For the eye of the witness

Dispositif analysis of The Automated Sniper

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Abstract

Gamification is a term circulating in academia in the recent years under the definition of using playful behaviors in non-game contexts. While its pre-conceptions are tied to playfulness and entertainment, artists have been implementing it into performance works which aim to provoke a conversation, rather than simply amuse. For this thesis, the interactive performance *The Automated Sniper* by Julian Hetzel is selected to exemplify such performances.

Whilst constructed as a first-person shooting game, this performance simulates contemporary warfare as the weapon on stage is a paintball sniper -reminiscent of unmanned aerial vehicles, otherwise known as drones. Notably, such drone programs are defined by great distance, which disconnects our gaze from the battlefield and thus from the rivals on ground. The main aim for this research then becomes investigating how is gamification applied to propose a new viewpoint, and through it, critique current warfare approaches.

To understand how this experience is different from a video game, the analysis will adopt the method of dispositif analysis in order to examine each component of this staged situation. By doing so, the thesis is looking into the utilized technology, measuring whether it leans towards war or games and how does this combination of styles engage the spectator. The narrative is then connected to this form only to discover that while *The Automated Snipe*r engages the spectators in a first-person shooting game, it portrays the enemy as civilians – individuals concerned, but usually neglected by both game narratives and governmental reports of military programs. Lastly, the mode of address is analyzed to examine what is the suggested position of the spectator. While previous research has shown that using playful behaviors strengthens the learning process, this performance's message lays not in the decision to participate, but in the willingness to observe one of your fellow audience members taking up the joystick of the gun and directing the muzzle at the actors on stage. This state of witnessing, however, does not only apply in the auditorium but expands to the realms of reality, where our privilege to solely observe violent conflicts goes hand in hand with the responsibility for such violations of human rights.

"I think art is the only power, the only political power, the only revolutionary power, the only evolutionary power! I think art is the only power that can free mankind from all repression. I say not, but art has already realized this, on the contrary. And because it has not, art has to be developed as a weapon."

The Automated Sniper, Julian Hetzel, 2017

Introduction

As theatre remains a space for communal experience, the political ceases to remain outside of its context. From ancient Greek tragedians to contemporary playwrights, artists create works which resonate with reality and include the audience in a conversation about morale and human suffering. Just as we become more imaginative in our ways of expression and use of technology, distant conflicts become easier to observe and the auditorium expands to include the audience in those stories. The approaches in use blur the lines between mediums and allow the spectator to participate in ways, otherwise dedicated to different mediums. This opens a new level of this platform where individuals and communities can explore their role in society. An example of such an initiative is Julian Hetzel's 2017 performance, *The Automated Sniper,* which aims to bring the witness closer to events of remote warfare that are often discussed and carried out behind closed doors.

Hetzel's works often depict political issues through a realistic and documentary approach.[1] *The Automated Sniper* is no exception – even though constructed as a seemingly innocent game, it provokes conversation about contemporary warfare's reality. This performance has two strongly distinguishable narrative parts. The first unfolds under Debussy's Clair de Lune's sounds and portrays two characters exploring the white-walled space and assembling random

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[1] "The Automated Sniper," Julian Hetzel, last modified March 14, 2018, https://julian-hetzel.com/projects/the-automated-sniper/.

objects, then naming them as if they were pieces of art. The second part is defined as "the game of war" and consists of three levels. As explained by the leading operator of the game – Ana Wild – war is one of the oldest games humans play, and like any other, it has strict rules that are to be followed to win. She then invites a volunteer from the audience to take a seat in a small space behind the stage where they would take control over a paintball sniper's joystick, pointed at the actors and their creations. Meanwhile, the volunteer's face is projected on the white wall, exposing their reactions to the rest of the audience. For each level, a new volunteer is invited, and by the last stage, they are ruthlessly navigated by Ana Wild's gentle voice to shoot and take out the actors on stage, identified as the enemy in the game.

Even though they date back from 1975, Michael Kirby's notes on political theatre still prove applicable to contemporary performances like the selected case. As clarified later in the analysis, through Kirby's definition, *The Automated Sniper* is indeed resting on the branch of political theatre due to its direct address of war.[2] Academia consists of abundance of texts on gamification, and even more on the interactive approaches in political theatre uses to present its audience with contemporary societal issues. However, the intersection between gamification and political theatre is yet to be mapped out. To contribute to this discourse and examine how this mixture can initiate social change, illustrate both the academic and social motivators of the following analysis. Thus, the relevance of the following analysis lies in further exploring how the dramaturgy of gamification can deepen the critical thought over political topics.

Firstly, needs to understand the complex relationship between political theatre and the invitation for the audience's playful interaction with it. Surely, if the performance were not interactive, or the narrative was constructed in a less game-like competitive manner, the overall experience would have differed. *The Automated Sniper*, however, is not only interactive but consciously constructed to resemble a first-person shooting game. In addition, this comparison can be further

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[2] Michael Kirby, "On Political Theatre," *The Drama Review: TDR* 19, no. 2 (1975): 129, doi:10.2307/1144954.

linked to military training simulations, created to remind the player of a games such as DOOM, thus expanding the social context of this research.[3] For what purposes is the gamified form selected and how its implementation affects the message of the performance will be examined through answering the research question:

How does the performance The Automated Sniper utilize gamification to present a critique of contemporary warfare?

A few sub-questions will be addressed to map this case:

- *How does gamification's approach allow the performance to present the topic of war compared to first-person shooting games?*
- *How does the narrative's construction the characters propose a humanized view over the "enemy" in violent conflicts?*
- *What is the suggested role of the audience and how much of the witness's agency is recognized through the mode of address?*

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Methodology

The methodological approach selected for the case is dispositif analysis, and through it, the thesis will aim to map out the components that build up *The Automated Sniper*. According to Nanna Verhoeff, The concept "dispositif" refers to a *screening situation* defined by the specific space and time of the actual "screening" together with "its specific mode of address and the spectator that is positioned within this arrangement."[4] She further argues that each component of such situations plays a fundamental role in how meaning is produced through a

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[3] Jonna Eagle, "Interactive," in *War Games* (Chicago: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 137.
[4] Nanna Verhoeff and Karin van Es, "Dispositif Analysis: How to Do a Concept-Driven Dispositif Analysis," (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2020), 1.

subjective experience.[5] While her manual *How to Do a Concept-Driven Dispositif Analysis* is discussing mainly cinematic cases, constructed differently from *The Automated Sniper,* the backbone of the approach can be easily adapted for the means of this research.

Often depicted as a triangle, the dispositif situation has three main components. For Verhoeff, those are "screen," "content," and "spectator."[6] Adapting dispositif analysis to the setting of theatre, the text below focuses not only on the screen but also on every piece of technology or space included in the narrative. Thus, this segment is to be referred to as "form", rather than "screen."

The "form" then includes the stage, the paintball gun, the projector facing the walls of the stage, the joystick, and the space where it is positioned. In addition, this aspect is compared to the construction of first-person shooting games, using Jonna Eagle's writings on the topic to better grasp the construction of playful behaviors in the context of participatory theatre.[7] This segment aims to examine how similar is the performance to first-person shooting games and whether it simulates them completely or imitates only certain aspects of them, and for what reasons.

The section on "content" focuses on the portrayal of war, still relating it to the combination of playful behavior and political theatre. The main concern of this conjunction is to observe the components of the narrative which differ from the storylines of war games. Through this, the thesis establishes an argument on how gamification is used on a narrative level to present a closer standpoint for observing the enemy. Most importantly, this segment draws conclusions on the notion of creating characters with whom the audience can sympathize while also play against.

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[5] Verhoeff and van Es, "Dispositif Analysis," 2.
[6] Verhoeff and van Es, "Dispositif Analysis," 5.
[7] Eagle, "Interactive."

Finally, the "spectator" is discussed through Andre Lepecki's definition of witness.[8] This concept is relevant to the case as it portrays a viewer who, through his physical presence during a situation, is transformed in an accomplice.[9] By applying this theory to viewing both the performances and war, the thesis grounds its argument on how *The Automated Sniper* positions its audience and how much agency are they granted over the happenings. To substantiate the academic relevance, the thesis explores how gamification characteristics illustrate the content of the performance. For the case's social significance, the analysis will dive deep into the spectator's role in interactive political theatre – their position, how they are being addressed, and what *The Automated Sniper's* construction suggests their role as a spectator is.

To conclude, through this methodology, the thesis attempts to align the definition of political theatre with gamification in the performance. The goal is to shed light on how content is presented through given technology and how this combination navigates the spectator's understanding of the situation.[10] Applied to the performance, it aims to grasp how *The Automated Sniper* depicts and critiques the current state of warfare.

Theories and Concepts

Before diving into the analysis, it is necessary to put forward an academic foundation for the following research. The concepts which will allow the tackling of the research question are political theatre, which is discussed in the section of "content;" gamification- relating to the form; and the concept of witnessing (both theatre and war), which will be addressed in the section focusing on the spectator.

Firstly, the concept of political theatre illustrates the core of this performance. Michael Kirby's notes on this branch of performance arts date back to

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[8] Andre Lepecki, "Afterthought," in *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2016).
[9] Lepecki, "Afterthought," 172.
[10] Verhoeff and van Es, "Dispositif Analysis," 3.

1975 but are still applicable to contemporary performances' approach towards the political. He points out the characteristics that make a theatre performance political, such as the idea that it should be concerned with contemporary civic issues and the aim to change the social perceptions surrounding them.[11] Kirby states that the latter is usually done through an explicit description of what needs to change and how it should be carried out. A more recent proposition of how to challenge the embedded viewpoints is by presenting a different perspective. As Nilanjana Premaratna suggests in her book *Theatre for Peacebuilding*, the multivocal form of theatre allows it to become a platform for the unheard.[12] She argues that looking into post-conflict situations illuminates positions of hierarchy, which further point out the citizens' power to act upon ideologies they find wrong.[13] Thus, while she and Kirby refer to different approaches that theatre employs to address the political, they both agree that such narratives can challenge accepted opinions and initiate social change.

The Automated Sniper embraces both of those approaches. Firstly, aligning with Premaratna by presenting the problem from terrorized civilians' perspective; and secondly, exemplifying Kirby's call for bestowing power over change by harvesting a sense of agency over those characters through encouraging participation. How the audience perceives that is somewhat subjective. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the performance is political as, still by referring to Kirby, it is defined as such by its construction and not necessarily by its interpretation.[14]

Later in the text, Kirby clarifies that political theatre often uses "simple techniques and thought" to convey its message.[15] Accordingly, *The Automated Sniper* engages the audience in a game that requires taking control over a joystick, thus relying on technology familiar from video games. This introduces the central concept for the construction of the piece – gamification. It encompasses

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[11] Kirby, "On Political Theatre," 130-131.
[12] Nilanjana Premaratna, *Theatre for Peacebuilding: The Role of Arts in Conflict Transformation in South Asia* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2018), 34.
[13] Premaratna, *Theatre for Peacebuilding,* 53.
[14] Kirby, "On Political Theatre," 129.
[15] Kirby, 134.

approaches visible in all three angles (form, content, spectator) of the dispositif situation. Although in a broader context, this term is applicably defined in "From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining Gamification" as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts."[16] When discussing the origins of the term, the authors recognize two popular concepts it is used to describe. The first emphasizes the growing institutionalization of video games in everyday life; the second, and more feasible for this case, suggests that since players indicate "unparalleled intensity and duration" of engagement with video games, applying game elements would increase the enjoyment of interacting with non-game products and services.[17] Despite their text discussing gamification as a tool for making non-game situations more entertaining, and in the case of *The Automated Sniper,* this notion of gamifying the experience being used to present a critique over warfare, both of those cases use gamification for the same purposes – harvesting the spectator's voluntarily sensorial engagement.[18] Despite this fundamental similarity, it is yet to be established how identical the performance is to the games it imitates.

For such a comparison, a scale needs to be clarified. Jonna Eagle's writings on first-person shooting games and their resemblance to the military's training simulations allow an elaborate juxtaposition of games, war simulations, and *The Automated Sniper*.[19] In his book, *War Games,* Eagle discusses the differences and similarities between those warfare simulations and provides fundamental points of contrast between games and real warfare. It is necessary, however, to bridge those theories to the realm of theatre. Elena Pérez and Lara Sánchez Coterón provide a foundation for this through their work "Performance Meets Games"*,* where they encourage game designers to draw inspiration from theatre and bring the playground back into the physical realm where players can interact with their

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[16] Sebastian Deterding et al., "From game design elements to gamefulness," *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference on Envisioning Future Media Environments - MindTrek '11*, September 2011, 10, doi:10.1145/2181037.2181040.
[17] Deterding, "From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness," 10.
[18] Deterding, 10.
[19] Eagle, "Interactive."

surroundings.[20] By doing so, they provide a detailed analysis of the interactive approaches used by theatre and applicable to game design. They recognize three types of human-to-human interaction suitable for bringing the player's interaction back to the foreground; the second of those is pertinent to the performance as it entails the game characters to be portrayed by humans who respond to the player's instructions.[21] This aligns with the case study's construction and further accentuates the audience's power and responsibility for a narrative taking place in the physical world.[22]

Similarly, in the text "Performing Perception", Peter Dalsgaard and his colleagues discuss the experience of system-user interaction, yet in public places.[23] While their text is concerned with street-placed interactive art technologies, the findings prove essential to the following analysis as they, too, recognize the witness's power. Even so, their analysis does not expand further than arguing that when presented with an audience, humans tend to adopt performative behaviors.[24] This thesis aims to further deepen this argument by tying those agencies to the concept of witnessing and the position this role of the spectator suggests.

Accordingly, Andre Lepecki includes several notes on witnessing within and outside of the theatre in the conclusion of his book *Singularities- Dance in The Age of Performance;* in those last pages, he proposes that the value of the spectator's gaze has been continuously elevated and condemned as it enters the realms of the 21st-century capitalist reality.[25] Considering this context, he states that the witness has been transformed into an accomplice, responsible for keeping the performance or event alive after its end.[26] Despite his focus on the moments of post-production, his views on the notion of viewing are applicable for the duration of *The Automated Sniper* as he proposes a clear distinction between a witness and a spectator, where

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[20] Elena Pérez and Lara Sánchez Coterón, "Performance Meets Games: Considering Interaction Strategies in Game Design," *Digital Creativity* 24, no. 2 (2013): 158, doi:10.1080/14626268.2013.808963.
[21] Pérez and Coterón, "Performance Meets Games," 160.
[22] Pérez and Coterón, "Performance Meets Games," 161.
[23] Dalsgaard and Hansen, "Performing Perception."
[24] Dalsgaard and Hansen, "Performing Perception," 9.
[25] Lepecki, "*Afterthought*," 170.
[26] Lepecki, 173.

the former illustrates an audience aware of the political power of sharing a (theatrical) experience.[27] This ideology is shared by other scholars in the field, like Jacques Ranciere and Susanne Shawyer, who additionally recognize the social power of theatre to address communal problems like human rights and inequality.

The French philosopher Jacques Ranciere, for example, researches the dilemma of the power relations between spectator and actor. In his views, power equals knowledge, thus positioning the actor on a higher intellectual stand than the audience. This is because of the performer's understanding of what is about to happen and how it connects to the performance's intended message.[28] After acknowledging this system, he proceeds to build upon it and propose a new way of viewing this branch of art – with no audience, at least not one that responds to its traditional role and position in the theatrical hierarchy.[29] Ranciere points out that the spectator's emancipation begins with the realization that we are equal in our ability to process and perceive information, as well as build upon it, learn from it, and then spread our knowledge by communicating our ideas and beliefs.[30] Despite this, as cited in Suanne Shawyer's take on the emancipated spectator's concept in participatory theatre, Ranciere does not acknowledge interactive pieces as part of his analysis.[31] This is because he thought their construction relied too strongly on power positions as the audience still needed permission to participate. Shawyer builds on that argument and presents an emancipated spec-actor who, in contrast to Ranciere's viewer, actively participates in the carrying of the performance, thus bridging the theories with the construction of *The Automated Sniper*.[32]She still agrees with Ranciere that, even when participating, the spectator has limited points of view they are invited to take up. Nevertheless, according to her, the spec-actor

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[27] Lepecki, 175.
[28] Jacques Ranciere, "The Emancipated Spectator," in *The Emancipated Spectator* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 7-8.
[28] Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 7.
[29] Ranciere, 13.
[30] Kozol, *Distant Wars Visible, 16.*
[31] Susanne Shawyer, "Emancipated Spect-actors: Boal, Rancière, and the Twenty-FirstCentury Spectator," *Performance Matters* 5, no. 2 (2019): 44.
[32] Shawyer, *"Emancipated Spect-actors,"* 44.

is in a position that allows an equally distributed power over initiating conversations about injustice within society.[33]

Lastly, when looking into those topics composing the performance's content, it is inevitable to compare them to actual warfare narratives. Considering that *The Automated Sniper* confronts viewers with a simulation of war that contrasts its reality, observing what is left out and what is brought forward is fundamental for understanding the depicted level of realism and how that shapes the message. Information about contemporary warfare can be found in Maria Espinoza's text on US drone programs, where she discusses the utilizers' justification that drone use is precise and thus ethical.[34] Espinoza continues by saying that such programs embed rooted traditions of Orientalism where the opposition is created between familiar "us" and strange "them."[35] Wendy Kozol adds to that by referring to Ranciere's emancipated spectator, who becomes a "co-constructor of witnessing by viewing from a distance."[36] Although the analysis below will not direct as much attention to defining the pre-conceptions of warfare, it will use those theories to understand how *The Automated Sniper* plays with popular perceptions to pose critique over the reality of warfare.

Chapter 2: Analysis

As it follows from the selected methodology, the relationship between a performance and its audience is established through both form and content. As the narrative is passed on through tools of the form, the technical construction of *The Automated Sniper* will serve as a backbone of the following analysis. This will allow a better understanding of how gamification affects all components: form, content, and mode of address. Only then would it be possible to position the spectator and observe how he is invited to perceive and engage in a conversation about

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[33] Shawyer, *"Emancipated Spect-actors,"* 43.
[34] Marina Espinoza, "State terrorism: orientalism and the drone programme," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 2 (2018): 378, doi:10.1080/17539153.2018.1456725.
[35] Espinoza, *"State terrorism,"* 380.
[36] Kozol, *Distant Wars Visible, 14.*

contemporary warfare through the assigned position in this theatre environment. To attempt and put forward a contribution to the literature on interactive theatre, this analysis will expand on analyzing how the notion of gamification responds to being implemented into performances carrying political nuances. Firstly, the construction of the performance will be investigated to establish the game elements included in the performance and what their role is in the process for critiquing contemporary warfare.

Form

Because many of the technological components resemble the construction of a first-person shooting game, a comparison is called between the performance and the form of such video games. The types of machinery found relevant to answering the research questions are the paintball gun and the accompanying joystick, as well as the separate space for the volunteers and the projector showing their faces to the rest of the audience. This is to establish the differences that separate the experience of gaming from the participation in the performance and how those influence the overall delivery of the performance. Both the similarities and differences between those constructions provide clarity about how *The Automated Sniper* engages its audience in a sophisticated critique of contemporary warfare.

Components like the joystick, the point of view, and immediate response to actions, for example, play an essential role in the experience of the player.[37] While one can draw parallels between games and the performance, this also present the differences, which lay the foundation for the impact this performance has over perceiving warfare. As clarified in the lines below, those tools, combined with the narrative, and the reduction or growth of distance from the happenings, enhance the power of witnessing.

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[37] Eagle, "*Interactive,*" 107-108.

The paintball gun (*Figure 1*), explicitly created for the performance, is reminiscent of an unmanned aerial vehicle because of its distance from both the actors on stage and the volunteers backstage. Its immediate tactile response to the players' actions resembles both gaming and actual combat, yet remains closer to the notion of gaming – despite symbolizing a real weapon, the paintball gun persists as non-lethal guns for play. Being such, their use abates the action of killing, much like games tend to illustrate the enemy as a mutated creature, monster, or another dehumanized character. Through those approaches, the designers aim to portray war less brutally by either justifying or not portraying moments of execution.[38] A comparison that further illustrates this can be found in the proposition of using a laser tag gun instead of a paintball one – if shot with the former, the light on the player's armor would fade, inevitably portraying their extermination. However, *The Automated Sniper's* operator does not command the volunteers to "kill," thus maintaining the focus on the act of war and the consequences for those who survive.
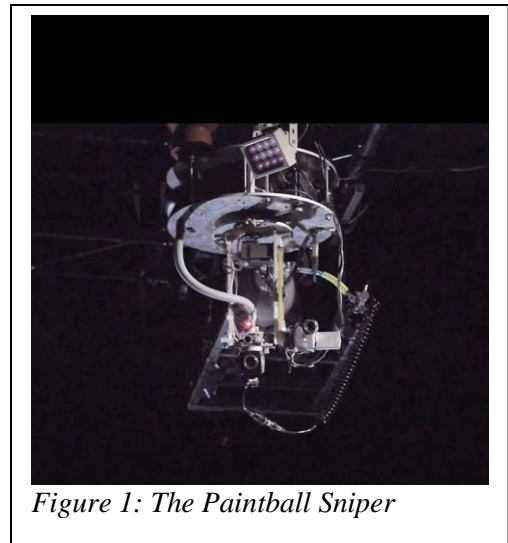

Figure 1: The Paintball Sniper

While the paintball gun remains closer to the realms of games, its joystick hovers between reality and games without a defined affinity for one or the other. It can be argued that this is mainly because the joystick is a tool that both the military and game designers use without altering significantly.[39] As Jonna Eagle explains, US soldier training is carried out through simulations of combat, which resembles the construction of first-person shooting games.[40] Because many of those enlisted for service are familiar with video game consoles, their training becomes smoother when using similar joysticks.[41] This is further backed up when

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[38] Eagle, "Interactive," 143.
[39] Eagle, 111.
[40] Eagle, 117.
[41] Eagle, 111.

Ana Wild asks the volunteers if they are familiar with the tool and, even though they represent different genders and age groups, all of them respond positively.

The joystick further implies a gaming environment as it diverts attention from the staging of the performance and involves audiences into its narrative. As Perez and Coterón describe, it takes away the attention from the space where the console is and directs it towards the game environment.[42] This immerses both volunteers and spectators deeper into the game's narrative and further away from the scenario's staged nature. The distance of events becomes much more natural through this notion, again evoking a sense of playful behavior rather than participation in real combat or a theatre performance.

Portraying both reality and game environments, the room assigned for the volunteers, is yet another aspect of the form which shapes the relationship between the audience and the happenings on stage (*Figure 2*). While contemporary warfare is lead through great distance, this room, even though only meters away from the action, still succeeds in creating a sense of disconnect and aloofness, similar to the experience of military staff operating drones from bunkers miles away from the actual combat location.[43] Therefore, the performance succeeds in being as close as possible to reality by separating the spaces of action and re-action. This notion impacts the experience of the viewers in the auditorium and the individual perception of those holding the joystick. As it will be further elaborated on when

Figure 2: The backspace & joystick (Photo by Thomas Lenden)

Figure 3: The volunteer's image on the wall

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[42] Pérez and Coterón, "*Performance Meets Games,*" 162.
[43] Espinoza, "*State terrorism,*" 379.

discussing the "spectator" aspect, this impact results from the space and the projector depicting the volunteer's face on the walls of the stage (*Figure 3*). As Dalsgaard and Lone explain, being observed brings an awareness that results in performative behavior.[44] Considering that gaming does not necessarily require an audience and that commanders closely observe warfare, the projector's inclusion affirms the pressure of performing. Furthermore, whereas in games, the responsibility and moral factors are intentionally held to a lower level, *The Automated Sniper's* construction of this space points to the social weight of being observed and responsible for every action and mistake.

In addition to this, while in war games the enemy is often dehumanized, here the targets are humans, who show immediate reactions to the happenings, thus establishing the idea of a human factor on both ends of a real military conflict. While the characters' behavior will further back this argument in the analysis of content, here it is worth mentioning that, as Perez and Coterón argue, bringing game narratives into the physical world allows greater immersion.[45] In *The Automated Sniper* the playground is not only brought closer but includes the audience as well. In relation to this Shawyer argues that audience participation does not necessarily disrupt the auditorium's hierarchy but rather unites audience and actors, creating a group of emancipated spec-actors.[46] Nevertheless, such approaches of address draw attention to the play of power between the individuals in the auditorium, which, when linked to the performance, points to an intentional underlining of the role of the spectator.

Tying this back to the construction of the performance, one more segment presents a viewpoint over such power positions. While the two actors on stage do not exert dominance over each other or the viewers, one more player is introduced before the end of the game. His lively image appears on the walls of the space as he is video-calling from Baghdad, Iraq, thus not physically present in the auditorium. Ana Wild explains that he is a professional war games competitor and that through his participation, a sense of distance will be presented, which is

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[44] Deterding, "*From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness*," 7.
[45] Pérez and Coterón, "*Performance Meets Games,*" 160.
[46] Shawyer, *"Emancipated Spec-actors,"* 44.

reminiscent of the reality of warfare nowadays. This last segment of the game brings the audience as close as possible to the reality of current violent conflicts – this person is sitting miles away from the action, in the comfort of his own home, and calmly follows the coordinator without any required explanation's orders. Even though this segment does not include the audience, it presents them with a gaming situation which is reminiscent of warfare through the physicality of its playground. This shifts the gaze from the shooter to those being targeted. It can be further argued that while this player's inclusion in the narrative can be taking away from the spectators' agency and positioning them as pure witnesses of a videogame situation, it still allows their gaze to exercise influence over the events.

Even though looking into aspects like the paintball gun and the joystick point to the audience being encouraged to perceive the performance as a game, the rest of the discussed components, like the joining of the professional player, bring the spectator closer to a simulation of war rather than to a game. In the latter, the player is presented with a more explicit narrative and justification of tasks, fights fictional characters, does not encounter civilians, and genuinely has more power and freedom of choice.[47] Like in war, however, *The Automated Sniper's* volunteer performs under strict rules, and there is little to no place for personal agency. In this context, the performance has embedded the reality of contemporary warfare, including the topic of technology, and portraying the human factor on both ends of military conflicts, neglected by many gaming systems.

Therefore, while war games aim to entertain through immersion in realistic environments, the performance emphasizes warfare's emotional realism rather than its technical construction. This is not to say that *The Automated Sniper* does not benefit from the notion of gamification as, through it, the consequences of combat become physical and, in contrast to games, much closer to us. Using a game as a mode of address allows for greater engagement, but it also positions the viewer in a standpoint rarely adopted in games or theatre – one which brings power over real people who can feel pain and fear.[48] When combined with the narrative, this unveils

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[47] Eagle, "Interactive," 129-130.
[48] Pérez and Coterón, "Performance Meets Games," 161.

other levels of involvement and realism, which provoke critique over the US drone programs. Thus, while the conversation about violent conflicts elegantly hides behind the game's mask, the narrative and mode of address show a more apparent demand for the audience to position itself in relation to the topic.

Content

While the performance's construction meanders between game and reality, it is through the story that one grasps the moral importance of the message. Similar to the form, the performance's narrative makes use of game-like approaches, especially in terms of vocabulary and mode of addressing the audience. Despite this, the way the characters are presented doesn't make the audience view them as 'threats.'[49] Linking this to Jonna Eagle's comments on war games' narrative, two major differences in the construction of the character's image can be observed. The first relates to the enemies' portrayal as civilians; the second is found in the performance's decision to let the spectator observe their peaceful actions closely, further problematizing the later invitation for attack.

Even though playful behavior remains encouraged by the performance, the topic of war and its dangers gradually become central throughout *The Automated Sniper*. The first scene shows the actors assembling objects to the sound of classical music, perhaps emphasizing the creative nature of humanity. This is disrupted by the coordinator of the game, Ana Wild, whose voice invites the audience to participate in the next segment of the performance, introduced as "The Automated Sniper."[50] However, before starting, she explains that what is about to happen is an action familiar to humans from pre-historic times – interacting through playing. She calmly proceeds by saying that there are various games humans play and for different reasons. One of those games, she clarifies, is war, and it is motivated by the drive of humans to compete and exercise power.[51] While

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[49] Julian Hetzel, "The Automated Sniper," *Vimeo*, 2017, 61min, https://vimeo.com/218916650.
[50] Hetzel, "The Automated Sniper," min 14.
[51] Hetzel, "The Automated Sniper," min 15.

she makes clear the intention of the performance to address the reality of warfare, her vocabulary remains in the context of games – "a game happens within a set of rules and takes place in a designated playground that is marked beforehand."[52] Gamification is therefore present on a narrative level as well as technical. Such choices shape the spectator's attitude towards the occurrences on stage as they tap into playful behaviors while engaging with real-life situations.

Depicting a possibly realistic narrative has to do with individuals on both sides of those conflicts. While the operator of the joystick remains a pawn, moving accordingly to the navigator's commands, the people on the ground experience direct violence towards themselves and their community, when caught in such conflicts.[53] In contrast to the enemy's representation in video games, the performance humanizes the characters by presenting them in the moments before, during, and after the game. The narrative establishes the characters Bas van Rijnsoever and Claudio Roitfeld as creative, care-free and innocent – even though they seem to be in a competition for artistic recognition throughout the narrative, their actions do not suggest danger for an imaginable enemy.

When a volunteer participates in the first level of the game, they are asked to mark a line of paint on the wall (*Figure 4*). The actors observe this action and later call it an artwork of "fragmented love." At this point, they do not recognize the threat in the actions of the volunteer and continue to view the world as an artful

Figure 4 – Volunteer's green line

Figure 5 – "Sadness is a question of perspective"

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[52] Hetzel, "The Automated Sniper," min 16.
[53] Espinoza, *State terrorism,* 385.

and safe environment. This, however, seemingly changes after their creations are destroyed during the second level of the game. At this point, the actors become aggressive towards each other – using each other's bodies to recreate the previously built structures of objects. The spoken titles of those assemblies also point to a shift in perspective. "Sadness is a question of perspective" (*Figure 5*), for example, depicts one actor aggressively riding the other as if a mule until the one under gets away and proceeds to create the next piece. The title of this scene serves as a commentary on the difference in perspective between opposing sides, where loss of life is seen as a tragedy by the victims of war, but as a positive victory by the attacker. Through this, the performance further exemplifies current warfare's moral complications, as those affected by it are usually innocent civilians, who do not expect threats to their lives. As a result of violence and destruction directed at them, they may experience a fragmented, disrupted sense of society.[54]

The performance's commentary on the effect of war on civilians does not end there. After the third, and last, volunteer returns from the room where the joystick lays, the operator announces one more level. This stage of the game is played by Akram Al Duhaimi – a professional gamer who specializes in online drone simulations.[55] He is introduced as a remote player because narratively he is in Baghdad, Iraq while the performance takes place in Zurich, Switzerland. Ana Wild herself points out that this call adds a sense of distance. The inclusion of this segment brings the simulation that this performance is, as close as possible to the phenomenon of contemporary warfare due to the ability of the paintball gun to be remotely controlled. However, it is not only because of this that the discussed level is closer to reality.

When asked how many hours he spend playing per day, Akram replies that it depends on the situation in his city. Elaborating on this, he explains that sometimes there are explosions and in those days he remains home and plays more.[56] What he describes aligns with Espinoza's argument of the destabilization of societies under the permanent surveillance of drones. According to Wendy Kozol, bringing those

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[54] Espinoza, "*State terrorism,*" 386.
[55] Hetzel, "The Automated Sniper," min 56.
[56] Hetzel, "The Automated Sniper," min 60.

images from the ground closer to our periphery can introduce the potential for recognition of the power positions between "us and them."[57] This can be seen in *The Automated Sniper*, as the audiences are confronted with the violence, directly reminiscent of drone warfare. While a drone, as a mechanism of war, is a tool that works at a distance, the performance brings this violence into the viewers' proximity, letting them ponder the morality of distant warfare, as they are faced with its consequences.

Through this, the development of the characters thus far becomes altogether more realistic as it is substantiated by Akram's experience. In addition, his participation positions all spectators in a passive state of observing. This ties to the idea of the witness, and further to the power manifested through the ability to observe and attack the enemy from afar. Even though the performance's definition as interactive would suggestibly refer to the offer of taking over the joystick, this last segment of witnessing illuminates the impact one can have over the events they are observing. In addition, as seen in the analysis of the content, what the spectator is shown (rather than invited to do) raises brimming questions of morality towards those under the surveillance of drones.

Audience

In her manual, Verhoeff explains that while there are several positions a spectator can take up when carrying out a dispositif analysis, the focus falls on the viewpoint the configuration of the situation more readily supports.[58] Even though *The Automated Sniper* is defined as an interactive piece, where participation is essential, the spectator is the one to whom this performance's message is tailored. Those who do not "play" remain the evaluators and approvers of the happenings around. Through this suggested role and the selected theme of warfare, the performance makes a statement on a larger social scale relating to the responsibility individuals have over the events they are witnessing.

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[57] Kozol, *Distant Wars*, 22.
[58] Verhoeff, "Dispositif Analysis," 3.

Gamification is undoubtedly present in the mode of address – Ana Wild plays the role of a coordinator, navigating the players' actions. This reminds of a commander – a figure found in many war games – who distributes the missions, which the player is expected to accomplish. In the context of this performance, by taking up the joystick, the volunteer becomes an active part of the storyline, assisting the continuation of the narrative. This newly obtained position of the spectator changes the hierarchical dynamics in the auditorium. Ranciere proposes that for the viewer to be emancipated, those power positions must be distributed by including everyone present in the auditorium.[59] This is true for the performance as the presence of the audience is still recognized through the mode of address, despite the narrative allowing for only three participants. For Shawyer, only such active spectators are transformed into (emancipated) 'spec-actors' – equals to the actors on stage as they share the responsibility of carrying out the performance.[60] However, by stepping forward, they do not only take on responsibility for the performance but also experience the pressure of being observed. This is possible through the gamified form of the performance, which provides the spectator with the player's immediate reactions, their performance with the joystick, as well as their interaction with Ana Wild. Dalsgaard and Hansen make explicit their aim to analyze interactive systems in public places and state that the user's participation is about the audience's perception of the interaction.[61] As *The Automated Sniper* takes place in a theatre auditorium – space for sharing communal experience, this argument applies to the case study. The authors further state that being aware of their visuality provokes the players to adopt performative behaviors, thus influencing their experience and further shaping the situation of the interaction.[62] The witness then becomes a central figure in the way the narrative unveils as their act of observing "transforms the user into a performer."[63]

Furthermore, in the case of this performance, the "players" have certain agency over the actors. Yet, those volunteers' actions are affected by the gaze of the spectator, thus arranging the witness in the highest position of power in this

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[59] Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 4.
[60] Shawyer, "Emancipated Spec-Actors," 42.
[61] Dalsgaard and Hansen, "Performing Perception," 2.
[62] Dalsgaard and Hansen, 6.
[63] Dalsgaard and Hansen, 6.

configuration. Further elaborating on the theories of the hierarchies ruling the auditorium, Premaratna puts forward the idea that nuancing those power positions allows for better understanding them on multiple levels – from authoritarian to broader public level.[64] Through this, *The Automated Sniper* highlights the rooted hierarchies in the theatre and makes a larger statement about the role of the witness by sedately handing them control over the performance. Moreover, by the last level of the game, all spectators adopt such position as they observe Akram's gameplay. Even though not participating, the spectators remain active etchers of the performance, because as Lepecki's argument affirms, by witnessing, the members of the audience become accomplices of the events.[65]

Besides, his research does not limit its arguments to the context of the auditorium but expands further to state that the witnesses' responsibility lies in the broader socio-political context on which those theatrical representations are based.[66] Even though not addressed directly, the context of The Automated Sniper taps into the recent usage of drones in warfare. While presented as a game, the performance's narrative certainly includes motives akin to the civilians' experience of warfare. Through doing so, they emphasize the importance of the witness without making a statement of his position of power. Espinoza's text provides a link between this concept and warfare by discussing that drones' surveillance causes "destructive effects such as psychological terror, insomnia and the disruption of social and political life."[67] Event though not represented with such intensity, the performance not only places the volunteers in a position, pressured by the gaze of the spectators, but also depicts the discomfort of the characters throughout the operation. On a broader social scale, the concept of the witness and their gaze is present in many writings on the drone programs.

Kozol, for example, directs her research into exploring how the witness is constructed through the context of violent conflicts incorporating drones. She states that those programs "disconnect our gaze from the reality on the ground in

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[64] Premaratna, *Theatre for Peacebuilding, 67-68.*
[65] Lepecki, "Afterthought," 172.
[66] Lepecki, "Afterthought," 172.
[67] Espinoza, "State Terrorism," 386.

exchange for an empirical view from the skies above."[68] *The Automated Sniper* plays with this distance and, by bringing both the shooter and witness closer to the ground, poses a critique over the neglection of civil and human rights.

To conclude this segment, it is important to recognize that when looking into the angle of audience in this dispositif situation, gamification is used to emphasize the role of the witness rather than the player. This performance ably masks its intention to confront the viewer through the visual representation of war through its playful simulation of a first-person shooter game. While articles on active learning state that gamification proves affective for the learning process, as seen before, participation is not the only way the audience engage with the narrative.[69] This is further supported by Nicola Shaughnessy, who, in his book *Applying performance*, argues that responsibility emerges from the fact that our bodies are present during the events.[70] Thus, while the spectator is not given a "role" or task within the narrative, they still develop a relationship with the happenings on stage, one that proves to be fundamental for perceiving the message of *The Automated Sniper*.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it becomes clear that *The Automated Sniper* uses its gamified form to include the audience in a simulation of warfare rather than simply amuse them through a game. As this analysis has discovered, the technical construction of the piece remains somewhat in the middle between video games and war simulations, without a defined closeness to either. This allows the spectators to engage in the topic of war through playful behavior, which eases the digestion of the narrative. However, throughout the analysis of the content it becomes prominent that, while using vocabulary suitable to the context of games, the story being told sheds light on the reality of warfare – the narrative not only humanizes the enemy but also presents them as civilians, unaware, and more

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[68] Kozol, *Distant Wars,* 199.
[69] Deterding, "From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness*,"* 946.
[70] Nicola Shaughnessy, "Performing Lives," in *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 48.

importantly, undeserving of the violence bestowed upon them. The performance makes sure to emphasize this reality by including a distant player who calmly supports this portrayal by sharing his personal experience of living in Iraq, where drone attacks are part of the community's daily life. Through this, a reality, distant to most, is brought forward.

At this stage, all the spectator is left to do is observe. The interactive method of this performance does not aim to transform the spectators into players. Quite on the contrary, it grants them the position of witnesses – individuals who are safe from both the evaluating gaze of others and the bullets full of paint. The power they have is never explicitly recognized or addressed; its consequences are not visible through the narrative or the construction; yet it remains the dominant force fueling this performance. Ranciere mentions that contemporary performances seem not to specifically aim to send a message but rather "produce a form of consciousness, an energy for action."[71] Here one is faced with precisely this type of provocation – the audience is not given the "right" answer but is instead invited close to the immorality of warfare. The only thing for the spectator to do is perceive the events taking place and build an individual stand on them. Of course, only those ready to see can recognize that the power given by the performance is for the witness to obtain and apply.

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[71] Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 14.

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