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EDITORIAL: GAMES IN A TIME OF CRISIS?

The world is in peril, and yet we are still playing.

The contemporary moment has been described as “an age of permacrisis, with one crisis seamlessly followed by the next”¹ – a state which, moreover, is not perceived as a temporary one against which we can batten down the hatches until better times come round, but which is seen to extend indefinitely into the future.

Even if we reduce the temporal horizon down to the past few months (at the time of writing), we witness one crisis piled up on top of another: the disappointing outcome of the Cop27 UN climate summit in Sharm-el-Sheikh, after which, as UN secretary general António Guterres said, “our planet is still in the emergency room,” in a year in which unprecedented flooding left 10–12% of Pakistan underwater and 2.1 million people homeless, and record-breaking heat waves across western Europe caused an estimated 20,000 deaths; the waves of Russian missile strikes across Ukraine that have killed dozens and left millions without electricity and heating as winter sets in, the latest salvo in a large-scale invasion that has brought the post-1989 geopolitical order to its most fraught situation; the anti-regime protests in Iran that followed the fatal beating of Mahsa Amini, and the brutal crackdown that has resulted in more than 400 deaths and 15,000 arrests; the inauguration of a World Cup in Qatar marred by the reported 6,000 migrant workers believed to have died in the preparatory construction works, and the system of exploitative labour this figure reveals; the humanitarian crises among migrants and asylum seekers in the Mediterranean Sea, the English Channel and the Polish-Belarusian border; and the mass shooting in Colorado Springs, a targeted hate crime reflecting the intensification, and increased cultural presence, of anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech in the West.

¹ F. Zuleeg, J.A. Emmanouilidis, R. Borges de Castro, *Europe in the Age of Permacrisis*, European Policy Centre, 11.03.2021, <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c> (accessed: 4.02.2023).

It has almost become a discursive cliché, over the past few years, to acknowledge – for instance, in work emails – the incongruity of going on with business as usual while the latest global crisis unfolds. For scholars working in and around the field of game studies, this incongruity is perhaps doubly felt. As game scholars, we are not immune to the sense of inefficacy or inadequacy shared, at times, by academics across disciplines with no immediate evident contribution to make towards a solution, or even a palliative, for these interlocking crises. However, layered on top of that is the gnawing sense of guilt that – much as we might argue otherwise, even with ourselves – perhaps, in orienting our work towards the study of games and play, we have dedicated ourselves to thinking about a domain of human activity that, precisely in a time of crisis, reveals itself to be inessential and frivolous.

This is hardly a new idea. As Brian Sutton-Smith pointed out, the perception of “play as a waste of time, as idleness, as triviality, and as frivolity” is a rhetoric that has a strong foundation in Western culture, both enmeshed in the capitalist distinction between productive labour and wasteful idleness that is itself rooted in the Protestant work ethic, and reflecting older ideas of play that can be traced back to the classical distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.²

As scholars working in and around game studies, we are equipped with all of the theoretical and conceptual tools we need to counteract such a dismissal of games and play, and to argue for their significance – cultural, social, political, existential, or otherwise – both of play, more generally, and of digital games more specifically as one of the dominant entertainment forms in the contemporary media landscape. However, once we begin paying attention to the significance of games in the socio-cultural context of the contemporary time of crisis, other doubts come to the surface. Enmeshed as they are in the technological materiality, discourses and networks of production and consumption of global capitalism, digital games are, in important ways, active contributors to many of the crises we are facing.

This, then, represents the first potential answer to the question concerning the role to be played by game studies in a time of crisis. Given the prevalence of digital gaming as a material and cultural practice, it is necessary that critical academic scrutiny is brought to bear upon games as a non-trivial contributor to problems like climate change, capitalist exploitation, and the proliferation of far-right ideologies. To non-exhaustively list only some of the ways in which this might be the case, as existing work in game studies has convincingly argued: commercial game production is embedded in the material-discursive structures and problematic labour relations of capitalism;³ playing and making digital games demands the use of energy-intensive

² B. Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1997, p. 201.

³ See: N. Dyer-Witheford, G. de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009; E. Lundedal Hammar, L. de Wildt, S. Mukherjee, C. Pelletier, *Politics of Production: Videogames 10 Years after Games of Empire*, “Games and Culture” 2021, vol. 16 (3), pp. 287–293, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020954996> (accessed: 4.02.2023).

technologies that contribute to the climate crisis;⁴ many of the commercially dominant digital game genres reproduce, in their foundational mechanical assumptions, imperialist discourses and colonialist ideologies;⁵ and gaming communities have tended to establish spaces for cultures that support far-right radicalisation.⁶

Yet, to paint digital games exclusively as contributors to these crises is to depict only a part of the picture. Just as games are a product of, and participate in, the ideological, technological, financial, and political systems of entrenched power, they – and the practices and communities that form around them – can serve as points of resistance and redress. The second form of response that game studies could take to the study of games in a time of crisis, then, is that of identifying, highlighting and investigating ways in which games can respond positively to times of crisis. In existing work that has adopted this direction, this has meant paying attention to games' capacity to represent and engage with contemporary crises, such as through the development of utopian or dystopian imaginaries⁷ as practices of thinking otherwise. It has meant paying sociological and ethnographic attention to digital games as sites and tools of protest and political resistance.⁸ It has also involved highlighting emancipatory efforts to reclaim games, and the ideological assumptions underpinning their ludic characteristics and spaces, through transgressive practices of design or play – for instance, from queer⁹ or postcolonial¹⁰ perspectives. It has also meant paying attention to the positive effects games can have on an individual or interpersonal level, as coping mechanisms, as means of self-care or community formation – for instance, as means of countering the stress and isolation of pandemic-era lockdowns.¹¹

⁴ B.J. Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2022.

⁵ S. Mukherjee, *Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism*, "Games and Culture" 2018, vol. 13 (5), pp. 504–520, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015627258> (accessed: 4.02.2034).

⁶ K.A. Bjørkelo, "Elves Are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic": *White Nationalist Readings of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, "Game Studies" 2020, vol. 20 (3).

⁷ See: P. Pedercini, *Lichenia Release Notes*, Molleindustria, 18.04.2019, https://www.molleindustria.org/blog/lichenia-release-notes/?fbclid=IwAR28sT_lvjvvoxIRHrdshRhHN4KXaOBo9aIx-BAcwafs53-d79U6-WHdjfk (accessed: 4.02.2023); G. Farca, *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2018.

⁸ H.E. Wirman, R. Jones, "Block the Spawn Point": *Play and Games in the Hong Kong 2019 Pro-democracy Protests* [in:] *Proceedings of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA)*, 2020, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2020_paper_444.pdf (accessed: 4.02.2023).

⁹ B. Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, New York University Press, New York 2019.

¹⁰ M. Jayanth, *White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design #DIGRA21*, Medium, 30.11.2021, <https://medium.com/@betterthemask/white-protagonism-and-imperial-pleasures-in-game-design-digra21-a4bdb3f5583c> (accessed: 4.02.2023).

¹¹ K.E. Pearce, J.C. Yip, J.H. Lee, J.J. Martinez, T.W. Windleharth, A. Bhattacharya, Q. Li, *Families Playing Animal Crossing Together: Coping with Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "Games and Culture" 2021, vol. 17 (5), <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211056125> (accessed: 4.02.2023).

In between these two poles, a territory can be mapped out whose topography is what we have set out to shed light on with this issue. The five contributions published in this issue trace different paths across this territory, along which we can identify a number of different viewpoints upon what playing in a time of crisis – and game studies in a time of crisis – could look like.

Mateusz Felczak, in “*Tedious by Design.*” *Institutionalized Labor of Content Creators in the Game as a Service Model: The Path of Exile Case Study* focuses on *Path of Exile* as a game that shifted from a product to a service model. This type of business model establishes a situation in which the act of play began to be perceived as labour. The tediousness of the gameplay practices the game-as-service model demands impacts not only players, but also streamers and their audience. In the end, the whole community around the title experiences the burden of a repetitive game that is (re)designed to accumulate capital.

Ragnhild Solberg also focuses on the experiences of play, exposing the problem of the centrality of the human player in game design. The paper “*Too Easy*” or “*Too Much*”? *(Re)imagining Protagonistic Enhancement through Machine Vision in Video Games* reads instance of players’ connection with, and dependency on technology as represented in the game’s storyworld as an example of machine agency. This approach helps to challenge the “techno-masculine imaginary” of games such as *Call of Duty* and *Cyberpunk 2077*, and undermines the fantasies of a superhuman, alienated figure that mainstream games tend to promote. By putting emphasis on processes and representations of machine vision, Solberg shows how players and player-characters’ agencies are intertwined with, and rely on, the agency of non-human entities, thereby making the case for a less anthropocentric understanding of games.

Contemporary games can also create a space for experimentation, highlighting the rebellious and radical possibility of play as an act of resistance. As Aleksandra Prokopek argues in her paper *Avant-Garde, Emergency and Digital Games Discourse*, games, especially indie and avantgarde games, can be used as tools for disrupting the situations of false comfort that mainstream, Western-centric games want to create. Following the thought of Santiago Zabala, and foregrounding the power of manifestations of queerness in contemporary avantgarde games, she presents in which ways games can perform a disruptive artistic shock, pushing audiences from a state of contemplation to intervention.

Similarly to Prokopek, Kate Euphemia Clark also adopts a positive perspective on digital games’ potential to affect cultural change in times of crisis. In *Unravelling Narratives of Empire in No Man’s Sky*, she analyses *No Man’s Sky* as a game that, across its frequent updates, is constantly developing into a more unique gameplay experience – an interesting counterpoint to *Path of Exile*’s gradual transformation into game service as labour. While *No Man’s Sky* was initially criticised for the colonial and anti-environmental implications of its focus on space exploration and expansion – a focus which would align it with many of the ways in which digital games often re-enact the dominant ideologies contributing to the present crises – its developers

addressed these comments, transforming the game into a slow, meditative, nonlinear experience with no clear main goal. Contrary to the accumulationist and expansionist logic of capitalism that many games reflect, *No Man's Sky* has now become a game in which the accumulation of resources and constant expansion won't lead you further, but, rather, distort your experience of the game world.

Ecological themes continuous in Andrew Barton's essay *Creating Climate Conscious Players: Final Fantasy VII's Ecoactivist Fan Communities*. He reads *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020) as hopeful depictions of ecological activism as resistance to the extractivist logic of advanced techno-capitalism, and considers how fan communities have internalized the games' standpoint even to the point of using them as a platform for militating against the games' publisher, Square Enix, and their forays into environmentally-harmful NFT games. In doing so, the games and their fandom are used as a case study to demonstrate digital games' potential for engendering political engagement.

Needless to say, this issue can only provide a set of partial answer to the vital question of why, and how, games and play can and should matter while the world burns around us. The aim of this issue has not been to conclusively address the complex ways in which games relate to, and signify within, the permacrisis of the contemporary. Instead, what we have aimed to do is map out the contours of an ongoing set of interconnected debates. The contributions to this issue can be read as responses to, and developments of, scholarly and critical conversations started by the existing work in and beyond game studies that these authors engage with. Taken together, these five interventions show us why it does matter to talk about games in a time of crisis. Across the landscape of contemporary digital game culture, they map out topographies of power and resistance, emergency and response, labour and exploitation, care and activism, hegemony and counter-hegemony. It is our hope, then, that these five texts shall be taken up as an invitation for further explorations of these topographies.

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