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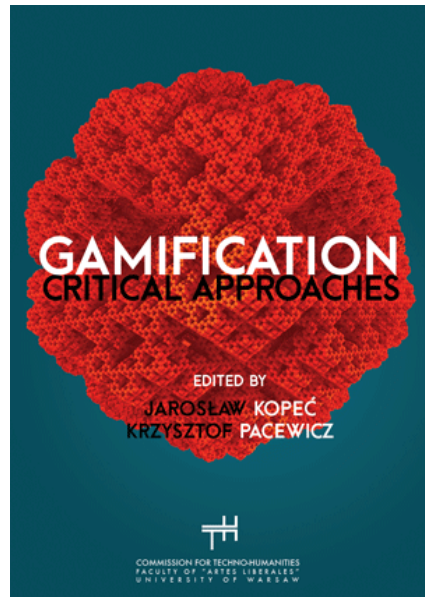
Gamification. Critical Approaches

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GAMIFIED VS. NON-GAMIFIED SPACE IN VIDEO GAMES: A BIOPOLITICAL APPROACH

Jakub Wencel

Taking into account a crucial distinction between “gamification” and “playfulness, I try to analyse the complementary and necessary relationship between “gamified” and “non-gamified” areas and elements in modern video games using the philosophical tools rooted in the modern tradition of studies on biopolitics. Subsequently, I try to define “gamification” as a device that is set up to “take over” non-gamified areas of playful, undetermined interaction – the process exemplifying mechanisms of biopolitical organisation of society. Gamification-as-biopower preys on disorderly, but productive and creative bodies.

Gamification is the way design articulates itself within an interactive area

In my chapter, I define and establish the scope and the nature of the relationship between “gamified” and “non-gamified” space in video games through the conceptual tools derived from the theory of biopolitics. My goal is to use them to better understand how the complementary and necessary relationship between “gamified” and “non-gamified” areas and elements in modern video games works.

I define “gamification” – the term still young and somewhat ambiguous – in a broad sense, as the way of establishing logical and functioning “systems of interactions”. Although my understanding of “gamified” and “non-gamified” space in video games can be compared to the distinction between “gamefulness” and “playfulness” (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke, 2011, p. 1), there are some crucial differences. While “gamefulness” and “playfulness” are purely per-

formative concepts, referring to a form of a certain activity, my perspective presupposes an “ontological” difference that comes before different types of interaction. Subsequently, I am more interested in writing about theoretical *areas* of game design (“gamified” and “non-gamified” space) than simply about different kinds of *praxis* of interaction.

Although the term “gamification” is usually used to describe devices, mechanisms and practices only “borrowed” from the video games and then applied to many different fields of human activity related to the use of technology (such as, for example, marketing, virtual interfaces or self-management applications and programs), I intentionally go back to its original field of work – video games. The disciplinary and regulatory character of gamification, if understood as something deeply related to biopower, becomes both a defining force in the game design itself and clearer and easier to define when analysed in the completely “artificial” context of the fictional, playful narrative of the video game.

When in 2011 American game critic Ian Bogost decisively and controversially declared, with a reference to a book by Harry Frankfurt (Frankfurt, 1991), that “gamification is bullshit” (Bogost, 2011), he, paradoxically, articulated not only its existence, but also captured its true *modus operandi*. Bogost claims that gamification is just another momentary intellectual trend, manufactured by marketing departments of big companies, and that its power is only “rhetorical”:

More specifically, gamification is marketing bullshit, invented by consultants as a means to capture the wild, coveted beast that is videogames and to domesticate it for use in the grey, hopeless wasteland of big business, where bullshit already reigns anyway. (...) Bullshitters are many things, but they are not stupid. The rhetorical power of the word "gamification" is enormous, and it does precisely what the bullshitters want: it takes games--a mysterious, magical, powerful medium that has captured the attention of millions of people-- and it makes them accessible in the context of contemporary business. (Bogost, 2011)

By saying this – perhaps unwillingly – Bogost presents “gamification” as a manufactured social disciplinary device, designed and created basically from scratch, – and useful to modern capitalism, which is looking for new ways to take over spheres of life which had not previously been under its control. Such a radical rejection of the logic of gamification in defence of video games can be understood as a gesture of resistance to its disciplinary character. However, if we assume that gamification is deeply biopolitical, everything becomes much more complicated. Just as there is no society without biopolitics and biopower (Hardt, Negri, 2009, p. 32-38), there is no *interaction* (not to mention *a game*) without some gamified elements.

It should be noted, therefore, that those areas of “gamified” and “non-gamified space” can be analysed, in the biopolitical sense, basically only within a process of “theoretical elimination” of one of them. We cannot separate biopolitics and biopower – although they are different

and they articulate themselves separately, they are, at the same time, complementary; there is no biopolitics without biopower and biopower without biopolitics (Hardt, Negri, 2009, p. 31). The discourses of constitution and oppression will always need something (like bodily substructure of society) to operate on, just like discourses of biopolitics – as subversive, free and undetermined as they can be – will always need biopower, with which they may be articulated. We can imagine a video game without goals, but it would still need some rules, an “inner language”, which would make it “playable”, even if this “play” were completely goalless. The ultimate purpose of this chapter, rediscovering the potentiality of “playfulness” as a form of “biopolitical principle of pleasure”, is then more about finding the boundaries of the gamified area: where the rules, the discipline, the goals are weakened or partially nonexistent.

Consequently, it should also be noted that “gamified space” is not understood here as a form of “rulebook”, as something completely “alien” and “detached” from a “non-gamified” space, something needed only as a “set of laws”. Although there are goals, rewards and rules which are set from the “outside” of the game, which are, naturally, part of this structure, they are merely “a tip of the iceberg”. When Scott Nicholson – in the article *A User Centered Theoretical Framework for Meaningful Gamification* (Nicholson, 2012, p. 5) – draws a distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful gamification, we should not be thinking only about distinguishing between areas “inside” (laws of interaction, inner goals etc.) and “outside” (“artificial”, manufactured achievements) the game. (Although Nicholson writes mainly about the difference between meaningful and non-meaningful gamification in non-game contexts, this distinction can easily be applied to video game design.) What really tells us how this structure relates to the problem of how much of the “space” is “gamified” is the organisation of the structure itself, which, of course, relates to all factors, including the external ones:

The opposite of meaningful gamification would be meaningless gamification, and at the heart of meaningless gamification is organization-centered design. Gamification tactics that rely upon points and levels leading to external rewards that are not related to the underlying activity are not concerned about the long-term benefits of the gamification on the user. (Nicholson, 2012, p. 5)

Nicholson concludes that the face of “organization-centered design”, which can be an example of meaningless gamification, is a way of focusing too much on mechanics or – in more precise terms – giving the mechanics unlimited, definite primacy. That primacy allows game mechanics to exercise control over all the activity within the game so authoritatively that it actually distracts the user and discourages him or her from engaging in the game:

Another threat to meaningful gamification is mechanism-centered design. A trap that game designers and companies can fall into is seeing a new or interesting game mechanism and deciding to build that into the gamification. Sometimes, this clever mechanism doesn't integrate

well into the non-game setting; therefore, while a novel mechanism can draw users into the gamification, the lack of integration means that users won't fully engage with the underlying activity. (Nicholson, 2012, p. 5)

Nicholson does not, unfortunately, attempt to define precisely how he understands game mechanics and how exactly the devices of gamification relate to them. Is every “rule” or “law of interaction” constituting the mechanics necessarily gamification? Or perhaps we can talk about gamification only in certain contexts of game mechanics? The biopolitical reading of this issue would draw us closer to answering “yes” to the first question.

Quite surprisingly, this kind of interpretation would be completely coherent with certain “formalised” readings of what exactly “game mechanics” is. Miguel Sicart, a game studies researcher, in his article *Defining Game Mechanics* tries to construct a self-sufficient, functioning theory of mechanics based on concepts from object-oriented programming. Sicart writes in the introduction to his article:

I define game mechanics, using concepts from object-oriented programming, as methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state. (...) With this article I intend to provide a practical analytical tool for describing game systems as formal structures that create gameplay. (Sicart, 2008)

“Gamification” is then something definitely “substantial”. It not only sets the book of rules and goals – obviously, it also contains “victory conditions”, “achievements” and “the lists” that determine which of the player’s actions should be rewarded and which should lead to appropriate punishment. Earlier, we mentioned the existence of an “inner language” of every video game, which constitutes all possible ways in which we could interact with it. Therefore gamification understood as something substantial consists also of all the possible sets of movements, practices, ways of communication and also ways of inhabiting, exploring and modifying the virtual world. That is why boundaries between “non-gamified”, “playful” interaction and “following the rulebook” are very hard to draw; in many video games we not only have a clearly marked gamified area (we know exactly what we have to do), but we also have a set of goals, which I would like to refer to as a form of “hidden gamification”.

The best examples here would be games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series or *Postal 2*, where often our goals are completely different from what the design “tells” us to do. In the newest instalments of the *Grand Theft Auto* series player has endless possibilities of “playfully” destroying the city and killing everyone around; yet, the storyline avoids missions during which he or she is forced to do so. The essence of the game, the pure, free interactive-explorative playfulness, is something that the game discourages us from. Looking at the current generation of “open-world” games we can clearly see that this paradox is crucial to their designs. *Postal 2* goes even further. It confronts a player with ridiculous missions, during which he or she has to, for example, buy a bottle of milk or deliver flowers. Meanwhile, the player is equipped

with guns and blades and the game itself is designed in such a way as to make using those items on other people the biggest feature. If we understood gamification as a simple rulebook or set of goals those aspects of game design would remain incomprehensible. The “playfulness” – apparently – can also be “gamified” in a non-direct, subversive fashion.

To better understand the difference between “gamefulness” and “playfulness” I would like to quote part of an article called *From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining ‘Gamification’* by game and design theory researchers Sebastian Deterding, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled and Lenart Nacke:

(...) “gamification” relates to games, not play (or playfulness), where “play” can be conceived of as the broader, looser category, containing but different from “games”. In game studies, this distinction between games and play is usually tied back to Caillois’ concept of *paidia* and *ludus* as two poles of play activities. Whereas *paidia* (or “playing”) denotes a more freeform, expressive, improvisational, even “tumultuous” recombination of behaviors and meanings, *ludus* (or “gaming”) captures playing structured by rules and competitive strife toward goals. Along those lines, classic definitions in game studies state that gaming and games – in contrast to playing and toys – are characterized by explicit rule systems and the competition or strife of actors in those systems towards discrete goals or outcomes (...) we suggest adopting the term “gamefulness” recently introduced by [Jane] McGonigal as a systematic complement to “playfulness”. Where “playfulness” broadly denotes the experiential and behavioral qualities of playing (*paidia*), “gamefulness” denotes the qualities of gaming (*ludus*). Thus, gamefulness circumscribes a coherent set of phenomena that is both distinct and has received little focused attention so far, which provides a meaningful extensional ground for defining “gamification”. (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke, 2011, p. 3)

It should be noted, however, that the authors consider “gamification” only as the process of applying video game mechanisms to non-video-game areas:

(...) we propose the following definition: “Gamification” is the use of game design elements in non-game contexts. (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke, 2011, p. 2)

This is despite the fact that, only a couple of sentences earlier, they acknowledge that the “gamification” process is based on transferring sets of rules and mechanisms from the “gameful” area to non-video-game areas:

We believe that “gamification” does indeed demarcate a distinct but previously unspecified group of phenomena, namely the complex of gamefulness, gameful interaction, and gameful design, which are different from the more established concepts of playfulness, playful interaction, or design for playfulness. (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, Nacke, 2011, p. 2)

Using the notion of gamification exclusively for non-video-game areas appears to be unnecessarily limited. If we consider as “gamified” not only “meta game” mechanisms, like systems of achievements or ladders in multiplayer games, but also “inner-game” ones (as I described them in the preceding paragraphs), there is no reason not to define “gamification” in the broader sense as the way in which certain design solutions articulate themselves in an interactive area. Whether those solutions are the victory conditions in a *StarCraft* campaign or web achievements for successful transactions from a personal bank account, there is no substantial difference, although video games – the source of most of the “gamified” solutions in marketing or client service systems – are arguably the medium (being the only interactive areas which are completely “virtual” and created from scratch) where we can see most clearly how they work.

The broader use of the notion of “gamification” is also presupposed by the biopolitical perspective, as it forces us to perceive the aforementioned phenomena as unified in terms of logic of functioning.

Biopolitics, biopower and pleasure

In the second part of my chapter I will try to merge the theoretical framework of the previous section with an approach that could be called biopolitical. Why do we need biopolitics to analyse the fairly self-sufficient (at least in terms of finding the best ways to recognise and describe certain relations and mechanisms of video games) discourse of game theory – or, perhaps, the set of discourses? It is definitely much more than simply finding an analogy between these two sets of relations: the relationship between gamified and non-gamified space in the area of video games and the relationship between the biopolitical set of discourses and the half-visible (or completely invisible) substructure of human bodies. The analogy functions merely as a necessary consequence of the fact that the relationship between gamified and non-gamified space, which constitutes the space as it appears to a player, is in its most fundamental sense biopolitical.

Drawing a connection between these two perspectives is not about using video games as an example to describe the biopolitical structure of certain aspects of modernity (the way society, culture, politics and economics work). My goal is much more humble. I intend to adopt a biopolitical approach to gamification in order to help us to understand how modern video games work in terms of their most fundamental mechanisms. I want to show how the design – understood as a set of abstract rules, which can be literally written down on a piece of paper – starts to actually work in a certain “digital” space, which is basically always bigger than the space needed for the sum of all possible gamified activities. Bigger both in terms of possible

ways of interacting with it, but often also literally, like, for example, in probably the most infamously “explorative” role-playing game of all time – *The Elders Scrolls: Daggerfall* – with its grotesquely enormous world consisting mostly of random-generated emptiness. I will shortly describe how exactly this relation between these two perspectives works and then I will insert the Foucauldian notion of pleasure, understood as a way of challenging biopower, which in my opinion can be used for describing the activity on the boundaries of gamified space.

Although the concept of biopolitics was not conceived by Michel Foucault, it can be noted that its enormous popularity among philosophers, sociologists and theorists of culture of the past forty years or so is the direct outcome of Foucault’s works. The term is first used in the series of lectures entitled *Society Must Be Defended*, which he gave at the Collège de France during the academic year 1975-1976:

Unlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new nondisciplinary power is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-human-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species. (...) After the anatomo-politics of the human body established in the course of the eighteenth century, we have, at the end of that century, the emergence of something that is no longer an anatomo-politics of the human body, but what I would call a “biopolitics” of the human race. (Foucault, 2003, p. 242)

In this lecture biopolitics is biopower, a terrifying new socio-political force that has one simple reason to function – extending the mechanisms of social control to the level where the whole bodily existence of humans is made its object, a point of interest for the political powers, and therefore is made vulnerable and adaptable to any modifications that can serve external purposes. Biopower is not a singular force with one easily identifiable source and similarly easily identifiable mechanisms of oppression. That is what makes it different from disciplinary power, where the relations of power and mechanisms of establishing sovereignty were much more visible. Biopolitics-as-biopower does not see individual persons. Its point of interest is humanity as a species: not understood as one monolithic totality, but as a disjointed, chaotic, dynamic space, which cannot be simply divided into equal parts or summed up as a single structure or organism. Its mechanisms of “governance” are adapted to this structure – whether we talk about oppressive medical laws or self-enforced sexual ethics (examples of disciplinary and non-disciplinary biopower) the focus remains on the vulnerability of the human body and our difficult relationship with it.

The problem with this early Foucauldian notion of “biopolitics as biopower” is that – and this is an argument that tormented many of Foucault’s opponents through the decades – it does not give any conceivable platform from which we can actually oppose biopower. In other words – the amount of “space” taken by biopolitics is identical to the amount of space covered by biopower. Now, I want to refer to the more modern concepts of biopolitics, within which an important difference has emerged between biopolitics and biopower. This difference is strong

enough not only to support some sort of subversive, or even utopian thinking, but also to provide us with theoretical and practical tools to challenge the hegemony of biopower. Moreover, I am tempted to think that Michel Foucault himself – by re-interpreting the concept of pleasure in biopolitical categories – reached a similar conclusion, although his academic interest remained on the side of biopower. To elaborate on the difference between biopolitics and biopower I want to use the thought of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – an Italian-American duo of philosophers and activists, responsible for the trilogy of books which are probably the most famous publications from the post-operaismo school of social philosophy to this day (Hardt, Negri, 2000, 2004, 2009).

The concepts of, and distinction between, biopolitics and biopower is derived from the work of Michel Foucault (even if, as Hardt and Negri note, these concepts are rarely or never used consistently) (Hardt, Negri, 2009, p. 60-61). According to them, biopower is a process that tries to exercise hegemonic control over life with a variety of devices used for the organisation, suppression and “sustainable” use of its creative possibilities – its dangerous potential is revealed in all its glory by Giorgio Agamben and the figure of “Muselmann” (Agamben, 1998, p. 104): life reduced to its pure “nakedness” – vegetative, biological, aimless existence. Biopower, in its obsessive focus on man as a species, with particular emphasis on his body, involuntarily pursues its own annihilation. On the other hand, biopolitics expresses the power of resistance, which is distributed in multitude – the dynamic form of humanity able to challenge the biopower. And although in the work of Michel Foucault subversive strategies for the production of subjectivity, paradoxically, often turn out to be in the service of biopower (just as seemingly “safe”, “conservative”, institutional discourses, as a result of the corresponding shifts and dynamic reproduction, create subversive potential), revealing the extremely ambiguous nature of biopolitical “games”, with no clearly defined antagonisms, Hardt and Negri have no doubt that resistance is all about biopolitics – understood as reclaiming ownership of a productive life. It is the starting point from which humanity can start the fight for freedom and emancipation.

Biopolitics should therefore be understood also as a “power”: as the ability of life to produce and reproduce new forms of subjectivity (Hardt, Negri, 2009, p. 56). But most importantly, it is the power prior to biopower. The original nature of biopolitical resistance can provoke accusations of a lack of autonomy on the part of biopolitical production, and its dependence on biopower, as it operates secretly within it, allegations with which Michel Foucault would most certainly agree. Hardt and Negri, however, brilliantly note that this power may be exercised only over free subjects (Hardt, Negri, 2009, p. 59-61) – if subjects’ freedom had not been the initial condition of the formation of the relations of power, the power itself would not have arisen. Biopower may not need much, but it certainly needs a bodily substructure of society. “Freedom” is the only space where you can form a government or – as we should clarify –

practice governance. No matter how paradoxical it might sound, resistance comes first, before authority. At this point, we can only appreciate the importance of Foucault's assertions concerning the possibility of exercising authority only over free subjects. Their freedom is prior to the exercise of power, and the resistance is simply an attempt to further expand and strengthen this freedom. In this context, the dream of an external point of view, or external support for the resistance, is futile and counterproductive. The resistance originates within the biopower and aims to disarm it rather than destroy.

This purely utopian notion of biopolitics seems to be the argument that Michel Foucault makes in one of his best known interviews – a conversation with Jean Le Bitoux that took place in Paris in 1978, two years after his lecture series on biopolitics at the Collège de France. This interview – named ambiguously *Le Gai Savoir* (*The Gay Science*) – touches mainly upon such subjects as sexuality and the concept of pleasure. I would like to focus on this latter idea. The most interesting question that arises during the conversation refers to the possibility of “escaping the discourse” or – in other words – a possible way of articulating some sort of human activity that would be impenetrable by biopower and therefore immune to any kind of “discipline”, “regulation” or “normalisation”. Let me quote a crucial part of this interview:

FOUCAULT: (...) Against this medico-biologico-naturalist notion of sexuality, isn't it necessary to put forward [faire valoir] something else? For example, the rights of pleasure? (...) Which seems to me to escape these medical and naturalist connotations and which have the notion of sexuality built into them. After all, there is no “abnormal” pleasure; there is no “pathology” of pleasure. (Foucault, Le Bitoux, 2011, p. 389)

It seems that – despite remarks in his lecture series *Society Must Be Defended* – Foucault believed that there is a way not only to oppose biopower, but also to practice some sort of activity that could not be “contaminated” by biopower and usurped by its disciplinary ambitions. Although all the practices of pleasure have to be in some way mediated by the practices that are already (at least partly) absorbed by some discourses, this mediation works either through the form of pure negation (like anonymous sex in clubs where both partners do not even know each other's names and do not talk to each other etc.) or in the form of a “parody” or “pastiche” (like so-called “role-playing” or – as Foucault mentions – even non-harmful forms of BDSM). In other words, even if those practices are, in some way, rooted in discourses, they manage to find some sort of a “back door” to fight them – a way to articulate their subversive potentiality.

In the later parts of the interview the concept of pleasure is directly opposed to the concept of desire. I will not go too deep into the whole complicated history of this notion, which here functions as a purely Deleuzian idea, but it appears that in our reconstruction of the dynamics between biopolitics and biopower it would be closer to the latter. “Desire” is a very dubious concept for Foucault. It presupposes “the lack of” something; the pleasure here is an effect of

achieving or getting something that we needed before, but that was not there. Any activity that gives us pleasure or satisfaction is subsequently preprogrammed by biopower, contrary to the Foucauldian notion of pleasure, which is undetermined and actually “creates” a new form or practice that did not previously exist:

FOUCAULT: (...) I believe the problem of “pleasure-desire” is currently an important problem. I would even say that it is the problem that has to be debated in this reevaluation—this rejuvenation, in any case—of the instruments, objectives, and axes of the struggle. (...) Deleuze and Guattari obviously use the notion in a completely different way. But the problem I have is that I’m not sure if, through this very word, despite its different meaning, we don’t run the risk, despite Deleuze and Guattari’s intention, of allowing some of the medico-psychological presuppositions that were built into desire, in its traditional sense, to be reintroduced. And so it seems to me that, by using the word pleasure, which in the end means nothing, which is still, it seems to me, rather empty of content and unsullied by possible uses—in treating pleasure ultimately as nothing other than an event, an event that happens, that happens, I would say, outside the subject, or at the limit of the subject, or between two subjects, in this something that is neither of the body nor of the soul, neither outside nor inside—don’t we have here, in trying to reflect a bit on this notion of pleasure, a means of avoiding the entire psychological and medical armature that was built into the traditional notion of desire? (Foucault, *Le Bitoux*, 2011, p. 389)

This antinomy between the notions of pleasure and desire applies easily to the forms of gamified and non-gamified activities within an interactive area. The whole idea behind gamification in video games – on the level of the “game itself” – is to achieve goals that, obviously, has not previously been achieved: getting items that are not part of a player’s character’s equipment; reaching an area, such as the end of a certain level, that has not previously been reached; or getting rid of a “big boss” that has not previously been killed. In most of the situations gamification combines all of the aforementioned within super-gamified structures, where we have to obtain certain items to “level-up” our character so that he or she can finally face the powerful boss. And, finally, in the end, the way out of the area is cleared so we can advance to the next level and start the procedure all over again. Video games are the perfect virtual model of how biopower-fuelled desire works: not in a vulgar, psychological sense which tells us that we like to “kill non-existing people” because we are frustrated and we cannot kill real ones, but in a highly abstract and structural sense: game-design works as a set of mini-discourses that not only set abstract “victory conditions”, but also make us want to meet them. It is biopower at its finest.

Recovering the playfulness

What are the conclusions of applying the biopolitical perspective to the theory of game design? Or – in other words – what is at stake in applying such a reinterpretation of the inner relationship between “gamified” and “non-gamified” areas? Within the realm of socio-political activism it remains very clear: if we accept the biopolitical reading of social structures and discourses towering over them and, as careful students of Michel Foucault's work, we accept all the repercussions which come with it, we know that there is no such thing as thought or praxis outside or above the biopower. The only means of subversive mobilisation is from within the biopolitical area – the idea of bodily-oriented opposition to biopower, whether focused on the new, “empty” principle of pleasure, trying to disarm forms of violence and oppression rather than abolish them, or on more “politicised” ways of recapturing the previously seized parts of life, as in Hardt and Negri's theory.

In understanding video game design and the manner in which the gamification works, this kind of perspective can help to balance certain aspects of design. I would say that an inversion of our perspective on video games could turn out to be very productive: we are used to thinking about video games basically only from the “gamified” point of view. When we think of games, we think of the goals, procedures, and ways of maximising our proficiency in moving forward with the progression of the story or within a set of challenges. We intuitively ignore boundaries of the gamified activity, and areas of undetermined, free, playful interaction, which arise around them. Challenging the hegemony of the gamified heart of game design – this is what is at stake in the biopolitical process of recovering playfulness.

The ongoing commercial phenomena of “open-world” games are a sign that the will to challenge the primary role of gamified activity within an interactive area is strong, both in the developers’ and gamers’ communities, although the manner in which this process is often conducted is not very satisfactory – many of these games (of which the most notorious example remains the *Assassin's Creed* series) spectacularly fail when it comes to evoking the “playful” experience.

Small and independent studios turn out to be much more productive. Where the big developers did not succeed, offering no alternative to the dominant model of the high-budget modern video game – with simple, mostly combat-based mechanics, chunky design of rules and predictable victory conditions – groups of programmers and designers have started to question that hegemony.

Probably the most basic example of a gamified narrative mechanism is the fact of winning the game after successfully fulfilling all the necessary victory conditions. When we take a look at the history of video games we will see that even in the “corporate” part of it there are ex-

amples of games that try to derogate from this principle – titles like *Planescape: Torment*, *Red Dead Redemption* or *The Walking Dead* ended with the main character dying at the end of the game, which was not and still is not, by any standard, a regular pattern in the industry. But when we look closely at the storylines of those three games we can perfectly see how – despite seemingly *losing* at the end – the player is still actually rewarded. In *Planescape: Torment* the end of the main character’s journey also means the end of his many years of suffering, in *Red Dead Redemption* the player gets the chance to avenge the dead protagonist by briefly taking control of his son, and in *Walking Dead* the death of the main character turns out to be a heroic sacrifice. All three productions, by incorporating narrative motifs deeply rooted in modern pop-culture, manage to transform failure into success and therefore into an operational narrative gamifying device. This most basic gamification mechanism – “play well – win the game” – was not broken until the rise of so-called “independent games” in the second half of the 2000s.

When Failbetter Games studio, led by programmer Alexis Kennedy, created in 2009 *Fallen London* – a browser-based, adventure Massive Multiplayer Online Game, set in an alternative-reality Victorian London – it included a very peculiar, completely optional storyline. Heavily influenced by the work of H.P. Lovecraft (whose novels’ protagonist never actually succeeded in anything) it was called *Seeking Mr. Eaten’s Name* and basically did not let the player win, ruining him economically instead:

In the early days of *Fallen London*, we added an experimental storyline. It gave the player the option of developing a ghastly obsession which would ruin their character’s life, requiring savage ordeals that chewed up their abilities and resources. It was initially very popular, and then as we tightened the screws and people realised we meant the warnings that no good would come of it, only the most determined stuck with it. (Kennedy, 2013)

After a lot of controversy the experimental storyline was finally removed from the game. The studio even decided to offer some refunds in response to some more serious complaints, which should not come as a surprise: since Massive Multiplayer Online is a genre with extreme focus on the competition between players, it is also a very “gamified” category of video games:

The breaking point came when a particularly savage – and buggy – piece of *Eaten* content did players more damage than they’d expected. A couple asked for a refund on the *Fate* they’d spent on the resources they’d lost (a third player even made a legal threat, but retracted it after it turned out he, er, hadn’t even played the content). (Kennedy, 2013)

Today, the best example of affirming “playfulness” in video games is the popularity and critical success of “explorative games”: productions which question the necessity of the existence of goals and victory conditions, while simultaneously trying to explore and enhance the al-

ternative ways of interacting with virtual space. Developers like Simogo (*Year Walk*, *Sailor's Dream*), The Astronauts (*The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*) or ceMelusine (author of extremely short “games-thumbnails”, “digital spaces” capturing single moments with very little interaction) constantly try to question the “hegemony of gamified space”, but the most famous – and probably the most successful – remains the work of Belgian studio Tale of Tales.

What should be noted is how the members of the studio describe their work on their website. It is a perfect example of a creative way of developing the terminology, which embraces the “playful” side of video game design:

Our goal is to create elegant and emotionally rich interactive entertainment. As artists we focus on beauty and joy. We want to create art for people. That is why we distribute our work on line, and cheaply. As designers we hope that videogames can be as diverse and meaningful as any other medium. We want to create playful experiences that appeal to both gamers and non-gamers. We try to design expressive interfaces to access engaging poetic narratives through simple controls. (Harvey, Samyn)

Tale of Tales' games experiment with attempts at blurring the boundaries between “gamified” and “non-gamified” areas, as well as directly questioning, or even negating, their right to stand. While some of their games, like *The Forest* or *Luxuria Superbia*, work with the concept of explorative playfulness, the brilliant small game called *The Graveyard* challenges the sovereignty of gamification in a very original way. In *The Graveyard* our task is to reach – as an elderly woman – a bench in the titular graveyard. When we manage to do that our character suddenly passes away. There is no prize, no “victory” screen, no logical explanation. This time there is no reward after death.

According to Giorgio Agamben, the ultimate boundary of biopower is the human body (1998, p. 11-14): as a mortal object of interest, it establishes the limits of what it can, and what it cannot, survive. *The Graveyard* repeats this thought, and – to oppose the sovereign power – it decides to get rid of the player, and in this wonderfully radical move it reveals the whole potentiality of a yet undiscovered part of video game design.

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