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AVANT-GARDE, EMERGENCY, AND DIGITAL GAMES DISCOURSE

Abstract: What may be considered as the greatest emergency in the contemporary world is the lack of a sense of emergency; the prevailing feeling that everything is fine, that, despite ongoing crises, we live in the only acceptable system, and it is impossible to imagine any alternative to it. Mainstream digital games, by offering repetitive, standardised, and predictable forms of gameplay, by focusing on technological advancement, and by exploiting workers in large corporations, became a part of that emergency. According to Santiago Zabala, what is needed to recover the sense of emergency and to break through contemporary complacency, is an “aesthetic force,” a disruptive artistic shock. What is proposed in this article is the possibility of considering the avant-garde as an aesthetical force in the field of videogames; a force that shocks the player and demands something more than a simple contemplation. As presented by game scholars, avant-garde videogames (through formal experimentation and political intervention) open the medium, and propose games that object to standardised, mindless repetition. Avant-garde games proclaim new ways of playing, accept diversity that opposes the stereotypical image of a player as a white, heterosexual male, and propose new kinds of engagement with the outside world. They tend to “remove the automatism of the perception” by disrupting players’ engagement and through disclosure of the system. To achieve that, avant-garde videogames break through the category of flow, problematize notions of videogame hermeneutic and interrupt the feeling of immersion.

Keywords: emergency, avant-garde, shock, immersion, flow

As Santiago Zabala argues, what may be perceived as the greatest emergency in the contemporary world is the lack of a sense of emergency – the belief that “everything is fine in the global west.”¹ Despite oppressive governments, climate change, and the injustices of capitalism, the prevailing order is still perceived as the only acceptable political and economic system, and it is “impossible even to imagine a coherent alter-

¹ P. Dolan, *16-bit Dissensus: Post-retro Aesthetics, Hauntology, and the Emergency in Video Games*, “Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies” 2021, vol. 8 (1), p. 8.

native to it.”² What is needed in that situation is to recover a sense of the emergency, to bring awareness about “imposed representations of reality.”³ According to Zabala, what may “shake us out” from that ignorance is an “aesthetic force” – a disruptive artistic shock, demanding intervention rather than aesthetical contemplation.⁴ As Patrick Dolan shows in his article applying Zabala’s proposition to digital games, that force can be found in post-retro pixel-art games – a game of this kind, he argues, breaks “through the emergency hauntologically” and “salvages elements of the past to propose better future.”⁵ Meanwhile, contemporary digital game discourse points to another phenomenon that disrupts mainstream media production, critiques prevailing paradigms and shows alternative possibilities – namely, the avant-garde.

The main aim of this article is to analyse how game studies discourse examines the existence of the avant-garde in contemporary videogames culture in the perspective of shortcomings of the historical avant-garde, and to describe how avant-garde techniques in videogames may be perceived according to the categories of Zabala’s “aesthetic force.” While still perceiving the avant-garde as a disruptive power that breaks through prevailing paradigms and proposes new alternatives that may change gaming culture, contemporary scholars highlight the need for a “re-working” of avant-garde strategies. Based on the analysis of this discourse, the article will try to show how avant-garde formal experimentation, political critique or the notion of shock may work in contemporary videogames.

Firstly, a brief history of the avant-garde will be presented. Secondly, the most important propositions about avant-garde videogames will be summarised, in the context of how contemporary authors deal with the difficulty of applying the concept of the avant-garde in the context of videogames. Finally, by presenting Brian Schrank’s category of “flow disruption” and Gonzalo Frasca’s non-immersion model, but also by proposing a strategy based on Peter Bürger’s concept of the “non-organic” work of art, this text shall attempt to show how the avant-garde may be perceived as an “aesthetic force” in contemporary digital game culture.

The Avant-garde: History of a Concept

From a historical perspective, the term ‘avant-garde’ derives from French military language – it can be directly translated into English as ‘vanguard’ or ‘advance guard’ (the part of the army that goes ahead). As Matei Călinescu shows, the term came into popular usage after the French Revolution, “when it acquired undisputed political

² M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?*, O Books, Winchester–Washington 2009, p. 2.

³ S. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency*, Columbia University Press, New York 2017, p. 5.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ P. Dolan, *16-bit Dissensus...*, op. cit., p. 8.

overtones.”⁶ It is accepted that in the artistic context that term was first used in 1825 in the writings of Olinde Rodrigues (a close friend and student of the influential socialist thinker Henri de Saint-Simon) as a description of the special duty ascribed to artists, who, as “people of imagination,” were capable not only of foreseeing the future but also of creating it. Artists were envisioned here as leaders of change that will bring prosperity to all. Their work, as the stimulators of imagination, were assigned an almost propagandistic role of popularising ideas and fuelling radical, utopian thinking.⁷

By the end of the 19th century, the term “avant-garde” – while still preserving its political meaning – gained another, cultural understanding. From that point on, it starts being associated with artists more interested in experimenting with artistic forms, with turning against the stylistic expectations of the public, rather than with “winning them over” through revolutionary propaganda. Around the second decade of the 20th century, the term “avant-garde,” as Călinescu claims, “had become comprehensive enough to designate not one or the other, but all the new schools whose aesthetic programs were defined, by and large, by their rejection of the past and by the cult of the new.”⁸ Dada, Surrealism, Futurism and the vast number of other groups that emerged at the time, despite their differences, seemed to share common characteristics linked to the categories of militancy, revolution, and anti-traditionalism.⁹

However, the innovative practices of the avant-garde and their radical and provocative approach soon “came to be regarded as merely amusing” clichés.¹⁰ Around the second half of the 20th century, the avant-garde started to be associated with newness and innovation, qualities that came to be praised by the market and institutions for their capacity to improve competitiveness and profitability.¹¹ As shown by Clement Greenberg, in times of markets of capitalism “upon which artists and writers had been thrown,” despite all the anti-bourgeois claims, the “avant-garde remained attached to bourgeois society precisely because it needed money.”¹² The term “avant-garde,” as presented by Călinescu, became just some socially and economically valued advertisement catchphrase.¹³ A number of obituaries indicated avant-garde’s death.¹⁴

⁶ M. Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, University Press Books, Durham 1987, p. 101.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 105.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 117.

⁹ I. Boruszkowska, M. Kmiecik, J. Kornhauser, *Teorie awangardy – wstępne rozpoznania* [in:] I. Boruszkowska, M. Kmiecik, J. Kornhauser (red.), *Teorie awangardy. Antologia tekstów*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2020.

¹⁰ M. Călinescu, *Five Faces...*, op. cit., p. 119.

¹¹ P. Sers, *The Radical Avant-Garde and the Contemporary Avant-Garde*, “New Literary History” 2010, vol. 41 (4), p. 849.

¹² C. Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* [in:] idem, *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston 1989, p. 5.

¹³ M. Călinescu, *Five Faces...*, op. cit., p. 119.

¹⁴ See: P. Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington–Indianapolis 1991.

Videogames and the Avant-garde

For some game studies scholars, though, stories about the death of the avant-garde are premature. As stated by Mike Sell in an article regarding the existence of the avant-garde in contemporary digital game culture: “if there is better evidence that the avant-garde is alive, if not necessarily well, in the twenty-first century, I have yet to find it.”¹⁵ The concept of the avant-garde appears in discourses around videogames in various contexts: as a name given to titles promoting formal experimentation, as an argument in the discussion about digital games and art, or as an advertising catchphrase. However, the avant-garde is also used to describe games that propose social and political critique, and to artistic creations that derive from the medium of digital games and serve to reinforce utopian thinking and express queer identities.¹⁶ While defining how the category of avant-garde videogames may be understood today, contemporary game studies scholars tend to highlight the notion of a multiplicity of avant-gardes (“minus the aggrandizing *the*”¹⁷), their critical power and their ability to promote diverse, alternative perspectives.

The multitude of avant-gardes may be seen in the number of categories proposed by the authors to cover the field of avant-garde videogames. In *Avant-Garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture*, Brian Schrank follows Clement Greenberg’s and Hal Foster’s propositions to describe two avant-gardes: formal, that investigates the properties of the artistic medium, and political, which focuses on social and institutional critique, including of the contemporary technocultural industry. Throughout the book, Schrank analyses more radical and more complicit examples of both avant-gardes. By showing the parallels between the techniques, strategies, and manifestos of 20th-century movements like Dada, Surrealism, or Futurism and the practices of some contemporary game developers, he explains how the avant-garde had redefined art, and how it opens the medium of digital games today.¹⁸

In his foreword, Jay David Bolter highlights the importance of Schrank’s proposition to look at the problem of “avant-garde videogames” from a more historical and cultural perspective, by engaging the history of 20th-century art to describe

¹⁵ M. Sell, *Modernist Afterlives in Performance – Playing the Avant-Garde: The Aesthetics, Narratives, and Communities of Video Game Vanguard*, “Modernism/Modernity” 2019, <https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/playing-avant-garde> (accessed: 18.09.2022).

¹⁶ See: A. Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2014; M. Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2009; A. Galloway, *Counter Gaming* [in:] idem, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2006; C.C. Pederson, *Gaming Utopia: Ludic Worlds in Art, Design, and Media*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2021; B. Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2020; B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2014; G. Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 2009.

¹⁷ M. Sell, *Modernist Afterlives in Performance...*, op. cit.

¹⁸ B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., pp. 13–20.

videogames. More casual or advertising-focused usage of the term “avant-garde,” perceiving it as a synonymous to worlds “new,” “original,” “cool” or “innovative” is dismissed here.¹⁹ Instead – as in Philippe Sers’ article regarding the contemporary avant-garde – it is considered as a “dedication to exploration and radical creativity that clashes with convention,”²⁰ and as a force that “opens up and redefines art mediums.”²¹ According to Schrank, avant-garde videogames differ from mainstream ones, because they focus on showing the possibilities of the medium, and on promoting “a greater diversity of gameplay” that can engage more people in more kinds of ways.²²

For Mike Sell, avant-gardes are not limited to experimental poets or rule-breaking painters but may also be seen in other revolutionary and militant activities, including contemporary terrorist attacks. Most importantly, they also exist in videogames as four “impulses:” as aesthetics; as textual references derived from historical avant-garde groups; as experimental mechanics; or as a narrative trope that places players in the “vanguard roles” of agents of special forces. While these four impulses cover a number of “in-game” elements, Sell also suggests two more modalities that focuses on the broader videogame culture: the avant-garde as a trope in writing about games, or as a way of showing ones’ identity and culture.

The notion of promoting one’s identity emerges also in Bonnie Ruberg’s proposition of the queer avant-garde, focused on how avant-garde videogames negotiate the cultural codes that dominate the industry, and how they break with the stereotypes prevailing within the medium by opening onto an alternative. In the introduction to *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, Ruberg proposes the category of queer independent games to refer to “radical, experimental, vibrant and deeply queer”²³ games made by, about and often for LGBTQ people.²⁴ Their creators, as artists with the tendency to explore alternatives, show new ways of presenting difference within the medium, and open games and game culture towards this difference, which places them in the contemporary vanguard.²⁵ Additionally, Ruberg perceives queer indie games as descendants of experimental and avant-garde groups (Dadaists, Surrealists, Fluxus or New Games), due to a similar fascination with the notion of the subversive potential of play.²⁶ Avant-garde queer games redefine the medium, disrupt accepted paradigms, and investigate formal and aesthetical qualities of games to convey important mes-

¹⁹ J.D. Bolter, *Foreword* [in:] B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., p. X.

²⁰ P. Sers, *The Radical Avant-Garde...*, op. cit., p. 849.

²¹ B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., p. 1.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

²³ B. Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde...*, p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 9–10.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

sage, proclaim equality, and create gaming experiences that reflect various cultures and identities.²⁷

The critical power of avant-garde videogames is visible also in Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play*, which focuses on radical or alternative game design. Flanagan presents a theory of avant-garde design, which aims to create games conveying important message, connected with social critique or political intervention. Throughout the book, she analyses historical instances of artists who have used games as a medium of expression. Among the creators that manipulate game rules to convey transformational or revolutionary beliefs, Flanagan lists artists recognised as avant-garde, including Hans Bellmer and Alberto Giacometti, presenting an important lineage between the historical avant-garde and contemporary videogame artists.²⁸

The critical potential of the avant-garde in videogames is also highlighted in Claudia Costa Pederson's *Gaming Utopia*, which is focused on the associations between utopia, avant-garde, and games. "Modernist avant-garde" and the subversive play of the Dadaists and Surrealists here become a starting point for tracing "the concept of gaming over a hundred-year span," and for analysing it in the context of designers' critical interventions and opportunities of reimagining the contemporary world.²⁹ Pederson presents videogames and game culture as accessible, open spaces for utopia – for radical imagination and for envisioning and engaging with the possibilities of change. According to her, the medium of digital games bring us the freedom to look for alternatives and picture new realities, even if the dominant system considers them unthinkable.³⁰

As these examples show, contemporary avant-garde videogames are perceived as a force that opens the medium by investigating its formal properties and proposing new ways of playing. Focused on offering something new (but not in the categories of mere originality and innovation, praised by the capitalistic market), games that fall under this label search for the alternatives and the sometimes unthinkable possibilities, proving that our reality may be different. Avant-garde digital games tend to break the prevailing paradigms of playing and shock the players to make them realise the stereotypical and standardized codes that are (re)produced by the mainstream videogame industry. In regard of politics, they proclaim greater diversity in game culture, not only by presenting heterodox perspective within games, but also by engaging social networks that promote collective experimentations and creativity, such as queer game jams (compared by Mike Sell to French Surrealists' game sessions³¹). Their focus on promoting alternatives that seem unimaginable strengthens utopian thinking, and reinforce the belief that the world can change.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 17–18.

²⁸ M. Flanagan, *Critical Play...*, op. cit., pp. 41–43, 90–93.

²⁹ C.C. Pederson, *Gaming Utopia...*, op. cit., p. 1.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 6.

³¹ M. Sell, *Modernist Afterlives in Performance...*, op. cit.

Reworking the Avant-garde

As presented by the above-mentioned authors, avant-garde videogames often rely on intertextual references, and on repetition of the aesthetics, designs, or techniques used by historical avant-gardes. But while describing the similarities between these strategies and the creations of contemporary developers, these scholars highlight the importance of perceiving those inspirations in the perspective of a “reworking.” Such a perspective connects not only to the differences afforded by the medium, or to the fact that culture is continually changing, and therefore avant-garde must change as well, but also to contemporary artists’ awareness of the inadequacies of their predecessors. As listed by Pederson, historical avant-gardes may be accused of elitist hermeticism, Eurocentrism, ideology of progress, primitivism, and sexism.³² Meanwhile, Schrank challenges the avant-garde with the fundamental question of the relevance of its practices today.³³

To focus on just one of these accusations, Pederson is not the only one pointing to the elitism of the avant-garde, connected with their hermetic language and complicated practices, incomprehensible to a wide audience.³⁴ Lack of the inclusiveness and a tendency to perceive itself in a role of a teacher, showing “mere people” the actual ways of the world, may be found, for example, in the practices of the French Surrealists. As presented by Mark Polizzotti, the leader of the group, André Breton, had “authoritarian tendencies,” visible in the “practices of *excommunicating* members deemed unworthy.”³⁵ Revealingly, the decision of excluding someone from the group was always connected with one’s commitment to Surrealism, but often with the personal beliefs of the “Pope of Surrealism,” namely, with “Breton’s hostility toward ‘sexual deviance’.” Polizzotti – who describes Breton’s homophobia as legendary – states that the artist “declared that the practice of male homosexuality ‘completely disgusted’ him and, with rare exceptions, did not tolerate the presence of homosexuals around him.”³⁶

The purported inclusiveness of the avant-garde clashes here with personal prejudices: how “could a man who championed liberation from mental and societal constraints so vehemently espouse a taboo upheld by society’s most conservative forces?”³⁷ asks Polizzotti, highlighting one of the avant-garde paradoxes. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, while commenting on the opening statement from André Breton’s *First Surrealism Manifesto*, stated that: “the new doctrine crystallizes, as always,

³² C.C. Pederson, *Gaming Utopia...*, op. cit., p. 5.

³³ B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., p. 3.

³⁴ See: R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1968, pp. 30–40.

³⁵ M. Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton (Revised, Updated)*, Black Widow Press, Boston, MA 2009, pp. 192–193.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

around its yearning for absolute freedom. The word fanaticism is already an indication that this freedom can be acquired only at the price of absolute discipline: within a few years, the surrealist guard spins itself into a cocoon of regulations.”³⁸ The brave non-conformism of the avant-garde is contradicted here by its final tendency to close itself in its own rules.³⁹

But the avant-garde faces a graver problem. As indicated by a number of obituaries collected by Paul Mann in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, the avant-garde is dead. It ceased to exist due to various of reasons: it was absorbed into the capitalist marketplace (particularly into its need for innovation⁴⁰), and was approved by universities and museums, accepted by bourgeois culture – the very things it used to stand against. The avant-gardes simply failed to realize their goals. The long series of movements was unable to destroy bourgeois society, and, instead of demolishing the institution, they became a part of it. The avant-garde had no political effect, and it may be concluded that the project of carrying out opposition in works of art was wrong, same as the belief that art and life may be united. In the end, its existence may be put in the predictable symmetry: “Dada announced the death of bourgeois culture in 1917 and mainstream criticism announced the death of the avant-garde in 1971.”⁴¹

According to game studies scholars, however, contemporary artists are aware of their predecessors’ shortcomings, and they know how to avoid their mistakes: by employing in digital games avant-garde methods that are “reconstructed and re-configured.”⁴² The elitist hermeticism of the historical avant-garde is replaced here with more “complicit,” inviting behaviours – for example, through sharing tools with a broad, inexperienced audience to include them in the creative process.⁴³ Contemporary avant-garde videogames, according to these scholars, are queer, open to alternative perspectives, and aware of the dangers of authoritarian tendencies. As presented by Pederson, utopian games do not proclaim fixed, rule-bound, unchangeable ideas, but exist as a space to promote utopian thinking, to practice imagination, and create alternatives that can always be changed.⁴⁴ The avant-garde is understood here in the categories of multiplicity and progress that helps avoid the danger of changing its beliefs into undisputable claims.

³⁸ H.M. Enzensberger, *Aporias of the Avant-Garde* [in:] idem, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, ed. M. Roloff, Seabury Press, New York 1974, p. 39.

³⁹ M. Călinescu, *Five Faces...*, op. cit., p. 110.

⁴⁰ P. Mann, *The Theory-Death...*, op. cit., p. 34.

⁴¹ Ibidem, pp. 36–38.

⁴² B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴³ M. Sell, *Modernist Afterlives in Performance...*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ C.C. Pederson, *Gaming Utopia...*, op. cit., p. 2.

The Avant-garde in Videogames: Three Strategies

Avant-garde videogames may be considered according to the categories of Zabala's "aesthetic force" as responses to the contemporary lack of a sense of emergency, makes ongoing crises visible⁴⁵ and exposes us to a pluralism of possibilities.⁴⁶ In *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, Zabala follows Martin Heidegger's reflections to argue that the greatest emergencies in the world are the ones we are missing. The contemporary neoliberal system ignores the effects of climate change, the unfair distribution of wealth, and the refugee crisis, and perceives itself as the only reliable option, denying the possibility of even imagining alternatives. But the radical artist responds to the "lack of a sense of emergency" and can "thrust" us into them. Works of art can be something more than simple means of contemplating beauty. Through aesthetical force – that shocks individual into new awareness – they can become starting points of change.⁴⁷

As presented by Patrick Dolan, the contemporary videogame industry adds to the emergency, because mainstream games are "dominated by corporations that perpetuate exploitative labor practices, work to de-politicize problematic narratives and gameplay, and are locked in endless technological progression."⁴⁸ By repeating safe genres and themes, the AAA industry entrenches the status quo and ignores the crises. But as presented by the above-mentioned scholars, avant-garde videogames disrupt the hegemony of play. As this article aims to show, at least three methods derived from re-worked and reconfigured avant-garde techniques may be described here as examples of avant-garde aesthetical force in videogames, namely: the disruption of flow, the non-immersion model, and "non-organic" games. With the help of these techniques, avant-garde videogames tend to shock the player and "remove the automatism of the perception,"⁴⁹ by exposing the frames of the system.

While analysing the category of radical formal games, based on Clement Greenberg's proposition,⁵⁰ Schrank focuses on games engaged with formal experimentation, that investigate the properties of the medium and expand it. By going beyond the standardized boundaries of digital games, such productions disrupt the so-called "flow paradigm" that prevails in contemporary mainstream media. Based on Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's proposition, Schrank defines flow as an "optimal experience" that makes players to "lose self-consciousness in the enveloping action."⁵¹ From the per-

⁴⁵ K. Pranjić, *Change Must Come: Yugoslav Avant-Gardes and Metropolitan Dada* [in:] S. Bru, K. Kangaslahti et al. (eds.), *Crisis: The Avant-Garde and Modernism in Critical Modes*, De Gruyter, Boston 2022, p. 300.

⁴⁶ D. Angelucci, *Forum on S. Zabala, "Why Only Art Can Save Us"*, "Lebenswelt" 2019, no. 15, p. 116.

⁴⁷ S. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us...*, op. cit., pp. 2–12.

⁴⁸ P. Dolan, *16-bit Dissensus...*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴⁹ V. Shklovsky, A. Berlina (eds.), *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, Bloomsbury, London 2017, p. 9.

⁵⁰ C. Greenberg, *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, "Partisan Review" 1940, vol. 7 (4), pp. 296–310.

⁵¹ B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., p. 32.

spective of avant-garde studies, flow may be considered here in the categories of kitsch,⁵² an easily consumable product that absorbs recipients into the standardised system and changes them into the subjects of predetermined emotions covered by the illusion of freedom.⁵³ According to Schrank, optimal flow makes people forget that they are subjugated by the prevailing order: “their doubts and distractions are kept to a minimum,” along with the will to “rewrite the rules of the systems in which we live, love, work, and play.”⁵⁴ Flow becomes here a way of engaging individuals into the system, to transform them into the role of a subject perfectly performing their part. The mainstream AAA industry, focused on technological progress, repetitive stories, and de-politicized narratives, strives to give the player the most consistent sense of flow.⁵⁵ According to Dolan, that “continual push” may be considered as an element in which the emergency of digital games appears.⁵⁶ Repetition of known formulas strengthens the belief that “everything is fine.”

The aim of the formal avant-garde is to break through that complacency; to remove the automatism of perception and diversify ways of playing. Schrank describes the game *Arcadia*,⁵⁷ that confronts players with four different minigames played simultaneously on four on-screen panels despite their independent mechanics and goals. Players’ attempt to win the car race, score the basketball point, manipulate falling pieces, and deflect the tennis ball at the same time, demands that they split their attention, which makes the feeling of “optimal play” almost impossible to obtain.⁵⁸ In contrast to mainstream games that aim to condense play into a single channel and subjugate its players into the system, avant-garde videogames prefer to keep users aware of their position. By revealing the formal elements of the medium and the forces that prevail in them, avant-garde digital games show players that the given order is not natural but established by the institutions of power.

A similar proposition, but regarding the category of immersion, is presented by Schrank in the chapter about narrative political avant-garde. Understood as the suspension of disbelief, immersion engages player into fictional worlds, making the medium almost transparent. As much as it is desired by the mainstream industry, immersion has also been criticised, not only in the context of videogames. Gonzalo Frasca argues that the Aristotelian model of theatre prevailing in Western culture

⁵² See: C. Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and...*, op. cit., pp. 3–21.

⁵³ B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., pp. 32–36.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵⁶ “The emergency appears in modern mainstream video games in the continual push for higher resolution graphics, hyper-detail, verisimilitude, and intricate gameplay that perpetuate a hegemonic ideology. In service of a hyper-real, high-fidelity aesthetic in games, large corporations are exploiting workers and producing homogenous titles marketed to hetero-sexual, cis-gendered, and neurotypical white men that perpetuate aggressive capitalist ideals and lack any kind of diversity in representation.” P. Dolan, *16-bit Dissensus...*, op. cit., p. 8.

⁵⁷ Gamelab, *Arcadia*, 2003.

⁵⁸ B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., p. 51.

may be described as the one that keeps the audience immersed “without giving them a chance to take a step back and critically think about what is happening on the stage.”⁵⁹ The main goal of Aristotelian tragedy is *katharsis*, that, through immersive, empathetic identification with the tragic hero, purifies the audience’s emotions. However, as the activist and theatre theorist Augusto Boal argues, this purification focuses not only on the emotions, but mostly on antisocial beliefs – it removes any revolutionary thought that may undermine the prevailing system. To criticize Aristotelian tragedy as a tool for maintaining the status quo, Boal begins from the propositions made by the avant-garde playwright Bertolt Brecht, who created several techniques of “alienating” the audience to remind them that they are experiencing an artificial representation. That defamiliarizing effects disrupts spectators’ immersion and gives them the space for critical reflection.⁶⁰

Based on these propositions, Schrank describes “Brechtian games” that employs strategies similar to Brecht’s defamiliarization techniques, like the browser game *Darfur Is Dying*,⁶¹ in which gameplay is disrupted by non-immersive pop-up ads about the Darfur crisis, and text appearing on the screen.⁶² Meanwhile, Frasca focuses on Boal’s Theatre of Oppressed, that breaks the separation of actors and spectators and fosters critical thinking by allowing participants to enact problems they encountered in real life, rethink them, and search for a solution. Anyone in the public can interrupt the play and present their own ideas about the problem being presented, along with possible solutions. For Boal, theatre becomes a tool, an opportunity to discuss troubling matters and search for alternative solutions. Frasca applies that model to videogames, proposing *The Sims of the Oppressed*, based on the famous simulation game. Here, similarly to Boal’s model, the tools are given into the hands of the participants who can create, play and discuss various scenarios based on real-life crises (like *Dave’s Alcoholic Mother version 0.9*).⁶³ While enacting them, players are aware of the system and the artificiality of the scenarios: at any time, they can take a step back, critically rethink them and propose an alternative solution.⁶⁴

The last strategy described here, based on Peter Bürger’s proposition of “non-organic” works of art, focuses strongly on the notion of shock that is experienced by players when their presuppositions appear to be incorrect. This technique follows the propositions made by the above-mentioned scholars and tries to consider how avant-garde theories may be implemented into the medium of videogames as aesthetic force, a shock demanding players’ critical attention. In *Theory of the Avant-*

⁵⁹ G. Frasca, *Rethinking Agency and Immersion: Video Games as a Means of Consciousness-Raising*, “Digital Creativity” 2001, vol. 12 (3), p. 170.

⁶⁰ A. Boal, *Theatre of Oppressed*, transl. C.A. Leal McBride, M.-O. Leal McBride, E. Fryer, Pluto Press, London 2008.

⁶¹ TAKE ACTION, *Darfur Is Dying*, 2006.

⁶² B. Schrank, *Avant-garde Videogames...*, op. cit., pp. 157–162.

⁶³ G. Frasca, *Rethinking Agency and Immersion...*, op. cit., p. 172.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 167–174.

-*Garde*, Bürger describes the avant-garde work of art as “non-organic,” in contrast to the classical work that presents an “organic,” coherent whole and can be interpreted through a hermeneutic circle, in which the parts can be understood only through the whole, and the whole only through the parts. Meanwhile, the avant-garde “non-organic” work of art negates that harmony and emancipates individual parts: they become autonomous and do not constitute a coherent whole.

While approaching the “organic” work of art (or mainstream game), the recipient has a preliminary assumption that there will be harmony between the individual parts and the whole. It may be said that, while playing a videogame, the player assumes that at every moment of the game, the interpretation verified by the game as correct will continue to be correct. For example, if the player’s avatar dies after touching the turtle in *Super Mario* games,⁶⁵ the player interprets it as the rule that the turtles are unhuggable and touching them will lead to failure. During the process of playing, the game verifies that interpretation again and again, whenever turtles are re-encountered. In an “organic,” classical game, that interpretation is correct in every part of a game: touching the turtle means death. What is proposed here, instead, is the hypothetical situation in which at the one, and only one moment, the turtle is huggable. The player’s interpretation, verified as correct in various parts of the game, in that one, autonomous moment is incorrect. “Non-organic” videogames, to follow Bürger’s proposition, would contradict the idea of a work as a whole; they would be created from individual parts that negate the harmony of the whole and anticipate autonomous elements. But most importantly, they would disrupt players’ assumption about the game as a coherent whole, and lead to the experience of shock.⁶⁶

While creating an entirely “non-organic” title may be problematic, we can already identify some examples of similar techniques implemented in games. In *Superliminal*,⁶⁷ a game that examines the notion of a dream, the player encounters a number of puzzles demanding the proper usage of the objects. The player can manipulate various common items, such as chess pieces, dice, and cheese, but also the moon and a house. Dice are the most frequent items in the game, and by clicking on them, the player can pick them up and enlarge or shrink them to solve a puzzle. Throughout the game, the player is given feedback that validates the interpretation that picking up and manipulating dice is correct and leads to victory. When player starts to get used to that mechanic, and automatically tries to pick up another die, in one individual moment in the game, the item disintegrates, being nothing more than a paper mock-up. The player’s correct interpretation – valid in other parts of the game – is proven false in that one, autonomous moment. It does not lead to failure – in that one moment the turtle is simply huggable, because that one part negates the coherent whole. And when the work refuses to give a total meaning, recipients experience a shock.

⁶⁵ J. Arjoranta, *Real-Time Hermeneutics: Meaning-Making in Ludonarrative Digital Games*, Jyväskylä University Printing House, Jyväskylä 2015, p. 112.

⁶⁶ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 80–82.

⁶⁷ A. Shih, W. O’Neill, *Superliminal*, Pillow Castle, 2019.

Conclusion

As presented above, for contemporary game studies scholars, the avant-garde, despite the shortcomings of its predecessors, still exists and alters the medium of videogames. By disrupting games' mechanics, making the system visible, and experimenting with radical design, avant-garde games propose formal changes and proclaim new ways of playing. By promoting greater diversity (including a broader understanding of the term itself), by accepting alternative perspective and the creations of amateurs and marginalized groups, the avant-garde influences the contemporary politics of game culture. The main purpose of avant-garde videogames is to critique the accepted *status quo*, and show that all systems are artificial, created by institutions of power, and it is possible to imagine coherent alternatives to them. Avant-garde videogames may be considered in the categories of "aesthetic force," shocking the player and bringing an awareness of the imposed system and all the crises it tries to ignore.

Aware of the risks of implementing avant-garde methods, contemporary developers know about the failures of the artistic avant-garde, and while deriving broadly from it, they critically re-work its techniques. The disruption of flow, the non-immersive model and "non-organic" games may be proposed here as three examples of practices, inspired by historical avant-garde groups. As Paul Mann notes, despite all the obituaries, the avant-garde cannot simply vanish; it "will have its own phoenix resurrection."⁶⁸ A re-worked and reconfigured avant-garde is resurrected in contemporary videogames, helping to change the medium and making it more aware of the world's crises. However, this reworking of avant-garde techniques should be constant, and it may be important to analyse how avant-garde videogames can avoid the fate of its predecessors in the avant-gardes of the twentieth century: how is it possible to reach wide audiences without succumbing to mainstream? How can one proclaim beliefs without creating unquestionable rules? The short descriptions of works and strategies that this paper has engaged with are unable to cover all the problems: the avant-garde is still changing, progressing and searching for new ways of playing. The avant-garde always escapes attempts of comprehensive description.

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⁶⁸ P. Mann, *The Theory-Death...*, op. cit., p. 39.

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