GAMES CAN PLAY US: THE POWER OF DISEMPOWERMENT IN "EMOTIONAL ENGINEERING"

EVA R. FILIPE
FACULDADE DE CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS E HUMANAS,
UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA, PORTUGAL

Abstract

With the paradox of interactive emotion as a starting point, this study will try to understand what is the cause for this limitation of video games' emotional power, identifying some requirements for it to be overcome. Through this singling out, the concept of disempowerment is drafted as a model for theoretical inquiry, critical counterpoint and set of practices that stand opposed to the forces that go through, define and are themselves firmed on the diverse layers of the interactive experience. Beyond trying to grasp the emotional potential yet to realize and how the rupture with the established and expected practices may unlock it, the proposal of the disempowerment model will overflow the inside of the game experience. From its construction within a game to its use on discourse about video games, its importance on broader and interwoven dynamics will be highlighted. All along the way, a critical proposal will gain shape, which will seek to, cyclically, magnify video game's power as a medium of experiences and the power of the medium as a cultural object.

Keywords: *Video games; agency; interactivity; immersion; subversion; emotional engineering; disempowerment.*

INTRODUCTION

Considering the necessary permeability of the one who engages in it, one would think of video games as the ideal medium for exploring its users' emotions. Contrarily to the reader, listener or spectator, the promoted user now takes part in the construction of the mediated experience, commitment of active participation that goes beyond that of the interpretative effort. Despite that assumption, it has been noted that video games struggle to fully achieve this potential. Where the drive to play, in and of itself, is concerned, it is possible to trace the emergence of the characteristics to which these difficulties are most commonly attributed in its contemporary expressions back to social shifts which correlate with this drive own evolution. In spite of the civilizational significance of its ritualistic expression, the rise of modern thought rose with it the interest in the ludological aspects of the game, which would develop in a culture of gamification, rather than in the more paidiac expressions of play. Rules, structure and, more importantly, the clear and unambiguous pre-established distinction between winners and losers, led to the interweaving of the ideal of victory and the concept of games (Cailois [1958] 2001).

Undeniably, the digital artifacts that allow video games to happen are a medium that is ludic in its essence, following through with this modern tradition to uphold ludification, while relegating the more open, free and poetic manifestations of the drive to the realm of "child's play." The ability to act and interact according to the structural rules is, no doubt, the defining characteristic of the new medium. However, interaction or action with and within a given structure also implies a certain creative freedom of this agent. It is also a free movement that creates meaning and, as such, transcends the rigid structure of rules. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to explore the possibilities unlocked by this free space, even the ones that put into question the same agency principle previously described as this medium's defining trace, aiming for a sharper focus of other aspects that are played with when a game is played and how the connections between those who take part in this ensemble can be designed as bonds that allow the reversal of the roles of player and played.

THE PARADOX OF INTERACTIVE EMOTION (Zagalo 2009)

According to Järvinen (2008, p.36), the appraisal of an entertainment object is linked to the willingness and ability of this appraiser to suspend their disbelief, as well as to the resulting connection's ability to fuel the creation of empathetic bonds with relatable characters or personae, that, in turn, galvanize and are strengthened by their "teleportation" to the world which these empathy focus points inhabit. The fictional universe, the world and its stories, its background events and those in which the player engages, otherwise discreet, become part of an enveloping and signifying tessitura.

This appraisal often manifests itself in moments of "serenity, exhilaration, suspense, thrill, fear, relief, sensory delight, sense of achievement, control and self-efficacy" but, tellingly, only the last three are identified as common in the experience provided by video games Järvinen (2008, p.178).

The way they are set, designed and put in motion during the interactive experience is better explained recovering, as the author did, the model of emotion designed by Ortony, Clore e Collins (Järvinen 2008, p.13), which sheds light to its psychological construction. In this model, an emotion is defined as a reaction, of positive or negative valence, to a situation in which events (whether defined by its past, present or future activation or impending possibility), agents (defined by their ability to act) or objects (to be acted upon) are put in relation with each other. We can also identify this same setup as an underlying characteristic in the set of "basic concerns", as described by Planalp's communicational approach to emotions (Zagalo 2009, p.41):

«...concern for our own physical well-being (tied to fear), concern for knowing what is going on (tied to surprise or anxiety), concern for close ties to others (tied to sadness, shame, love, jealousy), concern for achieving goals (tied to joy, anger). »

Since the ludic structure itself establishes, from the onset, certain objectives, one can consider the achievement of these goals as a common denominator of video games' emotional experiences. Which doesn't mean this experience won't vary, depending on how the other elements and their relations are designed, unlocking emotional experiences related to the rest of the described basic concerns. Despite this possibility, goals which solely have their own achievement as their end and, consequently, use the other elements as mere means to reach this end (goals of self-accomplishment through progress and empowerment, which become, in turn, instrumental goals, tied to the victory strategy) are the most prevailing (Zagalo 2009, pp.141-142).

This setup establishes not only what kind of emotion is within the frame of possibility, and, within that frame, which specific emotion will be triggered when an event occurs, but it will also model its quality and intensity. This is done by shaping, from early on, the elements which will be a factor when the trigger-event happens, namely, their proximity, unexpectability and desirability.

The constraints in this modeling and, therefore, the narrowing of the resulting emotional responses, which are named and summarized by Zagalo (2009) as the paradox of interactive emotion, are often considered inherent to the medium itself, the inevitable result of its ludic structure and interactive nature. In other words, the corner cut by the tensional relationship between "the activity necessary to the artifact" and "the inactivity necessary for the receptor to be able to feel particular emotions" (Zagalo 2009, p.15). As a result, emotions related to action or activity (movement, action-reaction) are easier to incite. These emotions are also commonly self-concerned, tied to the movement forward, and, though some with a negative valence may emerge, the goal is set on the positive emotions from accomplishing the previously established objectives. Sadness, as well as other emotions with a negative valence, especially those tied to the player's inactivity or passivity, are not usually stimulated during the gaming experience. Moreover, its uncommon emergence is often registered in strictly non-interactive events (e.g. the cinematographic interruptions named as cut-scenes) (Zagalo 2009, pp.258-259).

RESHAPING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Somewhat replicating the internal experience of the game, this tension also settled in its research field. The more vocal expression of the conflict was the lasting debate between ludologists and narrativists, which divided the scientific community. As Juul (2001) explains, for the purists of ludology there is a relation of inverse proportionality between narrative and game. Therefore, games don't need to tell good stories, but rather serve the ergodic dominant, Eskelinen (2010) agrees. Meanwhile, clarifies Jenkins (2004), for narrativists the similarities between video games, in particular, and narrative media are enough that the same models and tools may be employed in their study. Despite their differences, after the field itself had matured, even some of the more prominent protagonists of the argument (Aarseth 2014, p.54) would come to compromise, recognizing the possibility of coexistence of both approaches, narrativism being legitimized when studies with stronger ties to critical theory and media studies are concerned. This compromise also came with the recognition of the precise nature of this argument: "labor pangs" of a newly-formed academic field.

From this, one can take that only when considering the multidimensionality of the video game experience, can this

dichotomy be overcome, rather than when discussing the ontological specificity of the new medium. Each video game, with its unique configuration, will find its place between the two poles, that of the pure game and that of the pure story. Each one of these configurations will unlock different emotional possibilities, potencies awaiting to be activated by each player, with more or less freedom, more or less dynamism. From its ergodic liaison to the ludic structure, the dynamism of this experience will also be marked by a centrifugal movement through the universe to which the medium gives access. Gradually, its signifying layers and involvement spheres will activate, acting retroactively on the previous ones. In other words, the contact with the interface and mechanical controls is followed by the assimilation of the rules, engagement which makes it possible for the medium to become invisible and, therefore, for interactivity to refer not to the player's use of the machinery but to their interaction, within the virtual world, with its objects. From this moment on, narrative development may interweave and expand the significance of said interactions, clearing the way for new development possibilities.

In spite of the tensional relationship between the ludic and narrative components, when we consider the different engagement and involvement layers that articulate on the video game experience as a whole, it is also conceivable to think of new ways to shape them in order to model this experience beyond the stated emotional limitation. For example, if goals and their achievement are inherent to this experience, one can alter it by diversifying what kind of goals are set and, hence, the concerns that will be played with. These middle grounds will, thus, allow the exploration of the way textuality, including non-verbal, is integrated and modeled, as to incite the creation of tighter bonds between the elements at play and a resignification of the player's role within them.

CREATING WORLD THROUGH BONDS

The immersive potential of a video game, a cornerstone for its emotions design, is tied to its ability to fuel the player's sense of "being in the world", a "textual world (…) populated by individuated objects" (Ryan 2001, pp.14-15). In other words, the textual work is paramount to the creation of a seemingly organic virtual world, whose inhabitants are believable enough to become focal points of empathy. Again, the emergence of this empathetic other will act retroactively, strengthening the immersive power of the virtual world and the bonds formed with the player. Thus, the events that happen in and to this world and its inhabitants gain significance, including both those that act and are acted upon by the player. This is only possible, though, if the instrumental reason, that relegates this other to the role of an adjuvant object that exists only in relation to the player's goals, is dismissed. Instead, even if it is indeed an artificial object, this other should resonate with the player as if it were equally endowed with agency and with its own rationality, thus escaping from the player's direct control. Breaking with these objects' objectification makes way for more profound and compassionate bonds to be formed.

Those bonds will be defining to the player's concerns and the way they perceive the game's goals, expanding the range of possible kinds of emotions and specific emotional responses they will be susceptible to. This shift from being an object to being an agent will pervade how the world is perceived, because it brings an unexpected contingency to an otherwise controlled "social" setting. Player's concerns, even those related to themselves, the world and its events, will, thenceforth, comprise the other's position, role, and state.

BREAKING THE BONDS TO ENRICH THE WORLD

When bonds are thus formed, its break can also offer interesting emotional possibilities. For example, if designed and embedded as an experience of loss, it can achieve the lacking negative emotions, such as sadness. This won't be the frustration of defeat when a tool

that would assist them to move forward in the game is lost.

In order to achieve the feeling of loss, not only the bond to break had to be previously designed, but the moment of the break itself has to be carefully worked into the posterior experience, has to be persistent. The way this embedding is designed will vary according to the type of narrativity responsible for it. In a linear narrative, the irreversibility derives from the ergodic limitation itself. Even though this limitation will be more efficient in creating a sense of inevitability or hubris, on the downside, it may create an emotional distance between the player and the events that occur without their direct participation. This detachment harnesses the emotional impact of experience, witnessed as if through an external second-person point-of-view.

Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons [Starbreeze Studios 2013] presents a possible way to overcome linearity limitations, by so tightly interweaving the narrative and ludic sphere, that it reproduces mechanically the narrative plot development. This is prepared since the beginning of the game, by having the player controlling both brothers at the same time, using different sets of controls, to solve the game's puzzles. Narratively, it is established that, due to a trauma, the younger brother is afraid of water and the older has been teaching him how to

swim. When, without direct input from the player, the older brother dies, the set that was used to control him stops working, remaining as a phantom limb. Near the end, the younger needs to go through a lake and, bringing to its peak the seamless articulation, the player cannot control him to do so by using his assigned keys, but, instead, has to use the ones previously tied to the movement of the deceased brother.

On the contrary, in non-linear narratives where the breaking of the bond comes in direct consequence of a player's action/choice, the threat of detachment is replaced by the threat of reestablishing a logic of causality which recenters the game universe around the player. Its events become purely arbitrary and almost recreational the decision-making, due to their reversibility and easily identifiable attributability (i.e. x action leads to y desirable/undesirable consequence). Consequently, the ergodic narrative mechanism — which can be traced back to interactive literature — will have to be put in motion with a conscious effort to avoid a ludification of narrative itself, depicting a subdued narrative layer that becomes purely decorative and a video game experience not so different from the pure ludus.

CREATING POROSITY

The dialectic expressed through these examples is part of the concept of

agency itself, as defined by Murray (1997, p. 126), as it is not merely the power to act, but rather the "satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices". Therefore, it is not reduced to "pure activity", it should also carry some sense of "tragic inevitability" or fate. Furthermore, disconnected from its strict need to serve the player's self-satisfaction, "with agency there's also a personal and moral responsibility" (Kallay 2013, p. 23). As stated, realizing agency in such a way, the construction of this empathetic other and the shaping of the nature of its relationship with the player, will allow the formation of bonds, whose effective, impending or potential break, when finely and meaningfully rooted and developed, heightens the emotional experience.

The world where such an experience takes place also becomes more organic, which is not compatible with maintaining this world revolving around a heightened player space. The implicit player (space and role to be fulfilled during the experience) is also humanized.

The decentralization through the disempowerment of the player's central role and broadening of the aperture to focus on the other elements constituents of the game universe is well exemplified by the subversion of the hero's role in *Shadow of the Colossus* [Team Ico 2007]. The enemies themselves take part in the

construction of the subversive relationship between the player and their role as the game's protagonist, of the player and themselves. These enemies are, in their majority, non-hostile creatures that only attack in self-defense but the player has to slay them down to move forward. Distinctly, both the visual and sound effects in the moment of battle are designed to bring attention to the brutality committed successively by the "hero", rather than glorifying their victories. And instead of rewarding their progress by showing, either graphically or through the gain of abilities, this protagonist's growth, their body becomes more corrupted and fragile.

This kind of disempowerment has its roots in the horror genre, where it is used to incite states of fear, terror, tension and anxiety (Rouse III 2009, p.20). In spite of this more common use, the example above shows that it can be employed as a humanizing strategy, due to the physiological involvement it stimulates, which permeabilizes the player to the experience. Thus, it can be applied to other genres and articulated with the emotional design.

Through these strategies, the security of the cyborgian body of the player-character is questioned and the hedonism that permeates other representations with which it interacts will also be put in check.

REPRESENTATIONAL HEDONISM

The representational hedonism many video games indulge in is clearly linked to their inclination to mainly fulfill the stereotypical fantasies of a "masculine audience" (Järvinen 2008, p.129). As such, even though an apparently blank canvas, the implicit player is shaped by and imbued with the ideal of a masculine, heterosexual, able body, that assumes leadership roles. This rhetoric cannot be coherently maintained through a world constructed with the previous efforts in mind, though. In it, the player is the gravitational point of all the other elements of the game, whose existence is fully devoted to serving him either ludically or as a way to glorify their traits. Hence, the suspension of this rhetoric comes as both a consequence and a necessary step of the exploration of the emotional possibilities opened by the creation of strong affective bonds, at the same time, promoting a physical and mental porosity which consolidates the presence of the player in the virtual world and, thus, allows the introduction of a rhetoric of moral questioning (Taylor 2002; Järvinen 2008).

FOCUS GROUPS: WHAT DO GAMERS WANT?

Broad and transversal, both to the medium and its sociocultural context, the problematics that underlie the disempowerment proposal called for a more speculative and qualitative approach, rather than a statistical one, which guided the methodological choice of exploring this theme through non-structured interviews and participant observation of the games used as an example.

Beyond the initial requirement that the participants had some previous experience of these same games and genres, from the first to the second focus group, the profile was also narrowed taking into account the issues the first group felt reticent to discuss, e.g. gender-related problematics. This aim for the second encounter justified the preference for female or non-cis-male participants, active in feminist groups. The meetings took place in 2015, on August 24th and September 21st, gathering a total of 10 people: C, 24 year old, assistant professor, male; J, 20, student, female; M, 20, artist, male; P, student, male; PT, 31, writer, male, R, 22, student, male; RM, 22, student, female; RL, 22, student, male; T, 22, store clerk, male; TK, 22, customer service representative, female.

The same guidelines were applied to the scripts of both debates, steering them through the following bullet points: video games appeal, genres and immersion factors, most valued experience and reasons for its value. It was also discussed the dynamic between the mechanical, ludic and narrative layers

of video games, as well as the impact of each on the overall experience and on the construction of self-identity. Exploring the effects of subversion, morality systems came into question, as well as the different ways they can be implemented and their articulation with pervasive choice-making possibilities, how they impact on gameplay and storytelling. Related to this, the creation of an empathetic other was also discussed, together with the design and power of bonds and their break. From the fictional to the actual other, the sessions concluded with the examination of the video game as a cultural object and as a place for power fantasies to be fulfilled, its ideological power and value as a medium.

The significance of the interconnection between the different layers of video games led to the focus on role-playing (RPG) and adventure games, though others outside of this genre classification were still used as a reference point, both positive and negative. Both in Zagalo (2009, p.226) and in Järvinen (2008, p.332) they are highlighted for their central position in the game (pure ludus), simulation and narrative (pure story) triad. In some languages (e.g. Portuguese) translated as narrative games, RPG allow the construction of a "virtual agent" and their involvement on a "make-believe narrative space" that they can explore at the same time "attitudes, emotions (...) and social relationships"

from and between agents are also delved into (Järvinen 2008, p.156). RPG is also one of the most mentioned genres in Tocci's (2008) study of emotions in video games. Despite first-person shooters (FPS) occupying the top position, attributed to the stimulation of emotions more typically linked to video games, tied to their adrenaline and the desire to win, RPG stand out for their link to emotions as sadness and affection.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVITY

Notwithstanding this tendency to analyze genres with a stronger degree of narrative work, the opinions of players when asked about the importance of narrativity was far from being unanimous. Still, there was a clear dissonance between the answers to this initial question and those provided when, near the end of each discussion, the participants were asked to identify and justify their most poignant emotional experience on a video game. This disparity translates both the knee-jerk rejection of narrativity and the importance of a seamless junction of the two layers for emotional effectiveness. Summing up:

- To RL and T, the narrative layer was neither indispensable nor able to engross the player as much as the mechanical one.
- To C, it was not a distinctive feature of a video game, for its specificity resided on the player being able to control

the action as opposed to traditional media.

- To P, the interweaving of both layers mattered, because even though his experience of the medium might have been somewhat defined by «the possibility of having some degree of control», more than «constant control is the ability to influence and be influenced» that appealed to him the most.
- To R, a consistent narrative, interlaced with the mechanical structure which supports it, was decisive in spurring a deeper connection between the player and the game, because it allows specific emotions to be designed and stimulated.
- To J, the dichotomy made no sense, because these are not polar opposites. Rather, "the way we process the narrative" and changes prompted by this processing are part of the interactive context", not detrimental to it.

The effectiveness of an interconnected rather than a dichotomous relationship between the two was better exemplified by the participants' retelling of their experience of the previously mentioned moment from *Brothers*. As C recounted, the narrative layer seems to "virtually decal" the game's mechanics. Therefore, in spite of its linearity, from start to finish, the player's emotions are shaped and worked on, both creating a strong bond between each character and between them and the player. This paves the way

for a successful emotional outcome when all the work resolves in the moment the bond is broken. The effect of the break is extended until the end when the loss and its narrative relevance is recovered as a gameplay element.

Shadow of the Colossus presents us with yet another example of a, mostly non-verbal, narrative meticulously intertwined with gameplay, aiming to create a coherent emotional ambiance. There's a linear story which tells itself through the different elements at play, rather than through "direct exposition", underlined RL, "it is something you uncover (…), that develops organically (…), particularly each time you face the colossi". As mentioned earlier and the participants stressed, this effect has much to do with the way these enemies and their relationship with the protagonist is subversively designed. In an approach strictly concerned with gameplay, they would appear as normal bosses. But the way their entrance and confrontation is presented defies the player-character's usual role as the hero.

"It was not a pleasant experience [killing the colossi]", told R. "Usually, you're not supposed to feel bad for defeating these characters." This interpretation was reinforced by J, who added that this breaks with the norm that "a player should primarily want and be concerned about his own success and with the development of their protagonist's story"

no matter the cost. This is complemented by the graphical representation of the protagonist himself, who "becomes more and more corrupted like the other shades", explained RL. The ability to apply "the narrative effects in the player-character's body" was, for J, one of the main factors for this game's emotional impact.

All this undermines the typical road to victory and emotional responses tied to it to the point that, in certain moments, the player will "want to go back. Probably the same thought that would be going through the protagonist's mind." [R]

Concerning non-linear narratives, the previously stated dangers of ludification and arbitrariness seem to be minimized in contexts that avoid direct choice with a predictable resolution, instead opting for the inclusion of choice through moral dilemmas, moments of false choice (where the outcome cannot be changed no matter the player's action) and parallel narratives. *The Walking Dead* [Telltale 2012] uses the latter, presenting the player with "no-good-choice" scenarios where the chosen path causes a temporary ramification that eventually converges again to the main plot, i.e. choice impacts not so much on what happens, but rather on how it is experienced. More intricate ramifications can also be used to avoid these dangers, as is the case of cumulative choices, which are

harder to overturn due to the complex of interconnected choices and conditions that lead to a certain outcome (Bruner 2003).

Pondering this aspect of *Life is Strange* [Dontnod Entertainment 2015], RM defended that "the choices you make along the way leave their mark on you [the player] and on your personal experience, as well as on how you interact [in-game] with the other characters." Because of this, even when presented with undesirable and tragic outcomes, she didn't go back to remake the choices that lead to them. "I would be rejecting my own experience if I did." she stated.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BONDS

As this discussion made clear, for the true potential of emotional immersion to be activated it's not enough to create a bond between the player and the character they inhabit, but, as J described, "that character must also have other characters to interact with so that, with it, the player can form empathetic bonds (…) which intensify the elements and layers of experience he came in contact with until then. "As stated before, more than its nature (real or artificial), this other's ability to resignify depends on the way it is constructed and the possible bonds are prepared and shaped. Overtly exemplifying this, as well as expressing the result of an intentional creative exercise in interactive social dynamics

subversion, *Journey* [Thatgamecompany 2012] was thus described by RL:

> «Near the end, you must climb a mountain. The first time I played, I played alone, and my character, affected by the cold, started to slow down as I went up, until it completely froze. Now, even when you›re in the multiplayer mode, your actions are very limited and besides jumping all you can do is use that sound [whistle] which allows you to interact with objects and other players. If you use that when climbing, you can warm the other person up, but there›s no reward in terms of gameplay. In fact, the climb takes a lot more time when you›re not alone (…) eventually, you›re no longer able to make the sound, run out of energy, and the outcome is the same as before, the cold takes over. So, there›s no difference in the result, but the joint effort changes everything. »

Contrarily, in other multiplayer games (particularly, massively multiplayer online role-playing games - MMORPG - and multiplayer online battle arenas - MOBA) rarely can one obtain such a strong connection to other players, even paling in comparison to offline games, C and P agreed. This, they explained, is due to the appeal of the experience depending on "having other people [you know] to play with, rather than bonding as a value inherent to the game itself". This, they defended, results in "the player having no affective connection to any character whatsoever, you play because you want to prove yourself in front of other players and you want to win".

As such, the social aspect of the game is pervaded and lessened by an agonistic power rhetoric. "In *World of Warcraft*, even in group raids [a cooperative instance], competition arises, even if it's about who has the best gear (…) players are more concerned in individually proving themselves", M pointed out. The evolution of the game mechanics seems to encourage this kind of interaction, as told C, because even the "looking for group" phase, when a player must search for their teammates, was randomized and automatized. According to M, this sure help each player "to progress faster" but, in turn, "it cuts social interaction to its required minimum" because it provides each player with too many tools to avoid the "time waste of analog interaction" and instead focus on their individual achievements. Similarly, the complexity of the raiding instances, its size, and narrative elements lose priority, as mechanics favor the optimization of the challenges' speed and repeatability, R complemented.

The critical position adopted by the majority of the participants concerning these changes, once again, reveals a slight discrepancy between the kind of experience that, consciously, players state they seek and the kind of experience they actually value. At first, its function as a method for entertainment and escapist fantasy stood out, but when asked to identify the most emotionally striking moment of their experience in video games, all participants recalled moments identifiable as disempowering and the experiences of catharsis or estrangement and self-reflection those moments fueled.

- C chose Aerith's death in *Final Fantasy VII* [Square Enix 1997], particularly for the unexpected aspect of this loss.
- The most memorable moment for P came from *Kingdom Hearts* [Square Enix 2002] when the player-character gets lost and separated from their (artificial) friends, that up until then accompanied them through their journey, while also losing their powers, recalling the powerlessness and loneliness that moment made him feel.
- RM, again, invoked the emotional impact Kate's death in *Life is Strange* exerted over her and the transformative power of that experience.
- R recalled a game from their childhood, *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon* [Spike Chunsoft 2002], highlighting the intensity of the sadness they felt when, at the end, the bond with the Pokémon companion and its world is broken by the necessary return to the human world.

- Standing by her view of narrative interruptions as part of the ludic structure, and, as such, ludic by themselves, J singled out the final cut scene from *Homeworld* [Sierra Entertainment 1999] when, on their return home, the player-character must face the outcome of the several wars and conflicts that had been developing.
- T, who started by stating his preference for FPS games, due to them not including narrative embellishments and to their purely agonistic drive, surprised himself when he came to the realization that the most powerful moment he had experienced was one from *Spec Ops: The Line* [Yager Development 2012] where a character confronts the player-character with the consequences of their actions, questioning war games appraisal of conflict and militarization as well as the protagonist's heroism. Once again, T stressed the unexpectability of the confrontation as an enhancer of the sadness and guilt he felt.
- On a more positive note, RL highlighted his experience of *Journey* [Thatgamecompany 2012], for its symbolic value, peculiar multiplayer interaction and emotional journey.

THE EMOTIONAL POWER OF DISEMPOWERMENT

On all these levels, it becomes clear that the shaping of the implicit player's place and game experience when done according to a certain set of expectations crystallized on the target-gamer ideal leaves left to be explored the poetic possibilities obtainable through the questioning of these same expectations.

As Chen (2010) reflects on his notes about the creative process that brought *Journey* to life:

> «Looking around at the consoles' online games, the most common thing you play is killing each other or killing together (...) they are about empowerment. (...) So, our focus for Journey was to make the player feel small and to feel wonder, so when they run into each other in an online environment, rather than thinking about how am I supposed to use my gun on the other player, we wanted them to feel a connection to another player.»

That, he states, would not be possible in a game that kept on applying the same "empowerment" tropes used to please the audience of "younger males." Detailing this in, Chen (2014) explains that when running the multiplayer tests of a previous version of the game, in which players had the possibility to perform physical actions, they would still focus on fast progression and competition, employing their actions to hinder each other's movement. Even without a ludic system rewarding this action path, only by making it completely inaccessible, would they achieve a multiplayer experience where cooperation and empathy are prioritized over individual triumph.

That's why, in *Journey*, the restricted action, uncertain path, visual smallness, all come together in a disempowerment fantasy, which may result in a cathartic experience. Beyond the movement, that allows the player to explore but pulls him towards the mountain where the game ends and begins again, their interaction with the world and its other agents can only be done through sound sequences (the "whistles" C mentioned). As such, the player doesn't act upon the game world. They act within it.

TEARING APART THE MAGIC CIRCLE

Video games as empowerment fantasies reflect a broader rhetoric, which pervades not only its mediatic structure, production and consumption cycle but, co-productively, the structures of reality as well. Referring to a concept presented by Sutton-Smith (2001), the rhetoric of power applied in most video games, both hegemonic and a producer of hegemonies, can explain their and their community's resistance to the changes that, gradually, start to emerge and to spread on the production cycle of other mediatic experiences. Under this

rhetoric, video games consolidate themselves as a reactionary medium, serving "the fantasies, anxieties, impulses of those [who detain the power to determine] what game culture means and how its members should behave", walking past their potential as a platform for change (Sutton-Smith 2001, p.85).

We explored how this rhetoric is embedded in and influences the experiences the medium mediates, as well as the possibilities that can be unlocked by its subversion, but it's also important to question why this matters, understanding how it correlates with the other spheres of this medium experience. Disempowerment, until now only hinted as the set of practices that permit us to tear the settings of the empowerment model in favor of the stimulation of emotions usually left out, will be used, henceforth, as a model of inquiry. With it and on a broader scale, we will try to put in check the discourse surrounding video games and their industry and the cycle of status quo reinforcement it fuels.

GAMES AS SYSTEMS: CONTEXT AND RHETORICS

As a cultural object, video games are both symptom and part of the productive forces of real social dynamics. Hence, to establish the link between the importance of breaking the empowerment model at the micro level of a video game experience and, from a macro perspective, the medium's role, we must define the nature of the boundaries which separate the virtual world of the game from reality.

During the first academic incursions into the realm of play, there was the need for a conceptual division that could help compartmentalize the new subject and facilitate theoretical discussion. Therefore, the idea of a boundary between the sphere where, in different ways, the play impulse manifests itself and the real, from which those that take part in said activities come and go back to, began to take form. This sphere, very briefly described by Huizinga ([1944] 1949) as a "magic circle", would determine not only the space and time limits but also the framework for the signifying processes that would occur during the activity, secluding it from daily life.

Despite this early vague formulation, the debate about this separation was only spurred when, now in the realm of video games, Salen & Zimmerman (2004) brought back the concept of "magic circle." Once again, this was a debate that followed the birth of the new scientific field, thus sharing some similarities with the previously discussed divide and accompanying the discussion of its ontology.

In spite of the turmoil, even Zimmerman would eventually clarify that the concept is not rigid. Video games are not unidimensional: they are mathematical systems (closed), as well as representational systems (open and closed) and social systems (open), and, so, their openness will depend on the selected approach (Zimmerman & Salen 2004) (Zimmerman 2012). This understanding sheds light on and permits the discussion to shift to its negotiation character and the co-production dynamic between its distinct elements, rather than ignoring the "material, cultural and social" impact each and every game has the power to exert (Malaby 2007, p.3). As video games do not exist in a "social vacuum", on the other side of this permeable membrane, there's also a sociocultural context, whose configuration will be reflected by the game, from its mathematical structure to its textuality. This reproduction will, in turn, produce some effect on the context the object is part of (Zimmerman & Salen 2004, p.513).

Still, the necessity to separate the two realms, particularly with video games, is understandable when considering the content of the interest the scientific community had manifested for the new medium until then. Prior to the formation and legitimation of its own field of study, academic discourse on video games often expressed a deeply set technophobia, centering on their role and that of their hypodermic power in contemporary social problems (Anderson & Bushman 2001).

The efforts to free them from this stigma incited the recovery of the concept of an impenetrable boundary, which helped strengthen their defensive line. Thus, it became feasible to defend that they had no effects whatsoever or only minimum effects, as in other medium consumption, depending on social and individual predispositions (Willoughby & Adachi 2012; Ferguson 2014; Przybylski & Mishkin 2015). On the same note, as if not to shatter the previous achievement, the following studies on their benefits still abstained from exploring their ideological power, instead focusing on their pragmatic beneficial effects on sensory and motor development and their cognitive use in teaching problem-solving skills (Steinberg 2011).

SOCIAL IMPACT: FROM EFFECTS TO MEANINGS

As Bogost (2007, p.238) warns, though, devaluing all critics to video games also devalues video games themselves, their role as a medium and contribution to identity formation processes. Negating a direct causality between behavior and the exposure to media contents mustn't erase the possibility of maintaining a critical stance towards them. In fact, both can coexist if there's a focus shift from effects to meanings (Jenkins 2006).

Contrary to "effects", a study focused on "meanings" presumes an "active interpretative effort", because they can be critically analyzed. Thus, one can think of a player back in their context, whose video game experience and subsequent interpretation will be "shaped around what they already know or think", all while keeping their ability to distinguish what's real and what's fantasy (Jenkins 2006, pp.210-220). Simultaneously, it allows the consideration of the medium ideological power of "reinforcing moral values" (Bogost 2007, p.283), which may not directly cause but may influence or legitimize certain thought patterns and, thus, engrave "certain intentions and predispositions to act" (Rosa 2000).

The structures and elements tied to the empowerment model and their translation in the player's emotional experience, for example, express its role as a gendered and male-serving medium, a "boys space" (Zimmerman & Salen 2004, p.523), where a stereotypical understanding of masculinity is reproduced and reassured. So, those whose fantasies fulfill disapprove of anything that may threaten this dominant subjectivity, policing consumption, production, and representation and refusing to accept that which is not part of the masculine spectrum.

On the second focus group, where these problematics were more intensively debated, R stated:

«There›s a certain need for reassurance, a kind of complex from the typical gamer, whom the game initially served (...) It gave them a place where they cannot be accountable for their actions [and where to perform this toxic ideal of masculinity], so, they will fight with everything they›ve got to keep untouched the hegemonies that, outside this space, start to crumble...»

On the examples used to illustrate the emotional potential of disempowerment, this tendency is usually questioned, due to its connection with the subversion of the strategies and procedural rhetoric employed at its micro level and also, on a larger scale, of the discursive patterns that permeate discussions about the medium and, as such, pervade its instantiations. Conflating both, this line of questioning and subversion we call disempowerment can also be used when exploring controversial themes and imagery, doing so in a poetic and transformative manner, rather than simply avoiding them and fighting for the sanitation and depoliticization of the medium.

It must be stressed that the interpretative effort that allows video games to hold some power over gamers is not an individual task. There's not a secluded player processing, alone, their perceived experiences. Besides the collective

frameworks through which they'll be processed, there's also the "gamer culture" from which expectations stem and to which experiences overflow. This culture often overlaps with players' social circles and because of this complex, defying the hegemonic rhetoric is an intricate procedure.

However, besides the subversive elements used in the explored examples, other games, intentionally using disempowerment in the latter sense we discussed, are starting to emerge, mostly from indie studios. *This War of Mine* [11bit Studio 2014], for example, is a violent survival game that, like many others, puts the player in the midst of an armed conflict. However, instead of being on the side of the military, through which armed forces are heroized and war glorified, the player must ensure the survival of a group of civilians, through the cruelty and hardships of war. Although often described as a game that is not fun to play and that is very hard to complete, not in terms of gameplay, but because of its emotional realism, the disempowering and subversive rhetoric it employs undoubtedly leave their mark, inspiring not only self-reflection but also public discussion. It also clarifies that depicting violence, as well as other sensitive themes, in video games is not necessarily reinforcing the same model of empowerment or its toxicity. Due to its critical positioning and overt ideological stance, it is able to present violence

taking into account its real consequences, thus, using disempowerment as a way to fight the desensitization and emotional passivity incited by the interactive media empowerment fiction.

VIDEO GAMES AS A TRANSFORMATIVE MEDIUM

The very fact that the existence of such a game is possible, allows us to redirect the focus from the limitations of the emotional experiences they provide to more pervasive questions. The moments and games analyzed made clear that, rather than being the necessary consequence of the medium interactive nature, the narrowing of the emotional spectrum is rooted on practices and rhetoric cyclically and mutually reinforced through the production and consumption of video games as an entertainment object and, to a certain extent, embedded in the ideal of interactivity itself. This critical analysis, though, is not a prescription or a peremptory statement on what is and is not valid as a video game. Its main aim is to value this medium role as a medium of experiences and speculate on how to fully realize its potential as a "platform of change", whose procedural rhetoric would allow us to move "beyond or against fixed paradigms" through a "dialectical interrogation about how the real world could or should operate" (Bogost 2007, pp.57- 59). With this, it would also be possible to experience, through

them, "real dilemmas, change real lives" and "transform the world in meaningful ways" (McGonigal 2011).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarseth, E. (2014). A Narrative Theory of Games. Essay presented in FILE Games Rio 2014: Electronic Language International Festival, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 10th – July 27th. Accessed on March 10th 2015 at http://file.org.br/pdf_books

Anderson, C. and Bushman, B. (2001). Effects of violent video games on aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, physiological arousal, and pro-social behavior: A meta analytic review of the scientific literature. Psychologichal Science. A Jounal for the Association for Psychological Science 12(5): 353-359. September. Doi:10.1111/1467-9280.00366

Bogost, I. (2007). Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames. Cambridge, MA: MIT

Bruner, K. (2003). "Post Mortem: The Walking Dead" GD: Game Developer Magazine. 20(3): 36-42. March. Accessed on March 17th 2015 at http://www.gdcvault.com/gdmag

Caillois, R. ([1958] 2001). Man, Play and Games. Translated by Meyer Barash. Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

Chen, J. (2010). TGC's Third PSN Title: Journey in thatgamecompany (blog). June 17th. Accessed on July 20th 2014 at http://thatgamecompany.com/general/tgcs-third-psn-title-journey/

Chen, J. (2014). Interview with Chelsea Stark. Tapping Into the Emotional Side of Video Games: Developing Hope, Healing and Love Mashable. April 17th. Accessed on June 20th 2014 at http://mashable.com/2014/04/17/jenova-chen-emotion-in-games/

Eskelinen, M. (2001). Towards Computer Game Studies, Part 1: Narratology and Ludology. Essay presented in SIGGRAPH, California, USA, August 12th-17th. Accessed on June 21st at http://www.siggraph.org/artdesign/gallery/S01/essays/0416.pdf

Ferguson, C. (2014). Does Media Violence Predict Societal Violence? It Depends on

What You Look at and When. Journal of Communication, 65(1): E1–E22. November 5th. Doi:10.1111/jcom.12129

Huizinga, J. ([1944] 1949). Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Järvinen, A. (2008). Games without Frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies and Design. Dissertation (Ph.D in Media Culture), University of Tampere. Accessed on October 8th 2014 at http://ocw.metu.edu.tr/pluginfile.php/4468/mod_resource/content/0/ceit706/week3_new/AkiJarvinen_Dissertation.pdf

Jenkins, H. (2004). Game Design as Narrative Architecture. First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game. eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin e Pat Harrigan, 118-130. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006). Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture. New York: New York University Press.

Juul, J. (2001). A Clash between Game and Narrative: A thesis on computer games and interactive fiction. Master Dissertation in Nordic Literature, Institute of Nordic Language and Literature, University of Copenhagen. Accessed on August 10th 2015 de http://www.jesperjuul.net/thesis/

Kallay, J. (2013). Gaming Film: How Games Are Reshaping Contemporary Cinema. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Malaby, T. (2007). Beyond Play: A new approach to games. Games and Culture. 95(2): 95-113. October 18th. Doi: 10.1177/1555412007299434

McGonigal, J. (2011). Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World. New York: Penguin Books

Murray, J. (1997). Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace. New York: Free Press.

Przybylski, A. and Mishkin, A. F. (2015). How the Quantity and Quality of Electronic Gaming Relates to Adolescents' Academic Engagement and Psychosocial Adjustment. Psychology of Popular Media Culture. March 2nd. Doi:10.1037/ppm0000070

Rosa, J. M. (2000). No Reino da Ilusão, a Experiência Lúdica das Novas Tecnologias. Lisbon: Vega.

Rouse III, R. (2009). Match Made in Hell: The Inevitable Success of Horror Video Games. Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play. ed. Bernard Perron, 15-25. Jefferson: McFarland.

Ryan, M-L. (2001). Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Scott Steinberg. (2011). The Modern Parent's Guide to Kids and Video Games. Lilbum, GA: P3 Power Play Publishing.

Sutton-Smith, B. (2001). The Ambiguity of Play. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, L. N. (2002). Video Games: Perspective, Point-of-view, and Immersion. Master Dissertation in Arts, University of Florida. Accessed on April 12th 2014 at http://www.laurientaylor.org/research/taylor_l.pdf

Tocci, J. (2008). 'You Are Dead. Continue?': Conflicts and Complements in Game Rules and Fiction Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2 (2): 187-201. Accessed on September 2nd 2015 at http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/43/81

Willoughby, T. and Adachi, P. J. C. (2012). Do Video Games Promote Positive Youth Development? Journal of Adolescent Research. 28(2): 155-165. November 2nd. Doi:10.1177/0743558412464522

Zagalo, N. (2009). Emoções interactivas, do cinema para os videojogos. Coimbra: Gracio Editor

Zimmerman, E. (2012). Jerked Around the Magic Circle: Clearing the Air Ten Years Later. Gamasutra. February 7th. Accessed on August 2nd 2015 at http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/135063/jerked_around_by_the_magic_circle_.php

Zimmerman, E. and Salen, K. (2004). Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press