020). The tension between the protagonist and the villagers in *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER* is quite illustrative of this: both parties are undoubtedly cyborgs, but their understandings of what such an intimate relationship with digital technologies should entail are radically different. While the protagonist realizes this, their effort to bridge that gap is *structurally* undermined by their own learned attitudes and by the AI system in their skull that bluntly refuses to view the world as anything other but a dataset of binaries and quantifiable elements.

My intention is to return this attention to structure to the concept of technicity, and thereby to the Gamer™. For me, technicity should thus invoke the way that Ash uses it to argue that videogame interfaces directly shape “how the ‘now’, as a phenomenological experience, emerges from a relationship between the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future” (Ash 2015, 60). At the level of the videogame interface, envelope power—which approximates what Baudrillard calls the ‘ludic’—fascinates the Gamer™ with complex technical systems, and encourages him to train himself to perform techniques like “combo moves” in

fighting games, which rely on both an intricate mastery of the homogenized way that videogames construct temporality *and* on an embodied mastery of their controls (Ash 2015, 71). Through a discussion rooted in theories of “originary technicity” (cf. Bradley 2011), Ash demonstrates that this focusing of attention to ever-smaller units of time and a heavily mediated form of presence is harnessed by the interface envelope to “pull users more closely into the circuit of the attention economy” (Ash 2015, 75). The reasoning behind this is simple: the more one feels encouraged to *pay* attention to a video-game, the more likely it is that one will want to consume related products and thus generate value for the game’s publisher. Moreover, as the identitarian understanding of technicity indicates, envelope power extends beyond the interface itself. Following Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux’s discussion of videogame culture as a “metagame” (cf. Boluk and LeMieux 2017), Phillips uses Ash’s notion of the envelope as an analogy for Gamer™ culture at large when she speaks of the way that feminist critics constitute a “rupture in the envelope” for Gamers™ (Phillips 2020a, 15). If we accept, at this point, that the video-game industry and cybernetic capital play a significant role in conceiving the boundaries and internal logics of that envelope by designing its technicity, we might also infer that the gatekeeping practices of #GamerGate

and other forms of spreadable misogyny are *part of that technicity*. Indeed, the often-heard criticism that the video-game industry's response to such harassment campaigns has been worse than lacklustre is, in this light, only partially correct. Their response was lacklustre from a feminist perspective, indeed, but from a capitalist perspective *doing nothing is the correct response* because Gamers™ have already known how to behave and consume videogames 'properly' for decades. The exclusion of marginalized genders and other social minorities is neither a surprise nor the disgusting pastime of a 'vocal minority'—those who are in the supposed majority but stay silent are equally complicit. *This is all part of the design.*

Gamer™ Theory

Perhaps rightly, any intersectional feminist will object that this is nothing new. At best, I have synthesized various historical, discursive, and materialist insights across several levels of abstraction to create a theory-fiction that we are already all too familiar with. But using the concept of designed technicity to capture this slippery spectral figure known as the Gamer™ gives us more than a neat theoretical strawman to attack or deconstruct; although, as I said before, those forms of criticism are useful and necessary. Our familiarity with the Gamer™ should not stop us from

continuing to interrogate him *and ourselves*. My theorization is as extensive as it is to simultaneously demonstrate that the Gamer™ is the result of conscious efforts to construct the videogame industry's preferred customers in terms of identity markers and particular sensibilities, and to invite a certain self-reflexivity in our engagement with that model. Take, for example, my own ostensibly feminist disavowal of the 'gamer' label: does this somehow place me outside the scope of the Gamer™? What exactly does this disavowal excuse me from? I am still a white man (et cetera) who was raised in a society that considers people like me their ideal subjects; I still retain the same kinds of "embodied literacy" (cf. Keogh 2018) that a Gamer™ would have; I still purchase and consume many videogames that fit within the paradigm of the power fantasy. In the same way that liberal white progressives might disavow white supremacy without investigating and deconstructing their own whiteness, am I not closing off any potential inquiry into my *own* complicity in perpetuating Gamer™ culture by placing myself on the 'outside' of that culture? I object strongly to being called a gamer/Gamer™, but if I have established that this word is not truly a marker of identity but of *technicity*, is it not still an accurate term to partially describe my behaviour and consumption pattern? In this manner, the seductive and inseparable qualities of my

theory of digital play turn back onto me: does the Gamer™ even *have* an ‘outside’ for me to place myself in?

This last question risks a totalizing view once again. However, I would not deny that there are those who find distinctly different ways of producing and consuming digital play—the designers of videogames like *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* and *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER* among them. I cannot help but be reminded of Derrida’s often-maligned assertion that “there is no outside-text” (Derrida 1998 [1967], 158), by which he meant that, since meaning is always subject to *différance*—that is, it relies on a simultaneous difference from other meanings and a constant deferral of complete meaning to some undecidable future text—it is impossible both to ever ‘fix’ the context of a particular concept or text and to deny that any such instance of meaning is fully separable from its supposed opposites. (This, not coincidentally, is one of the central premises of seduction, too.) In other words, “there is nothing outside context” (Derrida 1988a, 136). Regardless of the evident ‘value’ of these anti-Gamer™ forms of digital play, they continue to derive their meaning from an opposition to the Gamer™ paradigm and thereby confirm its strength and ubiquity. Given this, the worst mistake one could make is to neglect the fact that such an opposition is always reliant on at least the temporary existence of that which one is

opposed to and to forget that such oppositions are always messy, meaning that the Gamer™ bleeds into the anti-Gamer™ whether the latter likes it or not. If the reader will permit me one terrible paraphrase: *there is no outside-Gamer™*. Wark is thus correct when she writes that we are all gamers in a near-ubiquitous gamespace, and is even more correct that our reaction to this should be a deeper commitment to changing the rules: “The gamer theorist is not out to break the game. To the extent that the gamer theorist wants to hack or ‘mod’ the game, it is to play even more intimately within it” (Wark 2007, §22). This does not entail that we should simply give in to the accelerationism of cybernetic capital, which will destroy the planet before it destroys capitalism.⁴ Rather, it means that we should incessantly investigate the limits of that system in our play and simultaneously endeavour to remake those limits. The question truly worth asking is this one: “Could the gamer come into possession of the means to make the rule as well as the move?” (Wark 2007, §200). While I cannot provide a fully coherent answer to all the questions I have posed above, one response I can offer is that if my disavowal of the ‘gamer’ label *did* entail an attempt to wash my hands of the Gamer™, said attempt has failed miserably. What is apparently, and perhaps counter-intuitively, a much more realistic move to make is to *embrace* the Gamer™ in order to see

where the paradigm still fits and where it does not, and to then investigate why certain parts of the figure fit and why others do not. I reject the virulent anti-feminism and bigotry of the Gamer™ out of hand, and this point is non-negotiable; but it is precisely because I still fit within the silhouette of the Gamer™ in numerous other ways that I have a responsibility to engage with him, to understand under what conditions that behaviour is fuelled and sustained—and under what conditions that pattern might be broken.

And what about game studies, the field that welcomes me and people like me with open arms while systematically excluding others? As I stated in the Preface, game studies' ideal subject looks suspiciously like myself—although Mahli-Ann Butt and her colleagues have found that graduate students structurally face significant class-based obstacles for their participation in game research associations like DiGRA (cf. Butt et al. 2018). It should also be noted that many authors whom I position within game studies' material turn are white or white-passing and frequently men, although such a statement is qualified somewhat by the relative prominence of queer and non-white authors who have taken up questions of materiality and material conditions in recent years (e.g. Bulut 2018; 2020; Marcotte 2018; Ruberg 2019; 2020; Russworm and Blackmon 2020).

The other ‘group’ that DiGRA has trouble facilitating aside from students and other early-career researchers, according to their survey, is “women and genderqueer folk” (Butt et al. 2018, 87), and they also note that people from the Global South are vastly under-represented in terms of DiGRA conference attendance. This critique can most definitely be extended to other game studies-related research associations as well. For example, I recently participated in a symposium at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, organized under the banner of ECREA, where two out of the nineteen speakers were women and nearly all the listed contributors were white Europeans. When I asked one of the symposium’s organizers about this glaring imbalance, their response was marked by frustration: the problem was obvious, but the damage had already been done. Unsurprisingly, the symposium featured multiple reiterations of the difference between ‘gameplay’ and ‘narrative’, and while the goal of the symposium was to look to the ‘future’ of game studies, feminist and critical race approaches were virtually absent from the discussions—including from my own presentation about ecocritical videogame modification.

As long as the field itself remains predominantly white and masculine, so too does its output, because as I claimed earlier, it matters both *what* is written and *who* writes it. It matters that Huizinga and Caillois are revered the way

they are among game scholars and developers, and that criticisms of their work often ignore their anthropological racism and conservatism (cf. Fickle 2019).⁵ It matters that ludology's resistance against the imaginary "disciplinary colonization and interpretive violence" (Phillips 2020a, 50) by literary and cultural studies has enabled a form of ludological scholarship that is depoliticized, post-racial, postfeminist, and even at times outright racist or sexist (cf. Phillips 2020a, 58–59). It matters that, during a book presentation I attended at the University of Amsterdam for an edited volume about the connections between (digital) play and civic engagement, the female scholar who contributed a chapter about the difficulties and shortcomings of using digital play to increase young people's civic engagement was announced as 'the critical note'. The preferred, more optimistic line of thought about the 'civic potential' of digital play, there represented by two tenured white men, was implicitly confirmed by positioning the most deeply politicized perspective as the 'critical' exception, not the rule.

Such rejections of expressly or 'overly' political scholarship continues to pervade game studies. Aarseth's notorious "Genre Trouble" essay (cf. Aarseth 2004) comes to mind here, particularly his assertion that Lara Croft's physical appearance is irrelevant to a player's experience of

gameplay because videogames cannot be read as texts in a literary sense—a true Gamer™ moment if there ever was one. This antifeminist remark was made in the context of the ludology versus narratology dispute, around which in fact much of Aarseth's career in game studies has revolved. While he has in recent years remarked on the misunderstandings and incompatibilities that this situation was based on from its very inception, he has yet to address his own role in keeping the controversy alive until well into the 2010s (cf. e.g. Aarseth 2012; 2014b). A recent editorial by Aarseth for the journal *Game Studies*, of which he has been the Editor-in-Chief since its inception in 2001, brought up the widespread frustrations about this among (especially feminist) game scholars once again. Aarseth presents the piece as a how-to guide for aspiring game scholars, in the form of a 'listicle' with ten tips. Of ludology versus narratology, he writes:

Don't mention 'the war'. [...] This trope is used as a touchstone by beginners to prove they know their way around the field, [...] to show that they are aware of some stuff that has gone before (in those murky days of 1998–2001), but the effect is that they end up perpetuating the myth that there was a group of narrative theorists who had a quarrel with another group called 'ludologists'. (This is not the place to explain that great misunderstanding, [...]) but suffice it to say that the so-called ludologists were all using narratology,

whereas the so-called narratologists were not, with the possible exception of a little bit of Aristotle.) (Aarseth 2019, n.p.)

This passage in particular incited some justified anger, because it presents a prime example of what Phillips, in her affective history of game studies' early years, calls "scholarly negging" (Phillips 2020b, 27). Her comparison to the everyday misogynistic practice of 'gaslighting' is quite apt here. According to Aarseth, not only did 'the war' never really take place, but even if it *had* taken place it only occurred 'in those murky days of 1998–2001', and any discussion of it after that time was just a number of 'beginners' (read: graduate students) trying to 'prove they know their way around the field'. Moreover, even if he admits that the dispute continued long afterwards he has still neglected to admit that he himself has participated in and benefited substantially from it—Aarseth is one of the most widely cited humanistic game scholars (he is a literary scholar by training), has received sizeable grants for his research, and he has headed the Center for Computer Games Research at the IT University of Copenhagen since 2003. Meanwhile, scholars who have attested to the different ways that this mythical 'war' and ludology's self-declared 'victory' have contributed to the field's white/masculine

character continue to implicate him as one of its leading figures (e.g. Moberly 2013; Phillips 2020b; Vossen 2018).

One might say that the *real* ‘founding myth’ of game studies is not the ludology versus narratology debate as such, but rather the harmful pretention that it “never took place” (cf. Frasca 2003a). It *did* take place and is still taking place, but not in the form it is often said to have taken place in. The ludologists, including Aarseth, had defined both sides from the very start—and they had set themselves up to win. Kevin Moberly formulates this contradictory situation in a Baudrillardian fashion: “The ludologist position, as such, is not simply defined in opposition to the narratologist position. *It is the narratologist position*” (Moberly 2013, 170; emphasis mine). In the same way that the ‘ludic’ subsumes all radical action or thought by fascinating players into envelopment and offering them a highly controlled level of ‘freedom’ within it, so too does ludology offer the simulated ‘choice’ of siding either with the ludologists or the narratologists, both of whom coincidentally share a formalist approach to videogames that largely refrains from materialist or other explicitly politicized analyses of the medium. Another paragraph in the editorial is quite indicative for the kind of ludological scholarship that Aarseth endorses:

Focus on particular games, and name them. Don't talk just about games/videogames in general. As a journal editor, I very rarely publish articles that lack a focus on particular games, or never mention a single one by name. If the article is about 'games' in general, then it typically is not about games at all, but instead uses 'games' as a metaphor for the real topic, whatever that may be. (Aarseth 2019, n.p.)

For Aarseth, then, as for ludology in general, there is little to no room for scholarship that indeed might use the term 'game' or the terminology of game studies to discuss anything other than the videogame medium. He thereby also excludes more contemplative or self-reflexive work, as well as arguments that might take game studies itself as their topics instead of specific videogames (cf. Voorhees 2020). He excludes, in other words, endeavours like my own. It is no coincidence that this apolitical formalism is precisely what the Gamer™ likes to see in videogame criticism: the industry-preferred fetishization of videogames as technological objects that are separable from the problems of society at large remain unquestioned (cf. Foxman and Nieborg 2016). Fundamentally, both the Gamer™ technicity and his design as the industry's preferred customer are left intact by ludology. We have seen the results: a consistent hostility to feminist and critical race scholarship, a nearly total absence of "specifically Marxist and poststructuralist

approaches” (Moberly 2013, 173) like I am taking up here, and a predominantly white and masculine demographic presence in game studies.

When we shift our focus back to feminist game studies, a number of different responses to the Gamer™ can be seen. Chess, for instance, argues against the highly gendered hardcore/casual distinction in Gamer™ discourse by narrating her own experience of ‘failure’ to engage with ‘hardcore’ games successfully, and rightly notes that both sides of the distinction are overly simplistic and do no justice to the great variety in play styles and play situations that exist across videogame genres. However, she goes on to write: “Maybe we should retain the term ‘hardcore’ to define the outliers. [...] Instead, perhaps we should just ditch the term ‘casual’. What we commonly refer to as casual games are just games for everyone else” (Chess 2018, 61). Instead of offering a new framework that more closely approximates the complexities of digital play’s entanglement with daily life, Chess suggests maintaining the false dichotomy after all. Precisely because of the many ways that digital play fits into our lives, we should not seek to imply that those who play ‘casual’ videogames, or who do not fit the typical identity categories associated with the Gamer™, cannot be Gamers™ in other ways. The Gamer™ may be an extraordinarily exclusionary figure, but there is still room for play.

For instance, Phillips frankly admits to having thought of herself as a gamer/Gamer™ throughout her life and discusses the myriad contradictions that this brought on:

I used to play on my uncles' PC and Nintendo Entertainment System until my brother and I received our first console, a Super Nintendo, when I was ten. Being a gamer informed my childhood, my adolescence and, eventually, my professional career. Being a gamer even informed my sexual and gender identity. Video games allowed me to play around with (toxic, militarized) masculinity and the thrills of falling in love with women before I was ready to be queer in meatspace. They gave me a way to connect to my brother and other boys in the restricted gender landscape of my youth and, in my adulthood, to a vibrant community that uses technology and play to interrogate the very foundations of gender and normalcy. (Phillips 2020a, 2)

She then continues to describe her simultaneous lifelong allegiance to the cause of social justice, and the clash between the Gamer™ mentality of victory-at-all-costs antagonism and the reality that “social justice is an endless grind, not a boss battle, and [...] if I'm doing it right, I won't be the one reaping most of the rewards” (Phillips 2020a, 3). In this exploration of the tensions that manifest when people adopt the Gamer™ technicity, while not fitting neatly into its design, we can find such insightful critiques as

Phillips'. This strategy can also be seen in the work of Kishonna Gray, who takes a Black cyberfeminist approach to videogames and other digital media technologies to reveal the ways in which women of colour navigate and resist the norms of these white- and masculine-coded spaces (e.g. Gray 2014; Richard and Gray 2018). Gamer™ theory does not need to be built from scratch, nor does it need to be built exclusively—or even primarily—by white men with academic job security. It is already being built, by Gamers™ of every colour and creed, of every class, of every gender.

Gamer™ Trouble

Potential troubles and pitfalls in this feminist engagement with the Gamer™ do persist, regardless of good intentions. Especially in some of the earlier contributions to feminist game studies, one may find a tendency towards emphasizing that other groups besides young white men play videogames and should therefore be recognized as Gamers™. Given the clear absence of women, people of colour, and queer/trans* folks depicted in the industry's advertising, its workforce, and in videogames themselves, this is not at all an unreasonable or surprising demand. After all, as Shaw puts it, media representation “provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible” (Shaw 2014, 4). It is also

Shaw who has strongly demonstrated the limits of this perspective. Across her work, she shows that arguments in favour of ‘more representation’ often end up reinforcing assumptions and stereotypes (e.g. the idea that women and queer people can/will exclusively identify with female and queer videogame characters), and that they frequently fall into the same capitalist logics that have caused this problem of representation in the first place:

Women, and indeed all marginalized groups, need not simply be represented “well” in the games they play or when they are being targeted as a particular type of audience. Those placed at the precarious edge of gaming by economics and/or embodiment, those denied the charge to “properly” perform gamer identity are inevitably left out of demands for representation that center on reconstructing the center of the audience. (Shaw 2013, n.p.)

We also see this problem play out in Chess’ critique of “Player Two,” who is positioned exclusively as a white cis-gender woman with significant spending power and a preference for games that involve stereotypically feminine activities like shopping (cf. Chess 2017). To my mind, those who would hypothetically view the construction Player Two as a form of significant progress towards equality—and, to be clear, Chess herself does not—are falling into the trap of what Nancy Fraser terms “affirmative recognition,”

whereby different cultural identities are *recognized* as valid within the terms of the same order that either caused or perpetuated their initial misrecognition (Fraser 1995, 89). In contrast, a politics of *transformative recognition* in game studies would not only refuse the neoliberal politics of diversity, which produce easily marketable categories without seriously investigating the potentials for class solidarity at the various intersections *between* those categories, but would “destabilize them so as to make room for future regroupments” (Fraser 1995, 84). The goal would not be to play the ‘numbers game’ of creating room in the industry’s market analysis for Girl Gamers™ or Gaymers™ et cetera, although demanding such market-driven reforms *can* still be considered progress under a very limited set of circumstances. Instead, transformative recognition would deconstruct and fundamentally alter those identity categories that these alternative versions of the Gamer™ would be based on, and also the ones that the Gamer™ himself is made of. Moreover, we should not forget that justice does not come from recognition alone: it comes only when that recognition is paired with socio-economic *redistribution*. Seductive digital play, as I argued in the previous chapter, may provide a vector along which this deconstruction of identities and reversion of capitalist logics can occur, but we should be careful not to neglect the fact that the digital

realm is not the only one where such transformations are due.

To conclude, I end this chapter on another critical note. One intention behind speaking about the Gamer™ as a technicity instead of as an identity is to call attention to the fact that the Gamer™ is not only a narrow set of identity markers but also encompasses a host of both learned and adopted behaviours and sensibilities. Anyone can be skilled at fast-paced action videogames, and anyone can hold anti-feminist or otherwise reactionary beliefs. The implication that arises from this is that the aforementioned ‘room for play’ within the Gamer™ sphere is not so much contingent on conforming to the design’s relatively static and materially inscribed identity markers (white, young, cisgender, male, etc.), but rather on those behaviours and sensibilities that are potential methods of value extraction for cybernetic capital. In this sense, the Gamer™ can only include the Other *conditionally*. It has been made abundantly clear that there is this behavioural and ideological aspect to the Gamer™, but another constant theme in this chapter has been the way that the Gamer™ lives on *within game studies* in a variety of ways. Even those who advocate for feminist game studies and translate their theoretical work into feminist praxis are not necessarily innocent of perpetuating the gatekeeping tactics that have been so central to the design

of the Gamer™. The 2019 allegations of labour exploitation, racism, and transphobia that were brought against the leadership of ReFiG (Refiguring Innovation in Games), a Canadian project that advocates for diversity and inclusion across several areas of videogame culture, come to mind here. Prominent veterans of feminist game studies were implicated in this story, and a crucial question was raised by designers who had previously collaborated with ReFiG, including by Aveiro-Ojeda, the author of *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER*: “I want people in games academia to confront this and think—will you keep endorsing transphobic and racist leadership?”⁶

Indeed, reading the accusations, we see both blatant transphobia in action *and* the eerily familiar move of claiming that certain kinds of videogames—in the case of Aveiro-Ojeda’s work, games that deal with matters of indigeneity—do not belong in nominally (and again, implicitly *white*) feminist videogame spaces. The stifling logics of affirmative recognition and neoliberal diversity politics were at play here too. That is, instead of recognizing the intersections between colonialism and cisheteropatriarchy—which would require an acknowledgement that the deeply deconstructive work of Aveiro-Ojeda is anti-colonial, politically queer, *and* thoroughly feminist in nature—the ReFiG leadership chose to rigidly define their feminism as

opposed to and *in antagonistic competition with* the struggles for recognition of Indigenous peoples and queer/trans* folks. But the Gamer™ and the military-entertainment complex that created him cannot be seduced towards radical alterity in a ‘cold’ manner, one step at a time. Cybernetic capital will then have plenty of time to adapt and any progress made will be co-opted shortly with no home casualties. Therefore, the stakes of intersectionality are as high as those of seduction. Compare, for instance, Audre Lorde, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984, 110), with Baudrillard, “Any movement that believes it can subvert a system by its infra-structure is naïve” (Baudrillard 1990, 10). Intersectionality posits that we can never afford to neglect any axis of societal oppression because each builds on and works with the others. In its best form, it does not subscribe to the separability principle and plays across various levels of abstraction. Seduction, for its part, knows that it must be *hot*; it must come all-at-once or it risks immediate diffusion.

Playing the Neoliberal University

“You are tired of being asked to choose.”

Hyperfiction, autobiography, and essay come together in Adan Jerreat-Poole’s *Nonbinary: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* (Jerreat-Poole 2019), which was published as part of a special issue on queer game design. The text narrates the story of a young academic who presents a paper on “the tactics that nonbinary players use to perform identity through digital avatars” and afterwards is asked to go for a drink with another participant from the conference. Accepting or declining leads to different events, each of which give different insights into what is presumably the author’s experience of being a gender-nonconforming person in a society where the gender binary remains hegemonic. Throughout this inter-active essay, the player can find scattered citations from books on gender and settler colonialism, indicating once again that the very notion of a binary gender system is itself an element of Eurocentric

colonial thought. The player is also presented with screenshots from the character creation menus of various roleplaying games that consistently imagine gender as a purely binary choice—and which, I would add, in doing so fully conflate gender and sex without fail. Maria Lugones sees this as a crucial part of what she calls the “colonial/modern gender system” (Lugones 2016 [2008], 27), which narrows gender into a crude binary construction that is entirely determined by the supposedly dimorphic, supposedly ‘strictly biological’ category of sex.

In the end, what matters in *Nonbinary* is not so much the explicit argument made in the author’s fictional conference presentation, but rather its combination of autobiography, game design, and queer theory, through which the essay conveys some of the difficulty of living within and beyond the decidedly white, Western gender binary. It does so in a manner not dissimilar to Zoë Quinn’s educative hyperfiction *Depression Quest* (The Quinnspiracy 2013) and the previously discussed *1870: CYBERPUNK FOREVER*; that is, it uses the medium-specific qualities of hyperfiction to allow the player to explore its argument across multiple ‘playthroughs’ and narrative routes. Unlike a more traditional academic text, the full argument is not immediately presented to the reader but must be *actively sought out* by navigating the text differently across at least three

different runs. *Nonbinary* is not particularly seductive at first glance, and I would to some extent not even want to make this theoretical connection at all—as I have been uncomfortable in my examinations of the other titles in the previous chapters too, although I have chosen not to make that discomfort explicit until now. On one hand, we could read Baudrillard’s seduction as an odd attempt at a queer theory of gender and sexuality: certainly, his interest in the artificiality of the masculine/feminine binary would point to such a possible interpretation. On the other hand, there is at the heart of the theory a conflation of gender, sex, and sexuality that is heavily implicated within the colonial/modern gender system and mirrors the roleplaying games critiqued by Jerreat-Poole. To illustrate: Baudrillard has stated in his later work that “seduction for me was, first, that reversible form in which *both physiological sexes* played out their identity, put themselves in play” (Baudrillard 2003, 21; emphasis mine); a surprisingly anatomical and dimorphic statement, when that same theory claims that “*seduction alone is radically opposed to anatomy as destiny*.” Seduction alone breaks the distinctive sexualization of bodies and the inevitable phallic economy that results” (Baudrillard 1990, 10; original emphasis). Reclaiming seduction and the principle of reversibility, *seducing* them from the “relentlessly heterosexual and -sexist

universe” (Felski 1996, 339) in which those ideas were conceived, for better or worse, may well be worth the effort. This was perhaps even the point of Baudrillard’s theory from the beginning.¹ I have already been making some headway here, but it is not my intention—nor, in a sense, my place—to fully elaborate on such an endeavour in this text.

What *Nonbinary* does point to is an interest from game scholars to incorporate the very forms they study into their academic outputs, as well as a desire within the (mainly Digital) Humanities to “challenge, and even transform, the existing publishing practices and pedagogical institutions” (Adema and Hall 2016, n.p.) of Euro-American academia. The essay can be found on a so-called “middle-state publication” named *First Person Scholar* (cf. Vossen 2016; Wilcox 2015), which is hosted by the Games Institute of the University of Waterloo. This publication’s prospective audience explicitly includes non-academics, everything is open-access, and its contributors are nowadays paid a small honorarium when their texts are published. *First Person Scholar* is a site of resistance, where some of the currently dominant trends in academic publishing are being thoroughly questioned in favour of a model that aims to make game scholarship accessible beyond the walls of the university and to effect a shift in Gamer™ culture. Jerreat-Poole’s

Nonbinary, then, offers one of the more radical instances of that resistance after all; not only in terms of its publication site, but also in its form and content: an *interactive* essay in which queerness and gender-nonconformity are placed front-and-centre next to anti-colonialism, and which was built using Twine, a tool for interactive fiction design that has been adopted by many individual and independent developers as a game design tool. Alison Harvey writes of Twine games:

Aside from the personal content of these games, Twine games challenge mainstream standards by subverting the celebration of difficulty, in both production and play, as they are often quick to both make and play. [...] These games are the consequence of Twine's revolution, the queering of the hegemonic culture of game design. This queerness stems from Twine's accessibility, and its resulting use by a wide range of people, including women, genderqueer, and trans* people, poor people, older people, younger people, people of color and first-time game-makers, among others. (Harvey 2014, 99)

I would argue that the impulse towards democratization that is visible in the discourse around Twine is similar to *First Person Scholar's* aim for accessibility and effecting a cultural shift beyond the borders of academia. Both are good, inclusive causes that may be fully recuperated if its proponents are not careful. As I show below, the

imperatives to make academic knowledge production and videogame development more ‘democratic’ and ‘inclusive’ are not necessarily or inherently *opposed* to the interests of cybernetic capital. This chapter explores some of the challenges of doing game scholarship in contemporary Euro-American academia, and asks to what extent game scholars are able to effect radical alternatives to the status quo from within the university system.

The University, with Some Conditions

One key question that permeates the issues outlined above, and which has permeated my entire argument so far, is that of the relationship between the University (as a concept and as a specific type of academic institution) and society, and the responsibilities that come with that relationship. Derrida has been crucial for thinking through this topic with regards to the notion that there are ‘pure’ distinctions to be made between the University and its outside, and between the different faculties *within* the University itself, each of which “does not permit, in principle, any confusion of boundary, any parasitism” (Derrida 2004, 105). As Derrida has shown across his writings on deconstruction, however (e.g. Derrida 1988b), there is always a certain parasitism at work in language and other systems of meaning, because meaning is never permanently fixed and always slipping

away—it is, to speak with Baudrillard again, always at risk of being *seduced*. For Derrida, the idea of the University having a clear inside and outside has become problematic in the context of the late twentieth century, when this separation has been made impossible by “the politics of scientific research, including all socio-technical strategies (military, medical, or other, such limits and categories losing all pertinence today) and all computerization at the intra- or interstate level” (Derrida 2004, 94), not in the least because so much of this technoscientific research and development, funded by the State or by the vectoralist class, often takes place *outside* universities. Elsewhere, Derrida sees the University—and within it, specifically the Humanities—as being confronted with “a new public space transformed by new techniques of communication, information, archivization, and knowledge production,” and with “the question of the marketplace in publishing and the role it plays in archivization, evaluation, and legitimation of academic research” (Derrida 2002, 25).

This idea of cybernetics displacing the University as the true centre of knowledge production is a recurring line of thought for Derrida, but as he himself has freely admitted, there is ample reason to claim that the University was never a wholly separate institution to begin with. For example, when he speaks of an idealized “university

without condition,” a University that insists on its unconditional sovereignty and freedom of expression, he immediately qualifies that ideal:

Because it is absolutely independent, the university is also an exposed, tendered citadel, to be taken, often destined to capitulate without condition, to surrender unconditionally. It gives itself up, it sometimes puts itself up for sale, it risks being simply something to occupy, take over, buy; it risks becoming a branch office of conglomerates and corporations. [...] A question must then be asked and it is not merely economic, juridical, ethical, or political: can the university (and if so, how?) affirm an unconditional independence, can it claim a sort of *sovereignty* without ever risking the worst, namely, by reason of the impossible abstraction of this sovereign independence, being forced to give up and capitulate without condition, to let itself be taken over and bought at any price? What is needed then is not only a principle of resistance, but a force of resistance—and of dissidence. (Derrida 2002, 28)

As is his wont in his more explicitly political writings, Derrida confronts us with an aporetic situation that refuses easy answers—how can the University maintain its fundamental need for absolute autonomy when it faces an increasingly interconnected, increasingly virtualized world and, by its own admission, relies on the State and other ‘outside’ agencies for its intellectual authority and

legitimation? Derrida proclaims his “faith in the University and, within the University, faith in the Humanities of tomorrow” (Derrida 2002, 24), but what is this force of resistance and dissidence that is supposed to make such a University arrive? And what is supposed to be the politics of such an institution? The indirect response to this last question by Peggy Kamuf appears, at first sight at least, quite adequate: “I can find no cause to apologize for believing that the university as such, without regard to discipline, *ought* to be a fomentor of democracy and social justice” (Kamuf 2004, n.p.; original emphasis). Derrida and Kamuf offer the University a fine set of principles indeed; freedom of expression, independence, and an active struggle for democracy and social justice. These principles are often said to be widely accepted specifically within the Humanities, although recent sociological research across Europe has indicated that left-wing and liberal views—more specifically, viewpoints on issues like immigration and wealth redistribution that are generally considered to be ‘left-wing’—are prominent across different faculties like law and medicine as well (cf. Van de Werfhorst 2020).

Of course, the principles declared by Derrida and Kamuf are relatively open to interpretation—a conservative’s idea of freedom of expression will likely differ from a progressive’s—and one might argue that the continued

dominance of liberalism in academia (as opposed to leftism) by default keeps the University as vulnerable as Derrida describes, because liberalism fundamentally still maintains the capitalist order of production that threatens the University's independence at every turn. Moreover, while the proliferation of cybernetic technologies within and beyond the university system was still in its early phases when Derrida wrote about the subject, by now this process of computerization and digitalization, and the accelerationism that comes with it, can justifiably be considered a *fait accompli*. Derrida predicted that new archivization techniques like databanks would displace the library as the "ideal type of archive" and in turn would cause the University to "no longer [be] the center of knowledge" (Derrida 2004, 94), but the broad acceptance of telecommunications and information technologies has had much deeper implications than this. For instance, Hoofd identifies a widespread idealism surrounding the effects and functions of new media for higher education and academic research. She argues that this attitude has enabled a situation in which "the promise of community, justice, and equality is exceedingly enacted through new media technologies," while that same "utopian or hopeful rhetoric around media technologies, which is especially prevalent in the well-meaning humanities and social sciences, currently *facilitates* the

ongoing acceleration and negative fallout of the neo-liberal economy” (Hoofd 2017, 105; original emphasis). This is another profoundly aporetic scenario for the University and its Humanities, and one which appears to run parallel to the one theorized by Derrida: in practicing their principles of emancipation and justice, they adopt the very same technologies that cybernetic capitalism currently thrives on. Subsequently, “well-meaning academics in the social sciences and the humanities who specifically seek to fight the negative fallout of global capitalism” (Hoofd 2017, 103) end up not only exacerbating Derrida’s aporia of the University as unconditionally sovereign yet eternally dependent on and responsible towards its ‘outside’, but also end up *accelerating* the colonialist expansion of cybernetic capitalism. A fundamental clash occurs when their well-intentioned quest to emancipate the Other and find radical alterity meets the informatic and transparent logics of cybernetic technologies. They become complicit in the smoothing over of reality.

No institutional critique of the University and the well-meaning Humanities can ignore that this broad acceptance of new media technologies has gone hand-in-hand with the gradual neoliberalization of Euro-American universities, in the same way that cybernetic capitalism and neoliberalism are co-dependent for their proliferation

throughout society at large. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades see this process take shape as universities' increasing obedience to market forces that skew towards "professional and high-tech fields that service monopoly capitalism," and in the creeping managerialism that favours "increased cost efficiency and attention to consumer and market demands" over stable labour conditions for faculty staff and students (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000, 76–77). That same allegiance to the market pushes teachers to prepare their students for the general labour market instead of teaching them critical thought; students are no longer valued for their criticality but for their "employability" (cf. Osborne and Grant-Smith 2017). Meanwhile, the perpetual crisis of academic labour is heavily exacerbated by this neoliberalization as well, as anyone should be able to conclude from even a cursory glance at the academic labour market in the Global North, where tenure-track positions are increasingly scarce while exploitative post-docs and temporary part-time teaching positions are increasingly frequent. According to Rosalind Gill, academic working life in the neoliberal university has much in common with labour in so-called 'creative industries' like videogame development, because its nominally *un-valuable* labour is subjected more and more to a productive framework and is, as a consequence, often characterized by

“precariousness, time pressure and surveillance” (Gill 2014, 18). She even directly appropriates the terms of the industry for her discussion, when she writes: “All the time is ‘crunch time’ now” (Gill 2014, 15). Fred Moten and Stefano Harney claim that “professionalization,” seen on their part as a type of passive “negligence” of criticality rather than its active suppression (Moten and Harney 2004, 103), plays a key part in neoliberalization’s stifling of the critical capacities of scholars. For them, the workload of individual scholars and teachers is intensified and *sped up* to such a degree that they even speak of “the internalization of the cybernetics of production” (Moten and Harney 1999, 28). This is no wonder: under cybernetic capitalism, even the most modest critique is a risk to be *managed* out of existence.

Moreover, two decades into the twenty-first century, we might point to the increased funding for Big Data-driven and “Digital Humanities” research (cf. Kirschenbaum 2014), as well as to the everyday use of new media platforms like Blackboard, Facebook, Gmail, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom in teaching contexts—the latter two being especially poignant examples, as the digitalization of education has accelerated exponentially due to the ongoing COVID–19 pandemic. These trends illustrate the point that universities are obeying the power distribution mechanism known

as ‘the market’, which cybernetic capital currently controls and reifies constantly. Several scholars have rightly pointed out that it cannot be a coincidence that the Digital Humanities’ rise to popularity occurred in the same period that the neoliberal university began to truly take shape, and they are therefore quite critical of the kind of new media-based research that is being conducted under this banner (e.g. Allington, Brouillette, and Golumbia 2016; Galloway and Dinsman 2016; Grusin 2014; Liu 2012). That said, Hoofd sharply observes that the academic search for fully *transparent* knowledge is to some extent inherent in the University project—note here the parallel with colonialism and cybernetics as discussed in previous chapters. The problems outlined above might under the current conditions be inevitable, “because the academic profession is already founded on the ideal of communication as community, which makes them blind to the possibility that today it might be otherwise” (Hoofd 2017, 108). Even a project like *First Person Scholar*, which quite intentionally reaches beyond the University for that communication-as-community, cannot currently escape the pretension to transparency. One of its former editors-in-chief argues that “middle state publishing exists because traditional academic writing is an oppressive force that keeps our knowledge locked up in the light of academic libraries and keeps those not

privileged enough to be part of the academy in the dark” (Vossen 2016, n.p.). This claim is largely correct, of course, and I do find open-access publishing to be unequivocally a worthy cause. The author is also clearly aware of the economic and intellectual precarity that come included with the current ‘publish or perish’ model of scholarship, and posits that middle-state publishing may help to counteract it. What is missing is how this adoption of communication technologies relates to questions of speed and the various roles that time can play in academia (cf. Tower and Hoofd 2018).

The stakes in this matter, unsurprisingly, are potentially of apocalyptic proportions. In an essay that might as well have been written by Baudrillard or Virilio, Derrida calls attention to the fact that telecommunications are reliant on the very same cybernetic technologies as those that simulate and incite nuclear war, and critically situates the discursive and textual work of the Humanities in this bind:

In our techno-scientifico-militaro-diplomatic incompetence, we may consider ourselves [...] as competent as others to deal with a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through. Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language,

structures of codes and graphic decoding. But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it. (Derrida 1984, 23; original emphasis)

We see here echoed a point that I make more extensively in a previous chapter. There, the cybernetic nature of video-games makes them the ideal medium through which to analyse contemporary capitalism; here, the textuality of cybernetics and the cyberneticity of texts make humanistic scholarship an important locus for both researching and critiquing the implications of cybernetics and technological acceleration. For Derrida, what operates at the heart of the Humanities today is an “aporia of speed” (Derrida 1984, 21). That is, the question of how to *perform* criticism in a time when both technoscientific development and academic labour are constantly accelerating, yet one of the necessary conditions for competent criticism of these same phenomena is a certain slowness. This process of technological acceleration within the university system indeed appears to align itself perfectly with the already-existing fundamental ideology of the University as primarily a knowledge production community, while also sinisterly undermining it. Thus, the well-known narrative of a “university in ruins” (cf. Readings 1996) runs up against the fact that the necessary conditions for the University’s ruination were always

already present within its supposedly ivory walls. Elsewhere, the notion that middle-state publication's blend of humanistic rigour with "timely, informal, and topical content" (Wilcox 2015, n.p.) can make academic knowledge production relevant to the general public, happily foregoes the potential criticism that this pressure to be 'timely' and up-to-date is just another exacerbation of the aforementioned aporia.

The Game of Western Academia

There are other consequences of the neoliberalization of the Euro-American university system that have arguably changed the "academic game" (Harré et al. 2017, 10) in significant ways. In an essay based on a keynote speech given at the 2019 Utrecht University Humanities Graduate Conference, Simon During names the rise of neoliberalism as one of the causes of what he calls the "cultural secularization" of the Humanities; that is, "the erosion of canonicity and the loss of authority and legitimacy for the disciplined training into the humanities" across the West (During 2019, 5). Neoliberalism's effects on the Humanities are, for During, quite paradoxical. On the positive side, the extension of market forces into the University means that more students than ever before have the opportunity to join the Humanities, and the rise of inter- and post-disciplinarity

due to niche marketing and the influence of the ‘general’ labour market have expanded the disciplinary horizon greatly. The *post-disciplines* that follow from this development defy disciplinary categorization and seemingly exist for a great variety of reasons—all of which appear to still fit within the frameworks of neoliberalism and professionalization. During mentions cultural studies, legal studies, film studies, literary studies (which is a “post-disciplinized” version of English), new media studies (in which we might situate game studies, too), and, notably, post-disciplines that “appeared from out of post 1960s progressive identity politics: e.g. gender studies, queer studies, African American studies” (During 2019, 10). However, in this generalization of the Humanities, in their cutting up not into well-defined disciplines but eclectic and flexible ‘schools’ and ‘departments’ and ‘studies’, the distinction between academia and what During calls the “extra-mural” Humanities is lost (During 2019, 9), and a door is opened for corporate managers to “encourage what is called ‘impact’ in the UK, Australia and the Netherlands as well as the ‘public humanities’ in the States” (During 2019, 14). That neoliberal narrative is already troublesome, because, as I have argued through Derrida and Hoofd, it suggests that the University was ever fully closed off from society at large and that the relationship between them is exclusively unidirectional—

information and knowledge supposedly flow from the University into society, never vice versa. This is precisely another reason to be suspicious of frameworks like ‘democratization’ and ‘effecting change’, which I discuss in the beginning of this chapter. They can easily fall prey to managerialism and other control mechanisms that seek to limit the University’s work to that which is quantifiable, and to that which ‘contributes to society’ (read: produces value for public and private sponsors).

During argues, rightly, that the ‘intrusion’ of market forces into academic life is not inevitable, but a thoroughly ideological process that can be challenged and reversed. This involves, in some ways, a somewhat naïve insistence on that idea of unconditional sovereignty for the University, a deliberate attempt at closing-off the University’s domain from the market. (One that Derrida would surely find much too simple.) That said, During is not merely concerned with the neoliberal university but with the more generalized decline of the Humanities in terms of their social prestige, and while this is undoubtedly a valuable topic for concern, he posits that another potential strategy for restoring this prestige is to resist “the processes of intellectual decolonisation and identity emancipation that underpin cultural secularization” (During 2019, 17). By this he means the contemporary movements to either expand the phallogocentric

canon of Western philosophical thought, or to radically do away with the notion of canon altogether—ideas which are often found in those aforementioned ‘post-1960s’ post-disciplines. The logic behind *conserving* the traditional canon is not simply based on the canon having a certain prestige value of its own; rather, During argues that those texts “have no *direct* relation to the broader social conditions, marked by inequalities, hierarchies, injustices, out of which they are produced” (During 2019, 17), and so a rejection of the traditional canon misses its own emancipatory point. However, this separation is doomed from the start. If writing bears no direct relation to the material conditions within which it occurs, *what is there to write about?* And what exactly is During himself writing about? The separation between expression and experience is instantaneously traversed by seduction, and the aporia of the University without condition rears its head once more.

I engage with this argument so extensively because I find the notion of post-disciplinarity and its links with the neoliberalization of Euro-American academia to be quite a potent conceptual lens through which to more clearly understand the position of game studies today. Moreover, while I principally disagree with During’s well-intended but openly conservative approach to the decolonization of canons and curriculums, I also believe that he is correct when

he states that there is more thinking to be done about how liberatory and neoliberal ideologies are entangled in the unquestionable, and perhaps *unresolvable* crisis of the Humanities. These are precisely the kinds of conversations that scholars in other post-disciplines have been having for much longer, such as in gender studies, which found itself needing to become “integrated into the existing disciplinary structure as well as remain autonomous so as to develop a discipline of its own. We are still working in this Janus-headed mode, [...] but *what* is the realm into which we seek integration?” (Buikema and Van der Tuin 2013, 311 original emphasis). Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin sharply note that gender studies’ integration into the “corporatized university in Europe,” which is in public often very concerned with diversity and inclusion, turns out to be merely partial: “when we do not comply with the accepted idea of gender as a statistical category for research and policy making, [...] but use gender as an analytical category, we don’t get the funding” (Buikema and Van der Tuin 2014, 196). This tension is unsurprising, because while statistical gender equality and neoliberal diversity politics are easily marketable, extensive and progressive research that might end up destabilizing that market-friendly and eminently quantifiable category of gender—for instance by specifying its intersections with race, class, and history—has never

been a ‘good investment’ from the perspective of capital. Radical politics will never sit easily within the institution, but now even a partial integration with the University requires major concessions. The University, in the accelerated, corporatized, cybernetic, neoliberal, professionalized form it takes today, benefits more than ever from radical scholarship being reduced to what Baudrillard in his early writings called a “*paracritical subculture* among intellectuals,” where “the transgression of hierarchical social values turns into the game of a cultural elite, [and] the subversive appeal to happiness turns into the game of social differentiation” (Baudrillard 2001, 67; original emphasis). To play the game of Western academia is now to play the game of cybernetic capital.

Ludification and Institutional Politics

Game studies, in the meantime, is not even close to becoming an established discipline like history or philosophy, nor a widely recognized field like gender studies. The frequent overlap in use of terms like ‘discipline’ and ‘field’ additionally make it difficult to discern whether game studies wants to be either and whether it *should* be. Frans Mäyrä argues that game studies is a “multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter” (Mäyrä 2008, 6). This identity, or maybe it is better

to call it the *technicity* of the field, is often centred around a single genre of digital objects for the purposes of “strategic essentialism”: “While differences exist between game scholars about the objects of their study, [...] it is seen as advantageous to temporarily *essentialize* game studies by focusing on digital games and game studies as a discipline of its own” (Raessens 2016, 4; original emphasis). As I have indicated in previous chapters, the fear expressed by some game scholars of being ‘colonized’ by other fields led to an early closing-off to pre-existing theories in fields like cultural studies and literary theory. The legacy of this early rigidity also continues to exacerbate game studies’ ongoing obsession with “difference, definition, and discipline” (McAllister et al. 2016, 109). That is, I would suggest that widely cited discussions within game studies surrounding, for instance, the “heart of gameness” (cf. Juul 2003; Stenros 2017), “ludology” (cf. Aarseth 2014b; Frasca 2003b), and “procedurality” (cf. Bogost 2007; Sicart 2011) are not only meant to draw out different theoretical strands but also to *discipline* the field and its potential subjects (games and Gamers™) by defining the limits within which they are expected to become knowable. This boundary-enforcing work of game studies, being situated largely within the contemporary University, is to an extent inevitable and understandable. There are, according to During, many

different ways of being a post-discipline, and game studies appears to still be deciding specifically which objects it wants to revolve around and how it wants to relate to those objects. What kind of game research is eligible for institutionalization? What are its politics, and what seductive potentials still remain within that paradigm?

To stay 'close to home' with these questions, I focus here on reading the work of Utrecht University's most senior game scholar: Joost Raessens. He is known for having co-organized the first DiGRA conference at Utrecht University in 2003 (cf. Copier and Raessens 2003), for co-editing one of the first handbooks of game studies (cf. Raessens and Goldstein 2005), for being one of the series editors for the *Games and Play* series at Amsterdam University Press, and for his role as one of the scientific directors of the university-wide Game Research focus area as well as the director of the Centre for Games and Play at the same university. It can thus be said that he has played and continues to play a crucial role in setting the research agenda for game scholars at Utrecht University, and that he occupies a prominent position in the field more globally. To an extent, one could even argue that his views are representative for at least one school of thought in Dutch and European research regarding the role of videogames in broader society. Two key features of his most recent academic work

are relevant to this context: his ongoing research into the emancipatory potentials of serious games (cf. Raessens 2009; 2015) and “ecogames” (cf. Raessens 2019a; 2019b), and his widely cited concept of “the ludification of culture” (cf. Raessens 2006; 2014). The latter was coined by Raessens in the early days of game studies—specifically in the inaugural issue of the *Games and Culture* journal, which was mostly preoccupied with “why game studies now?” and other such questions. Much of that first article is spent explaining the Playful Identities research project, which sought to “investigate the ways in which mobile phones, the Internet, and computer games not only facilitate the construction of these playful identities but also advance the ludification of culture in the spirit of Johan Huizinga’s [...] *homo ludens*” (Raessens 2006, 53).² Immediately of note are the purposeful broadening up of game studies beyond videogames, as well as the explicit allegiance to Huizinga that remains present to this day in Raessens’ work and Dutch game research projects more generally (e.g. Frissen et al. 2015; Glas et al. 2019; Raessens 2010).

A substantial theorization of the ludification of culture was initially missing and was published a few years later in a chapter based on Raessens’ inaugural speech for his position as the chair of Media Theory at Utrecht University:

Although computer games draw a lot of attention, they are not the only manifestation of this ludification process. Play is not only characteristic of leisure, but also turns up in those domains that once were considered the opposite of play, such as education (e.g. educational games), politics (playful forms of campaigning, using gaming principles to involve party members in decision-making processes, comedians-turned-politicians) and even warfare (interfaces resembling computer games, the use of drones—unmanned remote-controlled planes—introducing war à la PlayStation). Such playfulness can also be witnessed in the surge of using mobile phones and the playful communication resulting from this—think of texting and twittering. (Raessens 2014, 94)

And further on, regarding the academic purpose of the concept itself:

In this article my claim is [...] foremost epistemological. I argue that the concept of play can be used as a heuristic tool to shed new light on contemporary media culture, as a lens that makes it possible to have a look at new objects and study them in a particular way. The concepts of play, and the ludification of culture [...] enable me as a theorist to identify specific aspects of today's culture, and to construct a specific conceptual perspective on today's media culture. [...] I specifically focus on media (theory) and the ludic or playful turn that is taking place in that specific field. (Raessens 2014, 95–96)

A paradox appears to arise here, as Raessens claims to see the ludification of culture as ‘foremost epistemological’ in nature while also naming a wide range of different areas where this development has supposedly empirically been taking place since the 1960s—politics, economics, media, education, communication, and indeed, warfare have all been ‘ludifying’ roughly since the heyday of the Situationist International. (Does this mean that Western culture was not being playful before this time, as Huizinga claimed? Raessens does not say, but neither does he explicitly question Huizinga on this point.) He opposes himself to grand narratives like that of a “Ludic Century” (cf. Zimmerman 2015), which he rightly critiques as being simultaneously too broad and too narrow in its approach. However, the narrative he counterposes is itself equally broad in scope. This broadness makes it an effective, if somewhat circular, justification for researching playful media forms and other aspects of society where play can be detected: the ludification of culture has enabled research that theorizes and, in a sense, reifies that same ludification of culture.

Does the changing historical reality call for new concepts, or does this new concept change how we understand history? A wide conceptual scope is not in itself a problem—my discussion of gamespace in earlier chapters has a similarly global, if more politically charged perspective—but it

may become problematic when that scope subsequently lacks empirical or theoretical justification. The narrative of ludification runs into trouble here, as Raessens continues to depend on the Huizingan definition of play for his understanding of the phenomenon, though with some modifications. The most significant of these are that he emphasizes the *ambiguity* of play that Huizinga struggles with throughout his book, and that he claims, apparently in contrast with Huizinga's romantic conservatism, "that, *from an ontological perspective*, digital information and communication technologies have precisely enabled new forms of play" (Raessens 2014, 103; emphasis mine). This last argument is of special importance for both the empirical and theoretical validity of the concept: what kinds of play do these digital technologies enable, exactly? Take Raessens' repeated appeal to social media as exemplary sites of ludification, where "users can playfully construct identities that do not necessarily have any implications for real life" (Raessens 2014, 105). Even if users were willing and able to construct identities that are completely *separate* from 'real life'—and much contemporary internet scholarship, often with a feminist and/or critical-race angle (e.g. Haraway and Nakamura 2003; Nakamura and Chow-White 2012), argues that this is not the case—their 'ludic' engagement with platforms like Facebook or Steam would

still implicate them in the generation of economic value, through those platforms' commodification of human-computer interaction and their incessant datafication of social relations (cf. Couldry and Mejias 2019; Crogan and Kinsley 2012). Raessens acknowledges the moral ambiguities that might present themselves in the ludification of culture, but nevertheless prefers to leave explicit questions of exploitation and production aside or to discuss them, indirectly, in terms of the "rules of ludo-capitalism" providing "additional limitations" to playful contexts (Raessens 2014, 106n23). In his casual assertion that modern warfare is also subject to ludification, with its 'interfaces resembling computer games' and 'the use of drones introducing war à la PlayStation', one might even be inclined to ask whether 'ludification' here really refers to various aspects of culture becoming *more playful*, or if it rather indicates a worldwide proliferation of cybernetic technologies that generally maintain a semblance of playfulness.

Is the narrative of ludification then merely a different explanation of what I have called 'ludic' simulation? Perhaps not, but there is always the risk of slippage. For instance, Raessens acknowledges that *gamification* is a "specific part of this more general process," and he discusses it very briefly as "the integration of game elements in products and services with the aim to advance user

involvement” (Raessens 2014, 95). As such, gamification is in a sense an even more poignant example of the ‘ludic’ than entertainment videogames, because it is often directly aimed at either creating a deeper engagement of consumers and labourers in value extraction processes, or preparing those consumers for the further gamification of everyday life in gamespace. (Although, these goals are of course made truly explicit to company executives and shareholders only.) Gamification, like gamespace, craves rational, *manageable* subjects. Ian Bogost has suggested we call it “exploitationware” for just that reason; it is, for him, “a distorted version of behavioral economics, one dressed up as gaming in order to appear cooler and more appealing to potential sector customers” (Bogost 2015, 72). It dresses up ordinary value generation and extraction processes—consumption and production alike—as play-situations, and thus appears to abolish the bourgeois opposition of labour and leisure time that Baudrillard critiques (cf. Baudrillard 1975). But this is indeed a *simulated* abolition, because the principle of production itself is left unchallenged and cybernetic capital’s domains of authority are instead *expanded* by the imposition of the logic of value onto that which was not yet fully subsumed under it (cf. deWinter, Kocurek, and Nichols 2014; Woodcock and Johnson 2018). One might therefore argue that gamification is just a

deceptive synonym for cold seduction, because it offers a simulation of digital play while keeping the user firmly within the boundaries of cybernetic capital.

Then, the question still remains: if we can understand gamification as a form of cold seduction, how ‘specific’ is it really within the grand scheme of the so-called ludification of culture? Many of the areas that Raessens identifies as being subject to ludification, after all, are from a critical-materialist perspective subjected to the productive principle of gamification. I am thus inclined to wonder whether the demonstrable academic and institutional effectiveness of the ludification narrative, which has figured significantly in the Playful Identities project (cf. Raessens 2006) and in the more recent Persuasive Gaming project (cf. Frissen et al. 2015; Glas et al. 2019), might derive some of its rhetorical power from making the frame of playfulness applicable across all fields and disciplines, while in that same move *depoliticizing* the harmful effects of cybernetic capitalism and *obscuring* the previously mentioned complicity of contemporary Euro-American academia in that system. For instance, we have already seen that the resemblances between videogame hardware and missile drone controls partially serve a recruitment purpose, because prospective operators can more easily rely on already familiar literacies gained from videogame play. However, it should also be

noted that popular narratives of cybernetic warfare, articulated particularly clearly by Slavoj Žižek as “war deprived of its substance—a virtual war fought behind computer screens, a war experienced by its participants as a video game, a war with no casualties (on our side, at least)” (Žižek 2012 [2002], 46), in Huizingan fashion accept too easily the romantic idea that war could ever be a ‘purely’ playful phenomenon to begin with (cf. Gregory 2011). There is no ‘war à la PlayStation’ beyond the destructive role of cybernetics in neo-imperialist wars and contemporary state terrorism, and it seems to me that framing this role primarily as a newly emerging form of play does a moral disservice to all involved, except to drone manufacturers like General Atomics. Moreover, the use of ‘playful forms of campaigning’ in contemporary politics is *precisely* the integration of game elements with the supposed aim to advance user involvement, as well as a development that shifts the emphasis of what is considered ‘political’ from a matter of ideological struggle to a matter of convenient, mediatized participation (cf. Gekker 2019; Hoofd 2019). And what about the use of gamification in teaching (cf. e.g. Losh 2014), where ‘serious’ games are often marketed as exceptionally potent methods of ‘edutainment’ without much critical reflection on what exactly makes games properly educational?

Throughout his recent work in game studies, Raessens himself has mostly attended to the “political-ideological tendencies in serious games” (Raessens 2009, 24), a genre exemplified for him by titles like *Food Force* (United Nations World Food Programme 2005) and *Darfur Is Dying* (Take Action Games 2006).³ Following the work of Sherry Turkle (cf. Turkle 1996), but apparently echoing Baudrillard, Raessens argues that “players can either surrender to the seduction[!] of *Food Force* and *Darfur is Dying* by interpreting the game more or less according to the encoded [...] ideological frames (simulation resignation),” or they can “understand these frames [...] by deconstructing the assumptions or frames that are built into the simulation (simulation understanding)” (Raessens 2015, 254). Raessens rightly indicates that the ideal scenario here is ‘simulation understanding’, when players experience a “moment of disavowal—or distancing—that is specific to games” (Raessens 2009, 28), and thus become able to identify and question the underlying assumptions of serious games like the aforementioned examples. This would allow for a mutually constructive (and, Baudrillard would object, fully instrumentalized) relationship between a game, which conveys its ideological message through its procedural rhetoric, and its players, who accept that message but also engage with it to find its procedural limitations. However,

throughout his preliminary research he consistently finds game critics and scholars—precisely the demographics one should expect a measure of critical distance from—overwhelmingly falling into simulation resignation when playing and then reviewing both *Food Force* and *Darfur Is Dying* (cf. Raessens 2009, 29; 2015, 254–55). His later research on the interactive multimedia production *Collapsus: The Energy Risk Conspiracy* (Palotta 2010) repeats this finding—resignation remains the dominant reaction among critics (Raessens 2019a, 99–100).

At this junction, the goalposts for serious games appear to be moving away from understanding to resignation; effectively, from critical deconstructive engagement to cold seduction. For instance, when first confronted with these findings, Raessens carefully questions whether “critical distance needs to exist in the first place” because, he writes, “It is of course a legitimate aspiration to teach children about hunger as *Food Force* intends to do” (Raessens 2009, 32). Later, he praises *Food Force* and *Darfur Is Dying* solely for their “clear political agenda,” which he states “can be considered an emancipating and liberating aspect” in itself (Raessens 2015, 256). Yet, having a clear political agenda on a representational level is hardly specific to videogames, and simply *discussing* political issues is certainly not the same as actually advocating for and effecting

liberation. By the time the research has shifted to ecogames like *Collapsus*, we are speaking only in terms of a *potential* for the instrumentalization of play: the game “*might* contribute to [...] making people reflect on the global and political implications of the energy transition and act accordingly” (Raessens 2019, 93; emphasis mine). To be sure, Raessens points to promising evidence that serious or “persuasive” games are able to effect attitude changes in their players better than other, less ‘interactive’ media (e.g. Jacobs 2018; Neys and Jansz 2019). I would certainly not deny that there are ways in which ‘ludic’ simulations can affect attitudes and behaviours in both general and medium-specific ways. But again, to point merely to attitude change, when the initial desire was for serious games to be ‘emancipating and liberating’, feels like a moving of the goalpost for what they are supposed to be able to do.

It appears to be the case that Raessens *resigns* himself to resignation without admitting it openly, when simulation *understanding* is clearly the more ambitious and preferable option. This makes some sense from an academic-institutional view: pointing to ‘potential’ and ‘promising evidence’ invites further required research into one’s topic of choice—and I should clarify that I fully support the continuation of that research. That said, we could also say that this unstated resignation to the ‘seductive’ power of

simulation was a foregone conclusion from the very beginning. Raessens has identified four possible implications of cybernetic technologies, such as videogames, for their users' relation to reality and the symbolic order. According to this model, games may be experienced either as completely immersive virtual realities that can in turn be utopian or dystopian, as "replicas of non-virtual life," or as "dramatic stages for reality construction" (Raessens 2009, 24). Following this model are explicitly politicized and undeniably progressive analyses of the contents of serious games at their representational, procedural, and paratextual levels. In fact, the emancipatory angle throughout Raessens' work on videogames is generally a welcome one, especially compared to the consistently depoliticized work of ludology as discussed in the previous chapter. However, in the conclusion to one of the texts I have been reading here, where Raessens effectively concedes that the merit of *Food Force* lies mostly in its willingness to even discuss the topic of world hunger at all, he writes: "Which of the 'virtual' tendencies become actualized *is not directly inscribed in the game's technical properties*" (Raessens 2009, 33; emphasis mine). The troubling implication is that a politicization of the very technologies that underlie serious games is off-limits, because said technologies have no direct influence over their political or ideological properties, nor over the way

that any individual serious game constructs its own relationship to ‘actual reality’.

Apparently as a consequence, throughout the rest of his work Raessens never implicates serious games themselves in the problems they are addressing. *Food Force* and *Darfur Is Dying*, both arguably dealing with the violent consequences of global capitalism, are never criticized for their use of simulation technologies that “promise the containment and control of such supposedly accidental violence, while in fact exacerbating these forms of violence” (Hoofd 2007, 7). *Collapsus*, superficially so concerned with solving the climate crisis, is never confronted with the contribution of videogame consoles and home computers to ecological destruction and global warming (cf. Mayers et al. 2015; Mejia 2016). At no point does the question arise of the relation between digital play and the cybernetic-capitalistic systems in which it takes place. At no point is the observation that simulation resignation occurs so frequently, even among critics and scholars, investigated as an issue that is bound to be structural in a technology that has historically aimed for precisely that effect—to envelop its users in a ‘ludic’ simulation, to draw them further into the web of cybernetic capitalism, to ‘seduce’ them with diffuse feedback loops in order to prevent seduction from taking place. Furthermore, Raessens makes some allusions to the

“medium-specificity of computer games” (Raessens 2015, 251), but that specificity begins and ends with games as rule-based systems. The medium-specific *materiality* of videogames is left unquestioned, and *material conditions* are only made relevant when relating their simulational parameters to the complex scenarios they claim to model. All this fits unsurprisingly well with the narrative of the ludification of culture: there, too, the ways that capital operates *through* and *within* capitalistically produced media are left out of the big picture. With the same brush, the necessity for interrogating the complicity of scholarship itself in perpetuating that system is obviated.

This is shame, because a specifically humanistic and critical-materialist game studies, with its knowledge of both procedurality and materialism, should be adequately competent to heed Derrida’s call for the Humanities to reflect on their relationship with information and communications technologies (cf. Derrida 1984). From studying videogames, we know better than anyone that the nuclear apocalypse those technologies may help bring about is, after all, not only ‘fabulously textual’ but also possesses a “*fabulously procedural* dimension” (Jagoda 2013a, 765; original emphasis). It has not only been talked and written about; it has been *played out* as well. The videogame medium was, in a sense, built for this, and in our production of game

scholarship we cannot ignore that. Interestingly, Raessens does implicate game scholars in this history when he writes: “Professional serious game designers *as well as serious game theorists* [...] have an ethico-political responsibility when they make decisions about the ways in which they want to design serious games and construct theories about them” (Raessens 2009, 33; emphasis mine). I find myself unconditionally agreeing with this sentiment, but it is also clear to me that there is a difference of opinion about exactly how deep this responsibility goes. If we follow the narrative of ludification, it is all too easy to place ourselves *outside* of the processes we seek to describe and understand. Truly accepting the ethico-political responsibility that comes with the construction of theory should, from a critical-materialist perspective at least, instead entail a reckoning with the links between (serious) videogames, cybernetic capitalism, and the technological acceleration of Euro-American academia—or perhaps I should say, its *ludification*—as well as with our position as scholars operating within those structures.

A Politics of Complicity

How, then, can scholars play the game of Euro-American academia and the ‘ludified university’ differently? There is, for me, no question of whether we *should* play differently—

and, with some hesitation still, that we should play *seductively*. The institution can be changed, and this change can be performed through every aspect of scholarship. Derrida writes that, in every seminar, publication, or whatever other manifestation of the University, “an institutional concept is *at play*, a type of contract signed, an image of the ideal seminar constructed, a *socius* implied, repeated, or displaced, invented, threatened, transformed, or destroyed” (Derrida 2004, 102; emphasis mine). In that play, we are inevitably complicit in the continuation of the institution’s current form, and with that complicity comes another layer of responsibility. Gayatri Spivak argues that the ‘response’ in responsibility “involves not only ‘respond to,’ [...] but also the related situations of ‘answering to,’ as in being responsible for a name,” and, “when it is possible for the other to be face-to-face, the task and lesson of attending to her response so that it can draw forth one’s own” (Spivak 1994, 22). There is, for Derrida and Spivak alike, a certain *accountability* that comes with scholarship that often goes unrecognized.⁴ The institutional concept implicit in Raessens’ work, as discussed above, is one form of this misrecognition: a positioning of scholars as largely ‘outside’ the phenomena they purport to study and a disavowal of crucial areas where scholarly politicization is long overdue—an

avoidance of complicity and thus of accountability and responsibility.

Consider, in contrast, the work of Phillips with the #TransformDH Collective (e.g. Bailey et al. 2016; Boyles et al. 2018; Lothian and Phillips 2013), which she describes as “a loosely affiliated group of early-career academics working to bring social justice to the forefront of digital humanities” (Phillips 2018, 125). This collective does not merely address issues of diversity and representation within an overwhelmingly white and masculine field, but also engages with the consequences of digital methods for the Humanities in other ways. The envisioned transformations are therefore quite radical:

[...] instead of smoothing out the bugs in the digital academy, we wonder how digital practices and projects might participate in more radical processes of transformation—might *rattle the poles of the big tent rather than slip seamlessly into it*. To that end, we are interested in digital scholarship that takes aim at the more deeply rooted traditions of the academy: its commitment to the works of white men, living and dead; its overvaluation of Western and colonial perspectives on (and in) culture; its reproduction of heteropatriarchal generational structures. *Perhaps we should inhabit, rather than eradicate, the status of bugs—even of viruses—in the system*. Perhaps there are different systems and anti-systems to be found: DIY projects, projects that don’t only belong to the academy, projects that

still matter even if they aren't funded, even if they fail. (Lothian and Phillips 2013, n.p.; emphases mine)

To not be 'paracritical' but *parasitical*, to acknowledge an irreducible complicity and to accept what Haraway calls a "viral response-ability" (Haraway 2016, 114). That is what a critical-materialist game studies must do, it seems to me. For such a field, a healthy disloyalty to the University 'within' the walls of academia is preferable over a smooth incorporation into its corporate, cybernetic structure. Well-meaning experiments like Jerreat-Poole's *Nonbinary* and hybrid publications like *First Person Scholar* quite naturally embody the tensions that come with this position. They are undoubtedly in the business of questioning exactly what aspects 'belong to the academy' and which ones do not; their democratizing intentions are evidence of this, and there are certainly ways in which they allow for a different institutional concept than both the neoliberal university and white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy tend to prefer. However, this questioning is already inherent to the University's aporetic situation, and the technologies that facilitate this process are all too easily co-opted by cybernetic capital—the aforementioned 'democratization *dispositif*' in 'free' game development engines like Twine and Unity being but one example of this (cf. Nicoll and Keogh

2019). An academic politics of complicity should therefore be constantly aware of the risks that complicity brings; for capitalists, vectoralists, *and* for academics themselves.

Ludic Materialism, a New Paradigm?

I've argued, in a series of theoretical duels with Huizinga and some of his followers (in order of appearance: Caillois, Sicart, Aarseth, and Raessens), that there's no such thing as 'pure' play, a play entirely distinct from the seriousness of ordinary life, informatic control, and imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In doing so, I have aligned myself with French post-structuralism (Baudrillard, Derrida), left-wing critical theory (Galloway, Hall, Hoofd, Wark), feminist game studies (Chess, Gray, Phillips, Shaw), and game studies' material turn (Apperley, Ash, Dyer-Witheford, Keogh, Kerr, Kocurek). I conclude that there *is* a version of (digital) play that game scholars can and should be advocating for—a version that's *seductive* in the way that Baudrillard imagines it, simultaneously inherent to and opposed to the cybernetic systems that seek to contain its unrelenting potential for inciting the latter's reversion. An anti-capitalist theory of digital play, play-as-seduction, must acknowledge that even seduction itself, in issuing its reciprocal challenge to 'ludic' simulation, the

principle of production, and the logics of capital, can be the subject of *détournement* and recuperation. Digital play, even in its most explicitly liberatory forms, still needs to contend with the fact that capital will not voluntarily accept a truly agonistic relation. When met with such a challenge, cybernetic capitalism either integrates or it destroys; often both at the same time, but *never neither*. The spectral figure of the Gamer™ exemplifies this perfectly: created by the military-entertainment complex to control the audience of videogames, he determines the ‘rules of engagement’ for the medium to such an extent that even those nominally opposed to his oppressive regime may end up serving his interests. It is the responsibility of game scholars, located as we often are in a University that itself obeys the laws of cybernetic capital, to unflinchingly question this dire situation and its root causes—and, lest we forget, our own complicity in its perpetuation.¹

How will this critical-materialist paradigm fit into the current canon of concepts known to game studies? Will it even fit at all? Might it take its place among those that draw on the etymology of *ludus* and *ludere*: ludology, ludocapitalism, ludopolitics, ludosity, ludic economies, the ludic turn, ludification...*ludic materialism*? Perhaps this could be a synonym for critical-materialist game studies, although ‘ludomaterialism’ would have been more

grammatically correct—materialism as relates to games, instead of a ‘game-like’ materialism. Ludic materialism could, of course, be both. It might, for example, take the videogame medium as its subject and then follow Haraway’s optimistic, world-building line of materialist thought:

We need to develop practices for thinking about those forms of activity that are not caught by functionality, those which propose the possible-but-not-yet, or that which is not-yet but still open. It seems to me that our politics these days require us to give each other the heart to do just that. To figure out how, with each other, we can open up possibilities for what can still be. And we can’t do that in a negative mood. [...] Through playful engagement with each other, we get a hint about what can still be and learn how to make it stronger. (Haraway 2019, n.p.; original emphasis)

Play might break the possible-impossible. It might also not. The ‘ludic’ in ludic materialism should be met with suspicion even—or especially—among game scholars, because, as Baudrillard rightly observes, “Modern repression [...] operates in play (combinatory liberty) as it flourishes in the mass-media [...] and as it culminates in the critical play of the intelligentsia; *it operates in the play to which desire definitively resigns itself*” (Baudrillard 2001, 66; emphasis mine). If academia is a game and what scholars do is play,

are we content with our play being cold seduction, a ‘combinatory liberty’? Do we resign ourselves and our desires for a better future to the ‘ludic’ simulation that is the contemporary University? Or can we envision a ‘critical play’, like digital play, that is more than a diffuse/defused intellectual agonism?

What’s more, with the ongoing expansion of gamespace in view, do we give in to the neoliberal illusion that we have a choice *not* to do so, and that we can escape our responsibility to fight it? Teresa L. Ebert notes that “theory is not simply a cognitivism but a historical site of social struggle over how we represent reality, that is, over how we construct reality and the ways to change it” (Ebert 1992, 13). Theory and concepts *matter*, and will always do so, but with that recognition comes political obligation. In the same way that feminism relies on patriarchy as its core “struggle concept” (Ebert 1992, 20), maybe concepts like gamespace, military-entertainment complex, and Gamer™ can serve as theoretical matrices that allow critical-materialist game scholars “to perceive the way experience is produced and thus empower us to change the social relations and produce new non-exploitative experiences and collective subjectivities” (Ebert 1992, 32). For that to happen, we don’t need a ‘ludic’ materialism that resigns itself to the constraints of the University or the rules of the level playing field that

masks cybernetic capitalism. We need a *critical* materialism that knows the potentials and the limits of (digital) play as a vector for liberation.

I cannot claim to have completed this line of thought by any means, nor even to have provided a ‘closed’ argument in its favour. While some of my writing zooms in quite closely on certain authors, frameworks, and topics, much of it also paints in broad strokes, draws from many different and disparate sources, and briefly employs concepts for a paragraph or two only to discard them immediately afterwards. The large number of direct citations make the text dense, but also provide its reader with many avenues for further inquiry. This all might be seen as a lack of coherence or depth, or it might be taken for what it aspires to be: a sequence of provocations, suggestions, and speculations that answer the call of scholarly responsibility. Thought that aims towards liberation and social justice, in my view, “must know that it is playing without any possible conclusion, in a definitive form of illusion, and hence of *putting-into-play*—including putting its own status in play” (Baudrillard 2003, 93 emphasis mine). Yes, this deconstructive/seductive form of scholarship emphasizes playfulness in its engagement with theory and praxis, but this theoretical play does not need to be a mere “affirmation of that which already exists” (Ebert 1992, 11) if one realizes that

the stakes can be as high in play as in any other mode of being. Especially now, when the ludified university is being further integrated into gamespace with each passing semester, and a great number of highly educated graduate students and disenfranchised temporary staff leave the institution for better-paid and slightly less precarious jobs in other sectors, we ought to wonder more often what the stakes are in the game called academia.

Sylvère Lotringer once named one of Virilio's first monographs on speed a "theoretical accident" (Virilio and Lotringer 2008, 54). Of course, I don't want to claim that my work is comparable to Virilio's start-stop style of writing; I engage with similar issues, but currently I find some measure of continuity and flow in my own thought preferable to short aphorisms and endless implication. (More importantly, lengthy theoretical development and analysis remains the only accepted mode of humanistic media scholarship, especially at the graduate level.) I would, however, suggest that there is a sense in which *all* critical thought might strive to be such an accident, an "interruption" of the status quo wherein "something else can happen and a space can appear" (Virilio and Lotringer 2008, 53). This suggestion comes with the important caveat that theoretical accidents can also become "accidents of theory" (Bratton 2006, 21), whose interruptions are immediately used to reify

existing systems rather than dismantle them. They could even be said to *necessarily always be both*. Even the most critical work is bound up with the subject of its critique, and in cybernetic capitalism we constantly risk both destruction *and* recuperation. The three videogames I've most extensively analysed here are examples of this, but so is this text as a whole: my deconstruction *of* game studies inevitably also wants to be a work *in* game studies, and my critique of the contemporary University is written (hopefully) in accordance with the University's demands. It seeks approval from those same institutions it ostensibly distances itself from, never quite leaving their orbit in its endeavour to reach beyond the horizon.

We have yet to see whether the University is, or can be, or could ever be anything else than, as Hoofd suggests, "fatally wounded" (Hoofd 2017, 137). What is at least more certain is that, like cybernetic capitalism, *the University is fatally wounding us*. We are building this post-discipline in an environment that pushes the vast majority of its most critical workers—especially its Black, queer, disabled, and feminine workers—into financial debt and general precarity; and really, we seem quite unwilling to talk about that openly. This is less surprising when one considers that the inherent goals of the University are in fact, for better *and* for worse, partially aligned with those of cybernetic

capitalism. It isn't so strange, then, to suggest that "critical academics are the professionals par excellence" (Moten and Harney 2004, 111) if our critiques of the University don't take into account the potency of its 'outside', its parasites, its *Undercommons* as Moten and Harney call this class. A politics of complicity requires us to traverse that parasitical universe, to step into things betwixt. Better yet: we should join the Undercommons in class solidarity, if we weren't already among them to begin with. Ultimately, our only choice is to "sneak into the university and steal what [we] can" (Moten and Harney 2004, 101), and to be prepared to leave at any time. Is it imaginable at all, nowadays, for us to actually leave the University behind? For game scholars, most pertinently, but eventually for all critical pursuers of knowledge and justice? Can we still imagine the end of capitalism and join "the prophetic organization that works for the red and black abolition" (Moten and Harney 2004, 115)? What of patriarchy, white supremacy, liberal democracy, the prison-industrial complex, the State, the fossil-fuel industry, and any other remaining orders of production? The admittedly fraught but apparently quite potent alliance between seduction and intersectionality may be of use in these matters, although it will undoubtedly require further elaboration. What of the systems that ought to potentially replace the aforementioned—communism, to name

just one? To be sure, there's a place for digital play in the struggle for communism: hackers and modders are still reversing hierarchies within the cultural field of video-games even as they are constantly being recuperated by capital, and digital art has all but lost its ability to use cybernetic infrastructures for purposes beyond capital's usual profit motive. Steal from the Gamers™, give to the Undercommons.

Notes

The Turn to Materialism in Game Studies

1. **(p. 3)** To add insult to injury, the above citation follows a discussion of Carl Schmitt's 'friend-foe principle' and the 'puerile ideology' of Nazi Germany. Huizinga criticizes Schmitt from the stance that his political theology, and by extension that of Nazism, is primarily responsible for the loss of the play-element in modern warfare. "I know of no sadder or deeper fall from human reason," he writes, "than Schmitt's barbarous and pathetic delusion about the friend-foe principle. His inhuman cerebrations do not even hold water as a piece of formal logic. For it is not war that is serious, but peace. War and everything to do with it remains fast in the daemonic and magical bonds of play. Only by transcending that pitiable friend-foe relationship will mankind enter into the dignity of man's estate. Schmitt's brand of 'seriousness' merely takes us back to the savage level" (Huizinga 1949, 209). While I cannot but agree that Schmitt's theory is vile, Huizinga's underlying reasons for objecting to it are also misguided. He holds the pretence that there had ever been an originary, purely playful form of warfare to return to, and writes as if the worst crime of Nazism is cheating at the game of war.
2. **(p. 27)** Followers of the second-wave French feminism that Baudrillard criticizes responded to his thesis with

scorn and not-unjustified annoyance (cf. e.g. Gallop 1986; Gane 1992; Plant 1993). Claims like, “Instead of rising up against such ‘insulting’ counsel, women would do well to let themselves be seduced by its truth, for here lies the secret of their strength, which they are in the process of losing by erecting a contrary, feminine depth” (Baudrillard 1990, 10) surely did not help to make his female and feminist readers more receptive to his words. His equation of femininity and seductiveness does smack of a rather conservative worldview that in a certain sense perpetuates the same essentialism that Baudrillard *appears* to be writing against, as does his—evidently ironic (but of course, this is a problematic qualification to make!), but superficially reactionary—suggestion that the “entire history of patriarchal domination, of phallocracy, the immemorial male privilege [...] is perhaps only a story” (Baudrillard 1990, 15). However, more recently some theorists have pointed out that many of Baudrillard’s insights on the seductive potential of artifice and the *re-production* of patriarchal logics in feminism align with common critiques now heard in third-wave feminist and queer thought (e.g. Grace 2008; Hoofd 2010).

3. **(p. 30)** There is a notable parallel here with Derridean deconstruction, which relies on notions like *différance* (difference/deferral), iterability, and play(!) to show that “an opposition of metaphysical concepts (e.g., speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the confrontation

of two terms, but a hierarchy and the order of a subordination. Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing—put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of *intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes and that is also a field of nondiscursive forces” (Derrida 1988b [1972], 21).

Digital Play and the Logics of Capital

1. **(p. 41)** James Shasha, the videogame’s programmer, said of the gender mechanics in a Steam forum comment: “Multiple people on the team are nonbinary, trans, or otherwise gender nonconforming. Gender in the game reflects the way gender in real life works. [...] Gender is highly pathologized in our society and feeling okay about it often requires spending money on expensive [treatments], or struggling through constant dysphoria—something represented by the screen and text effects.” (See: <https://steamcommunity.com/app/436500/discussions/0/343786746009186425/#c343786746010156654>.)
2. **(p. 63)** I played the game as an art installation at a gallery in Haarlem in 2017. At the time, I was so shocked and impressed by the game that I wrote: “*Killbox* demonstrates perfectly how a game can say very much with very little. We aren’t even presented with a coherent narrative

or emotional backstory to make us empathise with those that were killed. We establish a connection with a coloured sphere and then that connection is brutally, senselessly severed, and everyone knows what happened, why it happened and what it means. This is what games are capable of: they convey meaning through *playing*, by letting the player *experience* something instead of telling/showing them. In its epilogue, *Killbox* presents some statistics on civilian deaths caused by drone warfare, but the words aren't necessary: the message was delivered by the missile that destroyed the village" (Jansen 2017, n.p.).

3. **(p. 76)** This is an important move to make: not only do videogames construct the boundaries in which play takes place, but they are *themselves* both the result of and a form of digital play. There is, in my framework, no clear difference between Caillois' categories of rule-bound *ludus* and unbounded *paidia* (cf. Caillois 2001, 36) because both are subsumed under the category of the 'ludic'. Moreover, one consequence of the momentary conflation of player and videogame, into what Keogh calls an intercorporeal "assemblage that is the *player-and-video-game*" (Keogh 2018, 22; original emphasis), is that the common theoretical separation of 'play' and 'game' becomes troublesome *a priori*. The two are inseparable in the actual moment of videogame play, which is in itself a justification for my occasional conflation of them into 'digital play'.

4. **(p. 89)** See, for example, the highly-rated “Sanidrone’s Guide to Success,” which contains key advice such as: “If you’re brave (or crazy) enough, go gender-sober! Don’t buy any genders from the kiosks and suffer the consequences for as long as it takes,” or “Luck is a *HUGE* part of this game, and I don’t just mean some of your typical RNG here. The nine goddesses themselves will have to be on your side in this world. [...] Don’t bother with lucky amulets or Beb’s tears, or any item of the sort if you don’t plan on leaving it at a shrine, it’ll just be a waste of time and money in the long run.” (See: <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=1863257496>.)

Gamers™, or: Designed Technicities and Preferred Customers

1. **(p. 96)** On this subject, the post-Marxist notion of “Empire” as theorized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri has been especially influential in game studies ever since it was popularized by Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, who describe it as the “emergence of a new planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military and communicative components combine to create a system of power ‘with no outside’” (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, xix). In striking parallel to my discussion of cybernetic capitalism, Hardt and Negri argue: “The transformation of the modern imperialist geography of the globe and the realization of the world market signal a passage within the capitalist mode of production. Most

significant, the spatial divisions of the three Worlds (First, Second, and Third) have been scrambled so that we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all. *Capital seems to be faced with a smooth world—or really, a world defined by new and complex regimes of differentiation and homogenization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization.* The construction of the paths and limits of these new global flows has been accompanied by a transformation of the dominant productive processes themselves, with the result that the role of industrial factory labor has been reduced and priority given instead to communicative, cooperative, and affective labor. In the postmodernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward what we will call biopolitical production, *the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another*” (Hardt and Negri 2000, xiii; emphases mine). Their account of global capitalism has been criticized, however, precisely for this alleged quality of smoothness’, as it unjustly renders irrelevant the attention paid by postcolonialism to the often very localized effects of that imperialism (cf. Kim 2015). My intention with the concept of cybernetic capitalism is neither to forego these issues nor to argue that postcolonialism has become redundant. It recognizes the centrality of the United States in proliferating cybernetic control—although Japan, China, and Europe have

contributed to this significantly as well—and, more importantly, continuously emphasizes that ‘smoothness’ is in reality an *unattainable goal* rather than a given fact.

2. **(p. 104)** As indicated by the wide range of the aforementioned calls, as well as Phillips’ use of the term ‘white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy’ in her recent work, feminist and queer game scholarship have rightly embraced key analytical tenets of intersectionality, which Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge define as the idea “that major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together” (Collins and Bilge 2016, n.p.).
3. **(p. 106)** The focus throughout this chapter is on the Gamer™ as a designed technicity specifically for *players*, but much of this theory will be relevant for those workers who are officially employed by the videogame industry. One clear indication for this is the lasting dominance of young white men in most positions within the game development cycle—according to some sources the percentage of men in production roles ranged between 79 and 95 percent in 2014 (Kerr 2017, 102). An especially telling example was the recent scandal at Riot Games: in 2018, *Kotaku* published a lengthy report that revealed the widespread sexism of Riot Games’ “bro culture” of “passionate gamers” (D’Anastasio 2018). The report was damning and demonstrated a structural culture of gender

discrimination. One year later, significant improvements had been made according to some, but others felt that more progress should have been made given the severity of the situation (cf. D'Anastasio 2019a). Several months later that same year, the company settled the gender discrimination lawsuit with its former female employees with a ten-million-dollar settlement fund (cf. D'Anastasio 2019b).

4. **(p. 118)** In her analysis of what can only be described as a planetary biosphere simulator, Wark formulates an incisive critique both of Marxism's general tendency to separate nature from social history (see my discussion of Baudrillard in the first chapter) and of the techno-optimistic accelerationism found on all sides of the political spectrum: "You had always thought that if the economy in the real world cranked along at maximum efficiency, then technology would also bobble along at a rate sufficient to deal with the little problems that might occur along the way. Just like in a well-designed game. Karl Marx: 'Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.' Well, maybe. What the *SimEarth* algorithm points to is that like most people, you had always taken this on faith. What happens if the little problems aren't just accidental byproducts—a little oil spill here, a toxic waste disaster there—what if the

military entertainment complex itself was mucking up the global conditions of its own success? Gamespace is just like your PlayStation. *It appears to itself as a rigorous game, with every action accounted for, and yet it relies on a huge power cord poking out the back that sucks in energy from an elsewhere for which it makes no allowance. That the game is not really ruled off from the world, that it relies on an external source of power, did not really occur to you until you played your new PlayStation for hours and hours and it overheated.* Tantalum, like the rest of planet earth, is only good with so much heat. There is something outside The Cave after all. Game over” (Wark 2007, §210; emphasis mine).

5. (p. 121) These criticisms are, moreover, often based on misunderstandings or plain bad readings. To name a recent example: Aarseth has claimed on several occasions that Huizinga and Caillois neglected the pervasive presence of the play-element in Ancient Roman culture, allegedly because “the great Roman games, the *Ludi Romani*, were bloody and fatal affairs which were designed for, among other things, teaching the public how one dies with dignity. [Their] mere existence did not fit [Huizinga’s and Caillois’] romantic ideology very well” (Aarseth 2017, n.p.; cf. 2018). Caillois indeed hardly mentions the Romans, but Aarseth’s assertion is plainly false regarding Huizinga, who writes: “The play-element in the Roman State is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the cry for *panem et circenses*. A modern ear is inclined to

detect in this cry *little more than the demand of the unemployed proletariat for the dole and free cinema tickets*. But it had a deeper significance. Roman society could not live without games. They were as necessary to its existence as bread—for they were holy games and the people's right to them was a holy right. Their basic function lay not merely in celebrating such prosperity as the community had already won for itself, but in fortifying it and ensuring future prosperity by means of ritual. The great and bloody Roman games were a survival of the archaic play-factor in depotentialized form. *Few of the brutalized mob of spectators felt anything of the religious quality inherent in these performances, and the Emperor's liberality on such occasions had sunk to mere alms-giving on a gigantic scale to a miserable proletariat*. All the more significant, therefore, of the importance attached to the play-function in Roman culture is the fact that not one of the innumerable new cities, literally built on sand, omitted to erect an amphitheatre, destined to endure through the ages very often as the only trace of a very short-lived municipal glory” (Huizinga 1949, 177–78; emphases mine). This passage comes towards the end of the second-to-last chapter of *Homo Ludens*, where Huizinga shows himself at his most reactionary and discusses Ancient Roman society at quite some length. In fact, Huizinga's view of Roman games fits perfectly with his deeply conservative romanticism, because he presents their prominence as “the after-play of civilization in decline”

(Huizinga 1949, 179) and believes that Rome only warrants discussion in contrast to his beloved Hellenic culture. He may not have had much of any value to say about ‘the great Roman games’, but to deny that he said anything at all is both a factual and scholarly error. Through this denial, Aarseth conveniently avoids having to deal with the significant conservative element in Huizinga’s thought and thus *avoids politicizing his theory of play*.

6. **(p. 132)** Aveiro-Ojeda was one of the most prominent voices in bringing the allegations to light, see their full thread on Twitter about the subject here: <https://twitter.com/babbygoth/status/1194365243918606337>.

Playing the Neoliberal University

1. **(p. 136)** We may read Baudrillard as a philosopher who actively *chooses* to ‘inhabit’ those diacritical relations he knows to be false, accelerating them to such a degree that they come apart without his explicit interference: “What interested me was a kind of becoming-masculine of the feminine and becoming-feminine of the masculine, against the prejudiced view that the masculine in itself is sexual identity. I understood the feminine as that which contradicts the masculine/feminine opposition, the value opposition between the two sexes. The feminine was that which transversalized these notions and, in a manner of speaking, abolished sexual identity” (Baudrillard 2003, 21–22). The reproduction of that conservative and Eurocentric dimorphism is, in this reading, done in a fully

ironic and self-aware fashion, and becomes an implicit invitation for the theory-fiction of seduction to itself be seduced and traversed.

2. **(p. 157)** In other sections of the article, Raessens analyses a debate between Aarseth and Jenkins that occurred in 2005 at the University of Umeå in Sweden. His account of the debate is quite damning of Aarseth's position that the ludology versus narratology dispute was limited to the late 1990s and early 2000s (cf. Aarseth 2019), as well as of Aarseth's personal stance within it: "What interests me most in this debate are the following methodological questions. Do we as an academic community of game researchers accept the coexistence of competing frameworks of interpretation, in accordance with the tradition of the humanities? This seems to be Jenkins's position, and it is one I agree with, when he states that both narratology and ludology can be equally productive. Or, do we adhere to the paradigmatic character of academic progress following Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science? This seems to be Aarseth's position when he rules out narratology as an outdated paradigm. If we want game studies to really come of age academically, we should not only further develop different theories and methods but also make the latter the object of our research and discussion" (Raessens 2006, 55).
3. **(p. 166)** Raessens defines serious games as follows: "Serious games are games that are designed and used with the intention or purpose to address the most

pressing contemporary issues and to have real-life consequences, for the world outside the magic circle of the game as well as for the player of the game, during and after playing. In this definition, five elements play a crucial role: 1. The intention or purpose with which these games are designed; 2. The intention or purpose with which they are used in a specific context; 3. The issues addressed by these games; 4. Their possible real-life effects on the outside world; and 5. Their impact on the player” (Raessens 2015, 246). Note, again, the indebtedness to Huizinga with terms like the ‘magic circle’ and the explicit separation of games and the ‘outside world’, even as there is a recognition that serious games are always used within ‘a specific context’.

4. **(p. 173)** Spivak writes: “The liberal Euro-U.S. academic, unceasingly complicitous with the text of exploitation, possibly endorsing child slavery every time s/he drinks a cup of tea, paying taxes to destroy survival ecobiomes of the world’s poor, sometimes mouthing a ‘Marxism’ liberal-humanized out of existence, and talking no doubt against U.S. military aggression, profoundly irresponsible to the academic’s one obligation of not writing on something carelessly read, cannot understand the complexity of this verdict. For them the happy euphoria of being in the right. That their relationship to dominant capital is not unlike deconstruction’s to Heidegger and therefore involves ‘responsibility’ is not something they can arrive at through their own thinking, which will not

open itself to what it resists. And they are certainly not willing to see if they are able to learn it through deconstruction. For them, deconstruction remains caught in the competition of whose sword is sharper” (Spivak 1994, 35).

Ludic Materialism, a New Paradigm?

1. **(p. 178)** Readers who are familiar with the field of game studies may note some similarities between my present endeavour and the recent work of Paolo Ruffino, from whom I have been reluctant to draw so far. What I call a critical-materialist game studies indeed bears a certain resemblance to his idea of a “Creative Game Studies,” which “offers a mode of writing about and intervening in game culture which is *intuitive, timely, performative, ethical, anti-authoritarian* and *anxious*” (Ruffino 2018, 12). My theorizing, too, is concerned with ethico-political questions and anti-authoritarianism, and openly admits to a certain anxiety that comes with its seductive, deconstructive approach to digital play. The apparent alignment with Ruffino becomes even more poignant when taking into account his figure of the game scholar as a “parasite to gaming” (Ruffino 2018, 106): we are both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ videogame culture, just as the University is both necessarily independent from and inevitably imbricated in society at large. He accurately stipulates some of the problems that arise from the temporal disjunctions between videogame culture and videogame

scholarship, even approaching a medium-specific ‘aporia of speed’ when he writes that “it seems that every game, console, article and academic text is always catching up, necessarily out of date before its release or publication” (Ruffino 2018, 120). Two crucial lacunae in his writing have made me reluctant to work with these arguments, however. First is the problem of Ruffino’s theoretical framework: while there is no lack of attention to *materiality* across his interventions (mostly theorized in a Latourian actor-network relation), he has precious little to say about *material conditions* beyond some off-hand remarks about capitalism, which appears to me a strange choice for someone who is bent on contending with the discourses and narratives put forth by the videogame industry. His Foucauldian understanding of “how power creates the conditions for making divisions, narrating the past, predicting the future, and more generally saying the truth” (Ruffino 2018, 17) is useful to an extent, but such a framework tends to lose its explanatory strength when it is not firmly rooted in some recognition of the material stakes that belie those relations of power. Second is the lack of situatedness and specificity in his theory of game-scholarly parasitism, which Martin also observes in his review:

[...] what is missing is a deep analysis of the institutional incentives, rewards and norms that structure the writing of game culture differently for different scholars. The game scholar may be a parasite, but [their]

transformational potentials are structured by the economics of academia, tenure and promotion rituals, publication norms and a host of other considerations that define the scope and impact of academic game writing. (Martin 2020, n.p.).

Evidently, I myself have not been able to do justice to all of these aspects either, yet Ruffino moreover lacks a situation of *himself* as a single instance of the (white, European, male) ‘game scholar’ and what that means for the kinds of narratives he seeks to (re)write. My work here thus serves as an indirect correction to the promise of Creative Game Studies, with the hope that it might serve as a vector for radically anti-capitalist and intersectional-feminist thought in game studies more broadly in the near future.

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