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Splendeur(s) et misère(s) des genres vidéoludiques
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Introduction:
Splendeur(s) et misère(s) des genres vidéoludiques

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À l'heure où le jeu vidéo s'est imposé comme un objet culturel majeur, la structuration de son histoire et la catégorisation générique de ses productions forment un important chantier qui reste encore à défricher par les études vidéoludiques. À ce titre, le dixième art a l'avantage de pouvoir prendre appui sur ses prédécesseurs qui ont constitué de puissants cadres d'analyse à partir desquels il est possible de cartographier le vaste territoire des genres. Dans le champ de la littérature par exemple, on peut citer des références incontournables telles que *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Todorov 1970), *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Fowler 1982) *Théorie des genres* (Genette *et al.* 1986) ou encore *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire ?* (Schaeffer 1989). L'analyse des genres trouve également écho du côté des théories du cinéma, notamment avec *Theories of Film* (Tudor 1979), *Film/Genre* (Altman 1999), *Genre and Hollywood* (Neale 2000) ou *Les genres du cinéma* (Moine 2002).

À la lumière de cette importante tradition de recherche, force est de constater que les jeunes études du jeu vidéo disposent encore de peu d'ouvrages consacrés à ce sujet. En effet, une revue de la littérature dans ce domaine révèle que seulement quelques contributions scientifiques se dédient entièrement à la question des genres vidéoludiques, entre autres *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play* (Carr et al. 2006), *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-*

Playing Games (Barton 2008), *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (Perron 2009) ou *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games* (Voorhees, Call et Whitlock 2012). Autrement, la documentation sur le sujet se disperse à travers quelques articles universitaires, chapitres d'ouvrages collectifs ou de thèses (Wolf 2001, Apperley 2006, Järvinen 2008, Arsenault 2009, Gregersen, 2014). La rareté des écrits en la matière signale un manque à combler d'un point de vue formaliste et historique, précisément parce que les étiquettes génériques telles que « jeux de plateforme », « jeux de tir à la première personne », « jeux d'aventure », « jeux d'action » ou encore « jeux de stratégie en temps réel » jouent un rôle central dans la détermination de l'horizon d'attentes ainsi qu'en ce qui concerne les interactions, les communications et les activités ludo-créatives des joueurs, des développeurs et des journalistes. Une part de la réponse face à ce manque ne relève pas uniquement de la démultiplication et de l'imprécision de la notion de genre en elle-même (par exemple, la typologie de Mark J.P. Wolf compte à elle seule une quarantaine de genres). Elle trouve également ancrage dans les premières impulsions d'analyse des chercheurs en études du jeu vidéo qui ont d'abord dû définir leur objet de recherche, entreprise qui s'est cristallisée sous la forme d'une opposition entre la part narrative et la part ludique du médium (une scission qui continue aujourd'hui d'influencer les modes de catégorisation générique). Si ces deux facettes tendent à présent à être réconciliées, cette dissociation polémique originaire et la multiplicité des disciplines mobilisées dans les études vidéoludiques ont mené à une prolifération de courts textes (articles, chapitres d'ouvrages et sections de thèses) proposant des classifications divergentes. Signe d'un décalage entre la notion classique de genre et l'objet étudié, ce foisonnement va à l'encontre de la fonction communicationnelle et classificatoire de l'approche générique en jetant davantage d'ombre que de lumière sur la production vidéoludique.

Cependant, un tel constat occulte en quelque sorte le caractère mouvant et discursif du genre qui a amené Dominic Arsenault à définir ce dernier, à la suite de Tudor, comme la « cristallisation temporaire d'un consensus culturel commun » (2011, p. 334). C'est bien parce que les caractéristiques d'un genre relèvent d'un consensus – et non pas d'une autorité spécifique ou d'un structuralisme rigide – qu'une myriade de formes génériques apparaît, disparaît et réapparaît sous des morphologies ou des appellations différentes. Par exemple, c'est le cas du *first-person shooter*, d'abord connu comme *maze game* ou *3D maze game* puis comme *first-person action*, *first-person shoot-'em-up* et *DOOM-like*, avant de se décliner en *first-person tactical shooter*, *team-based first-person shooter*, *MMOFPS* et autres dénominations plus

précises. Un scénario similaire se dessine du côté du *jumping game* dont les nomenclatures se propagent à travers divers circuits croisant les étiquettes *action-adventure*, puis *platformer* ou encore *Metroidvania*. Il importe aussi de souligner que si certains genres vidéoludiques jouissent d'un consensus fort, d'autres suscitent davantage de contestation et souffrent d'un manque de reconnaissance. C'est précisément le cas du *walking simulator*, des *hidden object games*, des *serious games*, des *art games*, des *incremental games* ou des jeux érotiques. Ces quelques trajectoires et réalités historiques pointent vers l'existence d'une dynamique transformative et discursive qui se trouve au cœur des processus d'innovation, de réitération et de ruptures qui animent et redéfinissent perpétuellement les contours des genres.

Dans cette perspective, la démultiplication des démarches contradictoires devient moins le symptôme d'une inopérance conceptuelle que de la grande vitalité d'un champ d'études qui se structure progressivement dans la confrontation et le dialogue. Tout comme les genres vidéoludiques qui sont d'abord apparus sous la forme d'emprunts (jeu de rôle sur table dans la lignée de *Donjons et Dragons*, *wargame* sur plateau, jeu de labyrinthe, S*hooting Gallery*, etc.) ou encore à travers des rapprochements avec de grandes œuvres iconiques (*Myst-like*, *Doom clone*, *Diablo clone*) pour ensuite développer des dénominations propres relativement stables (*Role-playing game*, *Real-Time Strategy*, *First-person Shooter*, etc.), la diversité des approches disciplinaires, des études de cas et des analyses critiques des multiples catégorisations permet de produire des modèles de plus en plus précis et fonctionnels. C'est dans l'optique d'un tel raffinement conceptuel et d'une volonté d'exploration historique et théorique des genres ludiques et vidéoludiques que s'est déroulée l'édition 2017 du *Symposium Annuel Histoire du Jeu.*

Le Symposium a souhaité aborder ce sujet protéiforme selon trois problématiques majeures posées par l'émergence et l'évolution des genres. La première, d'ordre fondamentalement historique, concerne l'étude des spécificités formelles et expérientielles des différentes catégories de jeux repositionnées dans leur contexte de formation et de transformation. Il s'agit alors d'interroger la généalogie des genres afin de déterminer quelles réalités recouvrent des étiquettes génériques qui évoluent au fil des développements technologiques, des pratiques des créateurs et des activités de consommation des joueurs.

Afin d'étayer cette base, la deuxième problématique porte sur la documentation et l'analyse du discours des diverses communautés qui discutent et constituent les catégories génériques. Sur cette question, retrouver les traces des perspectives de joueurs, journalistes, concepteurs, publicitaires et universitaires donne l'opportunité de revenir sur notre perception historiquement située et d'opérer un décentrement conceptuel nécessaire et fructueux.

Enfin, la troisième problématique se situe à l'intersection des deux précédentes et touche au développement des genres par l'entremise des phénomènes d'appropriation, de circulation et de détournement. L'histoire générique des jeux vidéo est en effet parsemée de transformations et d'hybridations attribuables autant à la communauté des créateurs que des joueurs. Documenter ces phénomènes ouvre sur de nombreuses perspectives quant à la manière dont des pratiques isolées peuvent se cristalliser en un genre identifiable par un large public.

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Issus de communications au Symposium, les cinq textes présents dans ce numéro offrent un riche éventail d'approches sur ces trois problématiques et interrogent les grands enjeux reliés à l'étude des genres. L'article de Gerald Voorhees prend ainsi acte des difficultés auxquelles font face les études du jeu vidéo en matière de catégorisation générique. Il trouve les racines d'une telle impasse théorique dans le débat entre ludologues et narratologues qui, selon l'expression de Gonzalo Frasca (2003), « n'a jamais eu lieu », mais doit se produire. Voorhees fait appel à la nécessité d'une dialectique agonistique (et non pas antagonistique) servant de creuset à l'émergence de définitions rigoureuses des genres, suivant la nature dialogique ou discursive de leur construction. Dans cette optique, ce que l'auteur nomme le « trouble générique » apparaît moins comme un cul-de-sac intellectuel que comme un champ d'échanges et de discussions extrêmement fertile; approche que les articles suivants viennent confirmer en explorant divers cas de formations de genres par la confrontation de perspectives différentes.

L'étude réalisée par Miikka Junnila, Markku Reunanen et Tero Heikkinen scrute en détail le western vidéoludique et profite de l'importation de ce genre cinématographique dans le jeu vidéo pour questionner la catégorisation de ces œuvres. À travers l'analyse quantitative et qualitative d'un large corpus, la disparité des formes de jeux associées au western soulève, d'une part, la question du croisement entre les aspects thématiques et ludiques au regard de

l'évolution de ce genre et, d'autre part, celle du lien rattachant les possibilités d'interactions au type d'univers fictionnel représenté.

La contribution de Simon Dor se penche sur les défis liés à l'historicisation de la jouabilité observé au cours de son analyse du jeu de stratégie en temps réel (STR). L'analyse du discours journalistique des années 1980 amène l'auteur à démentir la continuité naturelle qu'une approche téléologique de l'histoire du genre pose avec le *wargame*. Cette épistémologie critique vient mettre en lumière des racines reliant le STR avec d'autres genres tels que le jeu d'arcade, le jeu de sport et le jeu multijoueur. Cette nouvelle perspective oppose à une conception essentialiste du phénomène générique une succession de référents historiquement situés qui invitent le théoricien à une recontextualisation permanente de ces catégories.

Pour sa part, l'article de Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin se base sur un examen des parodies de jeux occasionnels pour interroger à la fois les théories littéraires du genre parodique et le statut de la catégorie des jeux occasionnels. L'effervescence autour du jeu *Cow Clicker* (Bogost, 2010) est étudiée comme un cas exemplaire d'un important déphasage entre les intentions auteuriales inscrites dans l'œuvre et sa réception. Par l'entremise d'une analyse du paratexte qui accompagne l'œuvre, des discours du créateur et des joueurs ainsi qu'en établissant des comparaisons avec d'autres jeux du même genre (*FarmVille*, *A.V.G.M.* et *Progress War*), l'auteure s'intéresse au caractère labile et incertain de la rhétorique procédurale des parodies de jeux occasionnels. L'interprétation et l'appropriation des œuvres par les communautés des joueurs sont envisagées comme des phénomènes déterminants vis-à-vis la concrétisation ou la mise en échec de la rhétorique procédurale autant que de l'amplification ou de la réduction de la dénonciation parodique.

Enfin, l'étude des simulateurs de marche (*walking simulator*) proposée par Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon rend compte d'une formation générique très contemporaine. Prenant *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012) comme point de départ, œuvre prototypique par excellence à l'image de *DOOM* (id Software, 1993) pour le FPS, l'auteur aborde le déploiement formel et discursif du *walking simulator* et invite le lecteur à redéfinir la perception commune de ce qu'est le jeu vidéo. Il retrace ainsi l'émergence polémique de ce genre controversé (et de son étiquette générique initialement utilisée de manière péjorative) à travers les discours polarisés produits par quatre communautés vidéoludiques: les joueurs, les instances marketing,

les concepteurs et la presse spécialisée. Une telle recherche expose la fertilité d'une réflexion articulée autour du décalage par rapport à l'horizon d'attentes en insistant par le fait même sur l'importance de réfléchir les tensions agonistiques qui dynamisent l'appropriation et l'évolution sémantique des appellations génériques.

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De la nécessité de décentrer l'approche des genres vidéoludiques d'un essentialisme ludologique (Voorhees et Junnila & Reunanen), en passant par l'archéologie des étiquettes génériques et de leurs développements sémantiques (Deslongchamps-Gagnon et Dor), jusqu'à l'analyse des écarts d'interprétations qui traversent, d'une part, les différents contextes de réception (Trépanier-Jobin) et, d'autre part, les discours qui constituent l'histoire des genres (Deslongchamps-Gagnon et Dor), le regroupement de ces cinq textes témoigne non seulement de la diversité des études génériques, mais aussi des problématiques communes auxquelles font face les chercheurs. Les pistes de réflexion qui sont proposées offrent des clés de lecture afin d'appréhender le désordre à travers lequel les genres vidéoludiques émergent, se cristallisent et se transforment. Elles contribuent, nous le souhaitons, à éclaircir les « troubles du genre » vidéoludique – comme le formule Voorhees – qui font de ce champ d'analyse un domaine de recherche extrêmement riche.

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Special Issue
The Rise(s) and Fall(s) of Video Game Genres
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Introduction:
The Rise(s) and Fall(s) of Video Game Genres

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Since video games have come to acquire the status of major cultural objects, their structuration and categorization become an important challenge for their studies. The tenth art thus follows its predecessors in the constitution of strong analytical canvases allowing for the mapping of a vast production. It was notably the case of literature, from which we can mention *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Todorov 1970), *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Fowle, 1982), *Théorie des genres* (Genette & *al*. 1986) or *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire ?* (Schaeffer 1989). The analysis of genres is also well developed in film studies with major works such as *Theories of Film* (Tudor 1979), *Film/Genre* (Altman 1999), *Genre and Hollywood* (Neale 2000) or *Cinema Genre* (Moine [2002] 2008).

In light of this important research tradition, it is clear that as a young discipline, video game studies still need to address this subject to a greater extent. Indeed, few books tackle this issue upfront, although one may think of *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play* (Carr et al. 2006), *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Barton 2008), *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (Perron 2009) or *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games* (Voorhees, Call, and Whitlock 2012). Otherwise, the literature on the subject is scattered in a few academic articles, chapters of collective works and

theses (Wolf 2001, Apperley 2006, Järvinen 2008, Arsenault 2009, Gregersen, 2014). The scarcity of academic contributions regarding video game genre signals the need for further investigations from a formalist and historical point of view, precisely because generic labels such as "platform games," "first-person shooter games," "adventure games," "action games," or "real-time strategy games" play such a central role in shaping the horizon of expectations as well as the interactions, communications and ludo-creative activities of players, developers and journalists alike. Part of the answer to this lack of research is not only linked to the multiplication and vagueness of the notion of genre itself (for example, Mark J.P. Wolf's typology alone accounts for forty genres), bit also bound to the fact that scholars first had to define the object of their study, a venture that took the form of an opposition between the narrative and ludic parts of the medium. Although those aspects tend to be reconciled, such a polemic dissociation, combined with multiple disciplines mobilized in video game studies, led to a proliferation of short texts (papers, book chapters or thesis sections) offering diverging classifications. While it is a consequence of the gap between the classical notion of genre and the studied object, this proliferation seems to go against the communicative and classifying function of the generic approach by casting more shadows than light on video games.

However, such an observation obscures somehow the shifting and discursive nature of genre which led Dominic Arsenault to define it, following Tudor, as the "temporary crystallization of a common cultural consensus" (2011, p. 334). It is undeniably because a given genre's characteristics fall under a consensus – as opposed to a specific authority or a rigid structuralism – that a myriad of generic forms and tags constantly appears, disappears and reappears. For example, one might think of the *first-person shooter*, first known as the *maze game* or *3D maze game*, then as *first-person action*, *first-person shoot-'em-up*, and *DOOM-like*, before it splintered into the *first-person tactical shooter*, *team-based first-person shooter*, *MMOFPS*, and other more specific names. The case of *jumping games* also comes to mind, which were initially labeled as *action-adventure games*, *platformers*, or as *Metroidvanias*. Yet, while some video game genres benefit from a strong consensus, others raise more protests and suffer from a lack of recognition. It is precisely the case for *walking simulators*, *serious games*, *art games*, *hidden object games*, *incremental games*, or erotic games. This transformative and discursive dynamic is at the heart of the processes of innovation, reiteration and rupture which constantly enliven and redefine the outlines of genres.

From this perspective, the multiplication of contradictory approaches becomes less a symptom of conceptual inoperability than of the great vitality of a field of study that is gradually structured through confrontation and dialogue. Just as videogame genres first appeared in the form of borrowed tags (tabletop RPG, tabletop *wargame*, *Maze Game* and *Shooting Gallery*) or by mirroring the titles of iconic productions (*Myst-like*, *DOOM clone*, *Diablo clone*) before being stabilized through institutionalized labels (*Role-playing game*, *Real-Time Strategy*, *First-person Shooter*), it is possible to produce increasingly precise and functional models by diversifying our disciplinary ways of dealing with the notion, studying specific cases, and leading critical analysis of generic categories themselves. It is in an attempt to foster such conceptual refinements and expand the historical and theoretical exploration videoludic genres that the 2017 edition of the Game History Annual Symposium took place.

This symposium has wished to address this protean object through three major issues raised by the emergence and evolution of genres. The first, of a fundamentally historical nature, concerns the study of the formal and experiential specificities of different classifications of games repositioned in their context of formation and transformation. It is a question of determining the technological, practical, and playful conditions that drive generic labels and their evolution.
In order to develop this basis, the second issue concerns the documentation and analysis of the discourses of the various communities commenting on and constituting generic categories. Finding traces of the perspectives of players, journalists, designers, advertisers and academics on this matter allows us to revisit our historically situated perception and to make a necessary and fruitful conceptual shift.

Finally, the third issue is at the intersection of the first two and concerns the evolution of genre through the phenomena of appropriation, circulation and diversion. The generic history of video games is indeed strewn with transformations and hybridization from the creators' and the players' community. Documenting these phenomena therefore opens up many ways of thinking on how isolated practices can crystallize into genres which can be identified by a wide audience.

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Based on papers given at the Symposium, the five texts in this issue offer an eclectic range of approaches to these three issues and reflect the major topics mentioned above. Gerald Voorhees'

article thus acknowledges the difficulties faced by video game studies in terms of generic categorization. He finds the roots of such a theoretical impasse in the debate between ludologists and narratologists which, according to Gonzalo Frasca (2003), "never took place" but must occur. Voorhees calls for an agonistic (and not antagonistic) dialectic that serves as a crucible for the emergence of rigorous definitions of genres, depending on the dialogical or discursive nature of their construction. With this in mind, what the author calls “genre trouble” appears less as an intellectual dead end than as an extremely fertile field of exchange and discussion; an approach that the following articles confirm by exploring various cases of genre formation through the confrontation of different angles of thinking.

The study conducted by Miikka Junnila, Markku Reunanen and Tero Heikkinen looks at Western-themed video games and analyzes the transposition of this cinematographic genre into video games to question the categorization of these specific types of productions. Through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a large corpus, the disparity of game forms associated with the Western raises, on the one hand, the question of the intersection between the thematic and ludic aspects of this genre as well as, on the other hand, the link between the interactional possibilities offered to the player and the type of fictional universe that is represented.

Simon Dor’s contribution addresses the issues related to the historicization of gameplay observed during his analysis of real-time strategy games (RTS). The study of journalistic discourses of the 1980s leads him to question the uncontested continuity that a teleological approach to the genre’s history poses with wargames. Based on this critical epistemology, the author exposes some genealogical filiations linking the RTS to other genres such as arcade games, sports games and multiplayer games. This new viewpoint opposes an essentialist conception of the generic phenomenon with a succession of historically located references that invite the theorist to a permanent recontextualization of these categories.

Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin’s article examines parodies of casual games to question both literary theories of the parodic genre and the status of the casual games category. The incremental game *Cow Clicker* (Bogost, 2010) is taken as an exemplary case study of an important misalignment between the authorial intents coded into the game and its reception. Through an examination of *Cow Clicker*’s paratext, creator’s and players’ discourses, and by making insightful comparisons with other incremental games (*FarmVille*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*), the author interrogates

the labile and uncertain character of the procedural rhetoric embedded in casual game parodies. Therefore, the interpretation and the appropriation of video games by the players' communities are considered as determining phenomena regarding the effectiveness of procedural rhetoric alongside the understanding of the critical message of a given videoludic parody.

Finally, Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon's study of walking simulators reflects a very contemporary generic birth. *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), a clear prototypical work similar to what *DOOM* (id Software, 1993) has been for the FPS, is taken as a starting point. The author addresses the formal and discursive deployment of the walking simulator and invites us to redefine the common perception of what video games are all about. He retraces the controversial emergence of this genre (and its initially pejorative generic label) by investigating its polarized discourses as produced by four game communities: the players, the marketing entities, the developers, and the specialized press. Such research indicates the fertility of an approach focused on the gap a genre can create in a well-formed and consensual horizon of expectations. It also revealed the fruitfulness of reflecting on genre troubles from an agonistic lens to better understand the tensions that shape the appropriation and the semantic evolution of various generic appellations.

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From the need to decentralize the approach of videoludic genres from a strictly ludological line or essentialism (Voorhees and Junnila & Reunanen), to the call for an archaeology of generic labels and their semantic developments (Deslongchamps-Gagnon and Dor), to the analysis of epistemological gaps that cross different reception contexts (Trépanier-Jobin) as well as the contradictory discourses that constitute the history of video game genres (Deslongchamps-Gagnon and Dor), the five texts collected in this issue not only expose the diversity of generic studies, but also point toward common challenges that researchers are actually facing. The lines of thought proposed here offer several keys to understand the disorder through which video game genres emerge, crystallize and transform. They contribute, we hope, to the clarification of several "genre troubles" – as formulated by Voorhees – that make this field of inquiries an extremely rich area of research.

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Genre Troubles in Game Studies: Ludology, Agonism, and Social Action

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Abstract: This paper outlines an impasse in game studies that others have called "genre trouble," which can be traced to the scholarly discourses that engaged the concept of game genre and reproduced aspects of the ludology and narratology debate. Two lines of argumentation and inquiry about game genres can be discerned, a dominant ludological line and a less prominent but more productive agonistic orientation. The potential benefits of the agonistic approach to enrich and enliven studies of game genre are articulated to both the discourse community of game studies and the inherently political contexts in which the field is situated. In this context, genre trouble is not an obstacle to game genre analysis but its method.

Keywords: Genre, Game Studies, Ludology, Agonism, Social action

Résumé en français à la fin de l'article

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This paper outlines an impasse in game studies that others have called "Genre Trouble," (Aarseth 2004; Arsenault 2009) and argues for shifting our stance, as a field, to rethink this trouble as an opportunity to bring renewed attention and enthusiasm for the analytical concept of "genre". As a critical tool, genre theory and analysis can help produce knowledge about the cultural and communicative dimensions of digital games that studies of individual games and those that treat games as a totality cannot. In this context, I am starting from and extending Bernard Perron's (2009b) observation that there is discernable dearth of scholarship on game genre (p.4). In addition to offering a retrospective explanation for this gap, I hope to pick up threads that link genre studies to contemporary shifts in game studies.

I argue that our field's genre gap is a product of a different sort of genre trouble than what Aarseth described. Though the contemporary consensus is largely that the ludology and narratology debate was banal and is no longer worth talking about -- if it even happened in the first place -- it is my position that this debate produced implications that persist to this day. Indeed, the concept of genre in game studies has been, until very recently, a reflection of the ludology and narratology debate and a testament to the structuring power of this discourse within our community. In what follows, I begin with a rhetorical analysis of how this conversation played out in terms of research on game genres, and how it has helped constitute this genre trouble. I draw two lines that, I argue, delineate how our field conceives of and takes up genre, and how it might do so going forward. The first is the "ludological line" and in addition to being the typical story that we tell ourselves in literature reviews about game genres, it is also a significant piece of the architecture of the Genre Trouble. I then formulate a counter-narrative with an alternative trajectory for our field, a competing history of genre characterized by pluralism and discursivity and loosely organized around notions of interaction and gameplay, which I call the "agonistic line." If the figure for the ludological line is a line in the sand, the figure for the agonistic line is the one we draw between different points in order to create connection and form.

Of course, both of these lines are fabrications: rhetorical constructs produced in the midst of specific historical contingencies. But it is my contention that the contemporary situation -- in the institutions of game studies and more importantly in the social, political, and economic contexts that even the more privileged among us can no longer pretend only exist outside of the "magic circle" of our community -- necessitates we pivot to an agonistic line on genre. I

conclude by advocating for an agonistic orientation in the discourse of our field and in critical-cultural studies of game genre by arguing that genre is a crucial tool that games scholars can use to intervene in the cultural struggles that define the historical present.

Genre Trouble

As a discursive formation, genre trouble refers to the struggle, carried out in scholarly conference presentations and proceedings, journals, and books, to conceptualize and practice game genre studies. The consequence of our genre trouble is our general inability, as a field, to harness genre as a tool that contributes effectively to our larger critical and conceptual apparatuses. Though my first impulse is to frame this as a matter of our inability to agree upon the criteria for distinguishing different genres of digital games, much less the actual contours of particular genres. However, such an assessment would be disingenuous. In fact, game genre exists in a state of simultaneous crisis and stasis precisely because of the criteria we have collectively accepted. Here, in addition to the substance of the argumentation we must look to how communicative forms and norms in game studies manage conflicts about and across disciplinary lines.

The "dispersion" and general "lack" of work on games and genre, noted by the organizers of the 2017 Game History Symposium – both a manifestation and consequence of the Genre Trouble in game studies – can be traced to the ludology and narratology debate. With Nelson, McGill & McCloskey (1987), I maintain that interrogating the rhetorics of inquiry of a field can challenge the aura of neutrality reified by the languages of academic inquiry and "reveal underlying issues and better ways to consider them responsibly" (p.4). It has long been considered *passé* to revisit the "debate that never took place" (Frasca 2003a), but as I have claimed elsewhere (Voorhees 2013), its lasting impact was to "define and thereby control the nature of the field". In this instance, the ludological narrative regarding genre enjoys pre-eminence, and colours every work on the topic. As I will argue, a significant component of the Genre Trouble is the simple but immutable insistence that game studies practice the formalist analysis of a game's "structure and elements -- particularly its rules" (Frasca 2003b, 222). It is crystallized in Thomas Apperley's (2006) canonical essay "Genre and Game Studies" but neither originates nor ends there.

Following Jan Simons (2007), I maintain that the study of game genres is one site where the ludology and narratology debate "blissfully ignored" the substance of the issues at stake. Though certainly well intended, Gonzalo Frasca's (2003a) insistence that "ludologists love stories too" and his opening vignette about using narrative concepts into his own work (without any specific sense of how) has come to epitomize the empty, feel-good quietism that drains any value from discussions of the topic. And despite Frasca's insistence about "ludology's intentions of peacefully coexisting with narratology," fifteen years later the flagship game studies conference is organized around the theme, "The Game is the Message," and the call for submissions to the track on "meaning-making" unabashedly asserts: "The connection between a game and its content is often interchangeable -- a game is clearly recognizable even if the surface fiction is changed" (DiGRA 2017). In the same way that having a friend who is a member of a marginalized community does not absolve one from benefiting from that community's marginalization, admitting that one "likes stories" without making space for narrative-oriented scholarship, much less while actively campaigning to take that space, is a rhetorical effort to depoliticize what others (e.g. Aarseth 2004) have freely admitted is a concerted project to build infrastructure, institutional legitimacy, and access to resources for games researchers. More than a dozen years and a handful of conciliatory gestures later, it is understandable that we forget that academic discourses participate in what Antonio Gramsci calls the "war of position" between competing ideological formations (1971, p. 238-9).

It is in this spirit that I amplify Matthew William Kappell (2016), arguing that "the 'debate that never happened'… is a debate that needs to happen. In ignoring the debate we are putting the utility of game studies at risk – perhaps not amongst ourselves but certainly in the context of the larger academy and culture in general" (6). It is in this spirit and with the hope that game studies will be able to speak to concerns outside of the phantasmic circle of our field that I interrogate how it constructs genre.

The Ludological Line

The origin of the ludological line, or the narrative about genre that is told from the ludological perspective, is Aarseth's (2004) essay "Genre Trouble." Contemporaries often point to this article to highlight Aarseth's dubious claim that the character of "Lara Croft" is a non-essential element of the Tomb Raider series. But I want to draw our attention, instead, to the particular

use of "genre" as both an analytical framework and rhetorical device in this piece. Aarseth uses genre to distinguish modes of cultural expression -- stories, simulations, and games -- as well as to describe formations of cultural expression including adventure, strategy, and role-playing games. Aarseth's decision to use genre to describe both of these categories creates an equivalency between them, one that is exploited in his argument that the underlying structures that distinguish adventure, strategy, and role-playing games are properties of their approaches to simulation. The resigned acceptance of this has had three lasting implications.

First, this equivocation helped provide discursive legitimacy to calls for a new discipline. Others have discussed how the ludology and narratology debate was and still is instrumental to the development of game studies as a discursive community connected by shared practices (Murray 2005; Kappell 2016). It is certainly not a novel or even uncommon tactic, in this light. In fact, if we take communication studies as an example, we can discern how this same discursive move was employed in the early days of the field. In the 1910's a growing number of scholars concerned with teaching public speaking began to leave Composition departments. Their first move was to split from the National Council of Teachers of English (formerly the National Organization of English Teachers and organize as the National Communication Association (formerly the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking). Herbert Whilchen's penned the manifesto for the emerging field of Speech Communication -- the distinct style of rhetorical theory and criticism that emergence in the first half of the Twentieth Century in the US -- citing a worrying lack of attention to the peculiarities of oral, rhetorical practice. In other words, the medium of oral speaking, an entire mode of cultural expression, was being neglected to focus on writing. This scenario repeated itself in the 1950's when a group of scholars grew concerned about the field's focus of oral discourse and rhetorical approaches, which they claimed came at the expense of other modes of communication, particularly electronic media. These folks eventually formed the International Communication Association (formerly the National Society for the Study of Communication) (Weaver 1977). Aarseth's move to turn the discourse of genre into an argument for the legitimacy of a new discipline follows this well-established tactic.

This does not mean that it was not also a distraction, a deflection, and unproductive for those interested in charting the relations between formations of text and the contexts of their production and circulation; indeed, this is the second consequence the equivocation. Aarseth's

tale of genre trouble helped pivot the conversation from genre as formations of text to genre as justification for ludology. That is, by insisting on talking about genre as a nebulous "form of expression" Aarseth makes it more difficult for us to take up the questions of genre as a set of conventions or expectations negotiated between a discourse and its audience (Burke 1965[1953]), or "stylistic and substantive responses to situational demands" (Campbell and Jamieson 1978, p.19), much less as an "aesthetic structure of affective expectation […that is] repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations" (Berlant 2008, 4). Even if this was not the intention of the essay, this move was nevertheless intentional.

At this point, scholars working explicitly in game studies in spaces where Aarseth also worked had begun the project, though not in any systemic way, of parsing out how the repetition of clusters of formal elements constitute distinct game genres. Diane Carr (2003) had written her famous piece on genre as the production of an affective state, and Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska (2002) had already talked about genre in terms of gameplay, as the actions that a player must perform to succeed in a game. Indeed, Aarseth, Smedstad, and Sunnanā (2003) had, the previous year, proposed a taxonomy to bring coherence and systemicity to prior efforts to theorize genre. We will never *post factum* be able to quantify the extent of the effectiveness of this rhetorical strategy, but I will claim with absolute certainty that genre would be more robust and more diverse area of inquiry in game studies if Aarseth, and others working under what Andreas Gregerson (2014) calls a "strict ludological position," had not refused to engage the question of how to utilize and study genre in games from the very start (p. 161).

The third lasting impact of the Aarseth's version of genre trouble is the deployment of a transhistorical narrative in which, retroactively, "the past is presented as an extension of the present" (Charland 1987, 140). In doing so, it reifies the foundations of a strict ludological position by inscribing ludology into a narrative about genre in game studies. For example, Frans Mayra's (2008) *Introduction to Game Studies*, presents genre as a problematic, echoing the ludology and narratology debate. He juxtaposes the Western and the Detective Story, which he terms "established conventions in the narrative arts" and brings forward, against this, Mark J.P. Wolf's claims that game genres should be "based on the nature of interactivity rather than iconography" (2001). Of course, Wolf makes no mention of ludology, nor does he cite any of the Northern European researchers who operated under the moniker – rather, he puts his work in

conversation with North American film and television scholars, the very folks who represent the narrative arts and the academic establishment the ludologists railed against. Nevertheless, Mayra's brief discussion of genre manages to frame the question in terms of ludology and narratology and also fold Wolf into the conversation after the fact.

This transhistorical façade is also exemplified in what is perhaps the most iconic essay, and certainly the most cited, on games and genre. In "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Game Genres", Apperley (2006) argued for understanding game genres as formations of "the various types of 'non-trivial' efforts involved in the ergodic 'traverse' of video games" (7). He draws a line from his theorizations, one that retrospectively includes Wolf's taxonomy, King and Kryzwinska's categorizations, and even Aarseth's *Cybertext*. Apperley does this by calling for an understanding of genre that builds from Wolf's taxonomy, but on the condition that Wolf's cipher, "interactivity," is replaced with the ludological shibboleth of "ergodicity." Apperley's theorization of genre seemingly remedied two irreconcilable positions, bringing explicitly representational elements into conversation with ludology by piously centering the ergodic. And it is presently the most vital touchstone in most literature reviews of the subject that I have come across (and written myself) -- sometimes the starting point, often the end point, and in many more cases the only point on the matter. Despite some recent scholarship that seeks to expand the scope of our thinking about genre (e.g. Gregerson 2014), game studies that take on genre are in a sort of stasis that is simultaneously a state of crisis.

Like the game versus player debate that followed, the ludology and narratology polemic's most substantive and lasting consequence was to create a story that makes a claim about the proper conduct of digital games research, and that thereby partakes in the shaping of other conversations in the field without directly participating in them. Michel Foucault (2000) calls this governmentality, the conduct of conduct, "a set of actions upon other actions" (341). By constructing a narrative about genre in game studies that wears a transhistorical façade, the debate helped constitute and entrench a knowledge about the proper conduct, or method, of the practice of game studies scholarship. It succeeded, in part, because of its ability to make a smooth line out of the rough contours of history, to even incorporate scholarship that was written and published before the term ludology was widely known.

But, it is important to remember that this principle of respecting the character of interaction in games is not a unique contribution from ludology. In fact, the centering of engagement, participation, and interaction emerged from and is still grounded in the discourses and corresponding expectations generated by the complex of player communities and cultures, professional and organizational norms of game development, and the crowded market for popular culture in which games circulate. There is a keen irony that this formulation is a serendipitous parallel with the ludological insistence that ergodicity define the study of games, especially to the extent that is was put forward by film and media scholars, literature scholars, and semiologists -- including Mark J.P. Wolf, Christopher Douglas, and David Myers -- practitioners of the very fields constructed as threats to game studies. But it is no coincidence either. Indeed, it would have been imperative for ludology to incorporate and thereby domesticate this cognate set of concepts.

The Agonistic Line

I want to turn to consider an alternative history of genre in game studies, one that traces what I am calling the agonistic narrative. At the heart of this line of inquiry is a conception of game genres that is premised upon the characteristic of "gameplay," which I have defined as "the agonistic struggle [between a culturally located subject and the technological apparatus of the game] – playful but consequential – out of which meaningful human action emerges" (Voorhees 2013, 16). This draws upon and extends Foucault's rethinking of the struggle between structure and agency -- in its various concrete instantiations – as an *agonistic* "mutual incitement and struggle…a permanent provocation (2000, p. 342). To discuss this alternative line of thinking about genre as agonistic means centering contestation and conflict without enmity; it rejects zero-sum games. Rather, it privileges the interplay of pluralities, of perspectives and stakes, in the work of doing genre theory and analysis in game studies.

How do we locate this line? We fabricate it, as one does, articulating various threads to one another. And our starting point is the much maligned concept of "interaction," which ludology claims to rehabilitate but in fact displaces with an emphasis on the game and how it structures play. Though he does not offer a formal definition of interaction, Wolf's chapter on genre in *The Medium of the Video Game* is clear in its insistence that "player participation" should be the "central determinant" of any game classification (2001, p.114). Importantly, while he argues

that interaction is and should be a primary consideration, Wolf advocates for genre categories that also account for how goals and objectives motivate play. To wit, the very notion of interactivity, which Apperley took from Wolf and domesticated through the construct of ergodicity, is constituted by an excess that cannot be contained in this figuration. Gameplay is the interaction between player and game in a network of variously competing, coordinating, and compelling desires and stimuli and their polyvocal intercourse. Gameplay is not and can never be a system operation, the sum total of possible or even probable means of ergodic traversal enabled within the parameters of a determinant cybertext.

Did anyone, even the ludologists, ever really think otherwise? Game designer Chris Crawford's (1984) binary system of genre classification, which he outlined in *Art of Computer Game Design*, divides the whole of digital games into the genres of "skill and action (emphasizing perceptual and motor skill)" or "strategy (emphasizing cognitive effort)." Crawford ultimately centers "interactiveness [as] a measure of gaminess" but also accounts for how graphics, sound, and input devices can further distinguish or disrupt genre expectations in his outlines of various subgenres (10). David Myers takes a similar position in his 1990 article, "Computer Game Genres," in which he proposes that we classify games by the "types of interaction [they elicit] between player and machine" (p. 295). In both of these instances, interactivity is centered in ways that manage to not erase the players, or the various non-essential and "interchangeable" elements that index the distinguishing features within families of resemblance.

A similar approach to genre shows up again and again. In the introduction to the *Screen/Play* anthology, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2002) advocate for the use of genres defined in dialog with "gaming communities", but based on styles of interaction. In "Genre and Affect," Diane Carr (2003) distinguishes genres based on the affect produced through different forms of gameplay -- as it enabled and induced by the interplay of the mechanics and thematics. Interactivity features prominently in Zach Whalen's 2004 polemic, "Critique of Generic Formulas," though it becomes nearly unrecognizable when rethought as the social relations facilitated and foreclosed by the technologies that form the basis for three new genres: massive, mobile, and Real. In the same year Apperley's famous article was published, Andrew Burn and Diane Carr argue that "style of gameplay on offer is of fundamental significance" in genre analysis but also insist that "games are hybrid forms, and thus invite compound classifications" (2006, p. 16). The concept arises again in Dominic Arsenault's (2009) essay "Genre Evolution"

when he asks the important question of "what comes after and around gameplay?" Of course, the answer is complex: games genres are perceived, received, and reconceived in the shifting but often overlapping contexts of technology, subjective experience, industry norms, and player communities, all of which are implicated in the interaction. David Clearwater's (2011) "What Defines a Game Genre?" provides further justification for Burns and Carr's decision to defer to game cultures in constructing genres premised on forms of interaction, outlining the intertextuality inherent to genres.

Even the most recent and sophisticated efforts to revisit and retheorize game genres have taken their lead from a notion of interactivity. In "Genre and Embodied Interaction," Andreas Gregerson (2011) further rehabilitates the concept by also considering the material interfaces of play. He forwards "interaction modes" as "generic structures of action" to supplement the criteria of interaction and representation in the established frameworks on game genres. Gregerson refines this formulation, arguing that "video game genres systematically structure embodied interaction modes of players by way of their generic material interfaces and their required embodied actions" (2014, p. 169). In this conceptualization, the available interactions, thematic and representational discourses, and material interfaces are each coordinates that can be used to triangulate game genre categories defined by an empirically derived notion of gameplay as the rhythms and patterns enacted in and by play, *contra* the ludological understanding of gameplay as (all) the potential -- rather than those that are actually employed -- means of traversal embedded in a game.

The common thread running across the surface of this constellation of scholarship -- uniting this rich history and exciting contemporary scene of genre in game studies -- is the concept of interaction. But if interaction is centered it is nevertheless the site of intense *agon*. Of course, interactivity explicitly identifies a process of reciprocity and feedback; the meeting of subject and object and the dialogic exchange across the interface. But interactivity, as a concept, has also been put into conversation with ergodicity, representation, affect, narrative, technology, materiality, as well as a host of other theoretical priorities.

We see this in three sustained bodies of inquiry on the topics of first-person shooter (hereafter FPS), survival-horror (c.f. Kirkland 2009; Perron 2009a; Perron 2012; Kryzwinska 2015; Perron 2018), and digital role-playing games (c.f. Williams, Hendricks and Winkler 2006;

Taylor 2006; Voorhees, Call and Whitlock 2012), among others. Here, genre is employed as a means of bringing into relief gameplay, formations of textual and play practices, by highlighting the repetition of the interplay of interaction mechanics, narrative and thematic representations, technological and material dimensions, and their constant construction, reconfiguration, and permutation in the various communities that claim a stake in them.

An exemplary case can be observed in relation to FPS scholarship, where folks located in geographically distant research centres and conceptually diverse sets of disciplinary commitments have engaged in a decade-plus (and still ongoing) conversation about the structures, aesthetics, and functions of FPS games. Looking across essays on the subject in Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska's *Screenplay* (2002), Nina Hunteman and Matthew Payne's *Joystick Soldiers* (2010) and Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock's *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts* (2012) anthologies, for instance, we can discern that they variously center the actions, thematics, and contexts that constitute gameplay or suspend these facets in polylogic tensions. Though these studies all acknowledge that genre should account for interaction, it is certainly not *a priori* the most vital element of any inquiry. So while ludic forms are central to Dan Pinchbeck's (2013) construction of the origins of the FPS, Mark J.P. Wolf (2012) leans more heavily on perspective and aesthetics in his account of the birth of the genre, though both can ultimately been seen utilizing the language and insights of multiple perspectives -- especially when contrasted to Alexander Galloway's account of the FPS as filmic remediation (2006). The nexus of interaction and aesthetics is complicated in fascinating ways in Dominic Arsenault (2009) and Carl Therrien's (2015) work on the FPS genre. In Arsenault's intervention, this is supplemented with a consideration of how technologies, or platforms, contribute to the shape of the genre, and a gesture to the importance of the experience of gameplay. Therrien's contribution does this and then some, examining how the genre was produced in multiple intersecting discursive contexts – academic, journalistic, and enthusiast – and bringing the historical scene in which the FPS does cultural work into focus. Of course, games studies have said much more about the FPS than I could state here, and much of it without explicitly making use of the term genre.

Nevertheless, what we can discern from this and other constructive conversations is that contestations around notions of interactivity have been agonistic, working through the interplay of pluralities. The works that I have attempted to tie together in this section think through

interactivity as it is, in different circumstances, modified by story, representation, technology, material apparatus, and/or attitude. As a corpus, however loosely stitched together, they put interaction on the table alongside these and other vital dimensions, and insist that the most salient quality is not inherent to the objects but to the subjects who collectively assign meaning to them. Classifications are made and assigned, sometimes, based on the prioritization of one contextually relevant aspect, or by valuing equally the interactive, representational, and technological, or by valuing them differently but consistently across the board. This is the kind of genre analysis and criticism that has yielded the most insight, and it does so because it puts multiple disciplinary rhetorics and multiple stakeholders in conversation. Embracing the encounter between different disciplines and ways of knowing, this approach to genre requires that critical practice entails looking through and using different criteria for organizing genres.

Beyond enabling increasingly sophisticated discussions organized under the rubrics of genre, by performing interdisciplinary inquiry, an agonistic orientation centers the discursivity inherent to genre analysis and demonstrates how meaningful engagement with diversity produces knowledge. In the latter, we can identify the operation of agonistic pluralism in genre discourses in the field of game studies and in the former, we can identify how game genre analysis can uncover and even generate agonistic pluralism in public culture.

Agonistic pluralism in game studies

The contestation and recombination of the varied theoretical, methodological, institutional and political commitments characteristic of genre analysis proceeds from a logic that can productively animate the field of game studies. Most of these conflicts have been engaged agonistically, as non-zero-sum confrontations. In fact, of those discussed here, only Aarseth conceives of game studies and the Genre Trouble as explicitly zero-sum. It is significant that Aarseth, who advocates for the demise of scholarly engagement that refuses to oblige his presumptions, and Frasca, who advocates for tolerance for other "teenage narrativists" (2003a) walk a different line, one that they insist does not intersect and cannot be made parallel with this methodologically pluralist, agonistic line of inquiry.

This distinction in orientation, or attitude, is vital, as it animates the difference between agonism and antagonism. Chantal Mouffe, preeminent philosopher of the political, explains:

> While antagonism is a we/they relation, in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their problem, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries' not enemies. This means that while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place (2005, p. 20).

It is not difficult to understand how the ludological position on genre operates according to the logics of enmity and antagonism. The refusal to engage in even the possibility that understandings of game genres could be bettered by using theoretical/critical tools derived from other fields of study constitutes a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of scholarship that does this. Indeed, the ludological line is defined by the ultimate aim of expelling other approaches and methods from the "common symbolic space" of game studies; a narrativist game scholar is a game scholar that should not exist (Aarseth 2004) or whose existence must be tolerated despite their inability to contribute meaningful knowledge (Frasca 2003a). Paradigms that do not *a priori* centre ludology are the trouble with genre, according to this narrative. This much is codified when Apperley marks (and performs) a "shift from representational to ergodic understanding of genre in video games" (2006, p.9).

It would be willfully naïve to treat this scholarly discourse as a part of a value-free, non-partisan search for truth rather than acknowledge how the forms, tropes, and processes of academic argument are tied to the distribution of material and symbolic resources. As Nelson, McGill & McCloskey argue, considering a field's "rhetoric of inquiry" can challenge the aura of neutrality reified by the languages of academic inquiry and "reveal underlying issues and better ways to consider them responsibly" (1987, p.4). In discussing the ludological line on game genre, I have drawn attention to how claims about the nature of a medium are mobilized in the rhetorics engaged in the construction of new disciplinary formations. Furthermore, I have identified the preponderance of the transhistorical narrative about the ludological line, the notion that game studies was always and already moving toward genres distinguished by ergodicity, as a powerful and lasting effect of this rhetoric. By insisting that ludology be the *a priori* criteria for drawing the boundaries of what can legitimately be called game studies, this discourse participates in governing the conduct of the field.

Game genre was one site where this struggle took place and it could be again, if we are willing to recognize that it was, in fact, contested. The greatest danger, in this instance, is the sort of unproductive tolerance that Frasca helped constitute by imagining away the confrontation between ludology and narratology. It is a civil construction of the exchange but also one that erases its function and meaning. As Kappell argues, there is nothing substantive to show of it. This is because tolerance is among the weaker forms of affect governing the non-antagonistic relationship between social actors in a given scene. And, significantly, tolerance for diversity is not pluralism. Tolerance does not enable a mutual engagement with diversity and difference but rather, by definition, signals a commitment to not engage.

What is required is not tolerance but agonism: the contestation of perspectives, the methodological impieties such meeting will produce, and a sustained debate over what game studies is and should be. This means recognizing that agonistic confrontation is vital to the health of a field of study, but not that difference and incommensurability should be celebrated as such. Bonnie Honig makes this clear in arguing that the point of an agonistic politics is "not to celebrate a world without points of stabilisation" but "to affirm the reality of perpetual contest, even within an ordered setting, and to identify the affirmative dimension of contestation (1993, p. 15). Where Honig is pointing to agonism and difference as inherent to human sociality, Mouffe argues that it is a precondition to community. Her theory of the political is premised on the idea that "far from representing a danger for democracy" agonism "is in reality the very condition of its existence" (2005, p.150).

As a community, game studies has imagined away the ludology and narratology debate, such that the actual clash of ideas and critical competencies it produced are not easily discoverable. But looking closely, we have seen how the debate is inscribed in the discourse of the Genre Troubles, how it developed ludological concepts at the expense of other modes of analysis and established clear protocols for doing work that counts as game studies. I have created an alternative account of how game studies can and does do genre analysis right, one that explicitly and directly contests the established genealogy and telos of game genre analysis. It is essential that we do the same with other sites and topoi in game studies, not for the sake of digging up or inventing conflicts, but so that we can better discern how these conflicts have in fact shaped our community, values, and practices.

Agonistic pluralism in game/public cultures

But it is not enough to initiate and sustain agonistics in game studies when games and game genres are doing this work by engaging public culture. This is because games are thoroughly communicative. Games use visual, procedural, textual, and narrative representations to communicate claims about subjects and the worlds that we inhabit, though players tend to only perceive them as arguments when they explicitly take on contentious topics. In this light, "as sites where culture and identity are contested, politics are debated, and knowledge is produced and disseminated digital games are ripe for intervention by critical scholars of communication investigating the intersections of discourse, power and social action" (Voorhees 2012a, p.6). While there is no shortage of scholarship examining the specific interventions that individual games perform or enable, we have not been doing the sort of work with larger formal, analytical categories and relations described by genre.

Game genres can be more roundly understood when approached as communicative action, as discursive interventions in everyday life. Carolyn Miller (1984) championed this conception of genre in her pivotal essay "Genre as Social Action." Stating from the premise that all communication is a response to a situation, Miller argues that distinct genres of communication -- mediated and otherwise -- can be approached as conventional responses to recurring situations. This communicative dimension of genre was introduced to game studies by Carr and Burns (2006) in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play*. Here, they take their lead from Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, and maintain that genres are a form of "social action" because they are "conventional uses of language by social groups" (p. 14). Carr and Burns applied this to help explain how the RPG genre has developed in response to its uptake in different geographical and cultural milieus.

Writing about the *Final Fantasy* series, I was inspired by Carr and Burns' study of RPGs, but like Miller draws insight from Kenneth Burke's theorizing of form (Voorhees 2009b). The study traces the rough contours of the RPG genre through several (re)configurations of the form, up to the year 2006. By connecting these formal changes and the patterns of representation mapped onto them to the historical contexts and social spaces in which these games were produced and ultimately played, the paper identified four historically situated genre formations within the assemblage called "Japanese RPGs," and demonstrated how each

communicates advocacy for a different construction of multiculturalism. Here, the different forms of the JRPG each constitute a distinct response to a common, shared cultural situation. A similar analysis of the *Mass Effect* series explains that the RPG genre operates as commentary about the management of social difference. That paper employs Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality in place of Burke's theory of aesthetics, which I also turn to in an essay on the cultural-politics of several distinct formations of the FPS genre (Voorhees 2012b). By relating the themes common to FPS games from three distinct periods to the material and cultural militarization of North American society, the paper shows that public acceptance of FPS games grew along with the forms of the genre that intelligibly communicate endorsements of militarism.

Games communicate -- making context-specific arguments, telling stories, representing physical and psychic realities, and more -- in response to historical situations; game genres do the same. But to do the work of locating how game genres participate in the circulation and contestation that is public culture requires more of the critic. It requires that a scholar play games outside of their wheelhouse in order to discover and create novel linkages. And it requires that we to pay attention to the representations, mechanics, and technologies of games and to embodied, social, and affective practices of play in order to discern patterns in any one, or across any number of these dimensions.

This is because genre truly is a crossroads. As Carolyn Miller explains, doing genre analysis means studying intersections; investigating the meeting of form and substance; examining how human motives conjoin with material and social contexts; understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between reflecting and shaping society; considering symbolic and material dimensions; discerning how individuals engage collective fantasies; and scrutinizing the relation between structures and agency (2014, p. 69). And while it is challenging, among these tasks, you will find many points of connection to ongoing work in the field.

Genre Trouble, Revisited

I have endeavored to show that the Genre Trouble in game studies worth revisiting is a rhetorical problem more than a conceptual one. Examining the rhetoric of inquiry in this Genre Trouble, the debate contesting different conceptions of game genre, suggests two distinct

discourses. The ludological line on the study of game genres enjoys pre-eminence in our literature reviews and metanarratives. Nevertheless, we can observe the continued development of increasingly sophisticated scholarship on the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of a handful of specific genre formations, e.g. the FPS, survival-horror, and role-playing game genres. In my analysis, this scholarship is distinguished by its pluralistic agonism, its predisposition to encourage the interdisciplinary encounter between a plurality of theoretical lenses and engagement with multi-faceted, messy, and contingent constructions of game genre.

An agonistic orientation to game genre, furthermore, enables two components of critical practice. The first is self-reflexive and a matter of turning the concept onto the discourse practices of game studies. As a reflection of the ludology and narratology debate, the Genre Trouble draws attention to two distinct logics -- antagonistic and agonistic -- for managing the differences inherent to an interdiscipline. It also suggests that the latter is a precondition to the open exchange of ideas and argument, which the former seeks to foreclose. The second facet of critical practice is sociological, a matter of making clear how game genres are engaging in social action. Genre is a stylized, formalized response to recurrent situations, and genre responds by acting to communicate advocacy for specific actions, attitudes, and orientations.

An agonistic orientation is also essential to transforming our collective experience of genre trouble into a vital aspect of method. This is because genre trouble is not an obstacle to game genre analysis but its method. Here, I am not only arguing *contra* Aarseth's tale of genre trouble to advocate we impiously utilize multi-disciplinary frameworks, but also drawing on Judith Butlers' (1993) advocacy for gender trouble, the disruption of naturalized gender formations. And this is critical if we aim to not only map the dynamics and implications of preeminent genre formations but also to chart their deterritorialization and the occurrence of new patterns and clusters of affect, mechanics, and performance. That is, aside from genre evolution (Arsenault 2009), there is the matter of genre emergence and dissolution which demands genre trouble as a method.

Feminist cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant writes: "The waning of genre frames different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates" (2011, p. 6-7). From this we can gather three lessons. First, the decline and dissolution of genre formations is an index of the changing affective state of gaming culture *qua* public

culture. Second, a lack of generic unities is indicative of a cultural *aporia*, an impasse or crisis of collective imagination to formulate a coherent response to the historical moment. And third, the unintelligibility of the moment is an opportunity that invites new forms of response, new genres, and new orientations to the future.

This is Genre Trouble as method. The pluralistic agonism generated by competing perspectives and critical commitments is exactly the productive, impious, messy sort of genre trouble that is required to not simply identify novel patterns of form and activity that constitute distinct formations of games, but to participate in the recognition, formalization, sedimentation, and unsettling of game genres. In short, genre is a conceptual tool for studying historically contingent formations of text and practice, and Genre Trouble a critical practice for assembling and inventing forms of sociality to survive the present.

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Gerald Voorhees is an Assistant Professor in the Department Communication Arts at the University of Waterloo. His research is on games and new media as sites for the construction and contestation of identity and culture, and he has edited books on masculinities in games, feminism in play, role-playing games, and first-person shooter games. Gerald is co-editor of Bloomsbury's Approaches to Game Studies book series and was managing editor of the Gender in Play trilogy in Palgrave's Games in Context book series.

Résumé : Cet article trace les grandes lignes d'une impasse dans les études du jeu que certains ont appelée « troubles du genre », et qui peut être attribuée aux discours universitaires ayant interrogé le concept de genre vidéoludique tout en reproduisant certains aspects du débat entre ludologie et narratologie. On peut distinguer deux axes d'argumentation et de recherche sur le genre dans le jeu vidéo : un axe ludologique dominant et une orientation agonistique, moins proéminente mais plus productive. Les avantages potentiels de l'approche agonistique pour enrichir et animer les études du genre vidéoludique sont rattachés à la communauté discursive des études du jeu ainsi qu'aux contextes intrinsèquement politiques dans lesquels le domaine se situe. Dans ce contexte, le trouble du genre n'est pas un obstacle à l'analyse générique, mais bien sa méthode.

Mots-clés : genre, études du jeu, ludologie, agonisme, action sociale

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The Interplay of Thematic and Ludological Elements in Western-Themed Games

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Abstract: The Wild West has been productized and remediated a number of times over the last hundred of years – and even earlier than that. Computer and video games are a relative newcomer in this string of remediations, distilling the essential elements of the Western even further into archetypal scenes, characters and modes of play. Expanding on our previous works on genres, we study a colorful selection of Western-themed games, 31 in total, with the aim to reveal how a firmly established and codified theme affects gameplay. A well-established theme, such as the Western, manifests itself at very different depths based on the kind of game we are dealing with – at minimum, it acts as an artificial surface that does not affect the gameplay at all. At the other end of the spectrum, the theme affects all the aspects of a game, ranging from its audiovisual presentation to the narrative and the actions available to the player.

Keywords: Western, game genres, video games, thematization

Résumé en français à la fin de l'article

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Introduction

Western fiction is, in effect, as old as the Wild West itself: the dime novels and traveling shows of the 1800s already presented a romantic, codified version of frontier life with its heroes and villains, and later media in the form of radio plays, movies, comics and tv series have all contributed to the same process in their own particular ways. Over a timespan of roughly 150 years the genre has been greatly reinterpreted and reinvented, for example, in the European context where the perspective has inevitably been indirect and colored by local trends. Starting from the 1970s, numerous electronic games have also depicted the American frontier – often in an even more distilled form, owing to both technical constraints and selective remediation of earlier depictions.

It is easy to note how many aspects of the mythological West are directly applicable to games. Many Western movie scenes are game-like to begin with: think of Tuco's proficient target shooting in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) or the fateful poker scenes, as seen in countless other works. Gunplay, bank and train robberies, fistfights, horseback riding and rodeo – a simplified version of cowboy life itself – lend themselves to arcade action, whereas notorious bandits, lawmen, gold rushes and indian[1] wars provide easily adaptable elements, victory conditions and goals for the narrative arc of a game. Furthermore, the ever-continuing (if undulating) commercial popularity of Western lore has, on its own behalf, ensured its constant presence across almost all mass media, with video games being no exception here.

While Western cinema, in particular, has received notable attention from film scholars, in video game studies the thematic has largely been omitted, with only a handful of mentions in books or articles that have often dealt with other, more general topics (e.g. Herz, 1997, 68–69; Saarikoski, 2004; Dickerman, Christensen and Kerl-McClain, 2008; Clearwater, 2011). Recently, more attention has been paid to the Western genre and its significance for gameplay (Buel, 2013) but this examination has relied on relatively few examples. Expanding on our previous works on genres (Junnila, 2007; Heikkinen and Reunanen, 2015), we set out to study a representative selection of Western-themed games, with the aim of revealing how a firmly established and codified theme affects gameplay. As part of the earlier study (Heikkinen and

[1] We use the archaic term indian, as opposed to native American, here to be in line with the source material.

Reunanen, 2015), we had already compiled a considerable 463-item list of electronic and other games representing nine decades, providing us with an opportunity to examine a thematic genre almost in its entirety.

First we will look into existing discussions on video game genres; even if concepts, such as video game genre, are commonplace in colloquial speech, they tend to be elusive and hard to define. Next we present our research material and method in more detail, and explain how and why certain games were selected for further analysis from the larger lot. Finally, we discuss the results with concrete examples on the interplay of the thematic and ludological aspects of Western games, followed by some generalizations that hopefully pave the way for further game genre-related studies.

Genre in Video Games

Jaakko Kemppainen's study on the use of game genres by publishers and resellers reveals how imprecise the concept is. Aspects ranging from game mechanics to the purpose of the title (such as education) or the setting can all be decisive factors when trying to define the genre of a particular game. Kemppainen also notes that same titles may occur with a different classification depending on the service. An interesting, yet often completely overlooked, factor in genre definitions is how they are used in marketing for economic gains (Kemppainen, 2010).

Clearwater (2011) and Lee et al. (2014) have arrived at similar conclusions: instead of trying to hopelessly craft a consistent ontology, game genres have to be considered as multidimensional entities where a number of factors are at play simultaneously. We do not even aspire to solve the ontology/taxonomy problem here, but rather explore how the most relevant dimensions defining a game affect each other. We are particularly interested in the ludological and thematic axes, keeping in mind that other ways to classify exist.

To clarify, ludological here refers to game rules and gameplay, indicating genres like first-person shooter, action adventure, puzzle, real-time strategy and so on, whereas theme and thematic genre relates to the kind of visual-aural world the game rules have been embedded in, such as science fiction, fantasy and the Western.

Game studies have tended to shy away from the thematic axis of genres, focusing on the ludological aspects instead (Clearwater, 2011) or an examination of the tension between the ludological and narratological elements (Apperley, 2006) instead of the theme as such. We see there is still plenty of room and need for studies that explore the thematic dimension, a perspective that has a long history in fields such as cinema and literature studies. (e.g. French, 1977; Wood, 1986). Within film, genre has become seen for example as a means of negotiating audience expectations, reception and critique of works in relation to what is perceived as common within a genre (Neale, 1990). In the comparatively long history of Western cinema, the genre has endured subversions, revisions and adaptations to different political and cultural contexts (Cooke, Mules and Baker, 2014).

The correlation between the ludological genre and the thematic one is also interesting on a more general level. Usually ideas about the narrative and the game logic feed each other during the design process of a game (Järvinen, 2008). Without a doubt, other aspects also affect the outcome: for example, the choice of a visual style, the intended target group and the overall purpose of the title, among others (Lee et al., 2014).

The definition of a Western is potentially abstract and applicable to different eras. A Western narrative is often about individual stories within a larger political frame (Cooke, Mules and Baker, 2014), such as railroad expansion with its land grabs and the conflicts between homesteaders and cattle lords. McGee (2007) also offers that Westerns are about political class tensions, whereas Bazin (1971) likened the Western to an epic, with its own superheroes. To have a clear objective and an understanding of the Western genre, we have chosen to examine games that have narratives based within the geographic time frame of the frontier expansion, civil war and the so called “Wild West”. In addition, we have looked for visual cues such as cowboys with wide-brimmed hats, six-shooters, stagecoaches and townscapes, regardless of their historical veracity.

A well-established theme with its well-known iconography, such as the Western, manifests itself at very different depths based on the kind of game we are dealing with – at minimum, it may act as an artificial surface that does not affect the gameplay at all. Mapping the strength of the thematization (see Järvinen 2008) across the dataset will uniquely illuminate different aspects of this interplay. As the chosen titles represent four different decades, they provide an

opportunity for chronological analysis as well; genres are not set in stone, but they, too, do change, and lose or gain popularity (cf. Kemppainen, 2010; Clearwater, 2011).

Research Material and Approach

In this study, we used a list of 463 Western-themed games as the starting point: mainly digital games, but some older pinball machines and electromechanic theme park games as well. The digital games are for a wide range of platforms from old game consoles (e.g. Atari VCS, Mattel Intellivision and Nintendo Entertainment System), home computers and arcades to modern PC, console and mobile games.

The list is used as a basis for a quantitative analysis, with the intent to map how the Western theme connects to different ludological genres. Ludological genres tend to have certain recurring sets of actions the players can take, called game design patterns (Björk & Holopainen, 2005). One way of defining ludological genres is based on which set of game design patterns (game architecture) can be observed in games of the genre (Lessard, 2014). In our research we have chosen actions to be in the center of our attention, as they differentiate game experience from other media. With actions in this study we mean any action that the player can take in the game as a player, not action in the broad sense of chases, explosions, shooting and the like, even though those certainly have their place in Westerns.

Our primary interest in the quantitative part of the study is to assess whether the Western theme has driven games towards certain ludological genres, or has the theme been utilized in a wider number of different genres, possibly ending up with different kinds of sets of actions still somehow relating to the theme.

We have chosen to look at one particular subset of games in our list in more detail – commercial games published for PC and consoles from 1990 to today. Mobile games have started forming their own recurring patterns of game design and thus new genres. They can, to some extent, be mapped to more traditional ludological genres, but there are also differences, so our numbers are more representative of console and computer gaming than most recent mobile games. Also, home computers and consoles have been very different platforms before the nineties – for example, some modern ludological genres rely on computing power that simply wasn't

available in the 1980s – so in order to give a contemporary account we decided to leave the oldest games out of this part.

To have data to contrast the Western-themed games with, we have listed other 268 games from year 2006, divided into ludological and thematic genres with the same genre classification system from an earlier study (Junnila, 2007). This data can be found in Appendix 1. Junnila defined a number of thematic and ludological genres, and analyzed the games to find out how the ludological and thematic genres intersected (ibid.). With this data we can compare the Western genre distribution into ludological genres to games with other themes. The ludological genres we use here are taken from the 2007 study, meaning that some modern subgenres are missing – for example MOBAs (Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas) would have to be put under the RTS (Real Time Strategy) genre, even though it has developed into a very specific direction later on.

The definitions of the ludological genres are partially rooted in previous research, coupled with our own understanding of basic genres. Some games are difficult to classify by nature, such as hybrid approaches that combine many ludological genres. Although these challenges with classification may somewhat affect the numbers, the big picture should still be representative of titles published in 2006. The games were categorized into genres from the Finnish games magazine *Pelit*, which in year 2006 was mostly reviewing commercially viable PC and console games, so they should be comparable to our Western games sample. Naturally, these games being from the same year make a difference, as we could already notice in Table 1 how some genres have been more popular during a certain decade.

The data from the earlier study needed to be adapted for the present research, as the categories do not correspond exactly. Thematic genres were loosely defined, and did not include Western as its own genre. If there had been any Western games in the magazines in 2006, they probably would have ended up in the thematic genre of adventure (meaning an adventurous version of real life, as in *Indiana Jones* and *James Bond* series, or the Wild West), while some of the reality-based games, for example the American civil war strategy games, would have been classified as Realism (as the *War* genre denoted games representing 20th century conflicts).

Quantitative Analysis

Our quantitative analysis essentially consisted of defining the main ludological genre of a title and then adding the numbers together. As mentioned in the previous section, the oldest and non-digital games are not part of the figures. Table 1 shows the results of the quantitative analysis. Not surprisingly, action games with different ludological subgenres is the largest genre. This seems quite intuitive, in the same way as Western movies tend to have a strong action element in them, revolvers, chases, fist-fights and duels being core aspects of Western imagery. Not that shooting would only appear in action games – most Western games, whatever the ludological genre, seemed to include shooting of some kind, as we later show in the qualitative part of the study.

Certain gameplay ideas and ludological genres do not mix well with the Western theme at all. It is not difficult to understand why, for instance, the racing subgenre isn't present – while horseback riding can be a part of Western games (e.g. the horse races in *Red Dead Redemption*), it is less likely that a Western theme would be the basis for a complete driving game. Especially flight simulator elements would be difficult to justify in a realistic 19th-century Western environment.

Within the action genre, the target shooter subgenre (which is not part of the general genre system used in this research) appeared to be especially popular – probably as Western themes have been a common theme in arcade cabinets with light pistols, pre-dating the whole electronic game phenomenon, later evolving through games like the video-based *Mad Dog McCree* (American Laser Games, 1990). It seems especially in the last year or so, the target shooter subgenre is undergoing a resurgence in Virtual Reality format – there were multiple VR target shooting games in online game store Steam's Early Access at the moment.

Beat 'em ups are also very rare (only one occurrence), although some action oriented games have a fist-fight element in them. Action adventures and FPSs fit into the Western theme rather well – FPSs evolved from the more generic action shooters with advancing technology. Action adventures evolved out of adventure games as more dynamic actions have been added to the traditionally scripted gameplay, still keeping the strong story elements. 2D platformers die out after their popularity in the 1990s with no platformers in the early 2000s. During the last decade

platformers have re-emerged (e.g. *Gunman Clive* [2012], *Angry Fun Run: Cute Wild West* [2013] and *SteamWorld Dig* [2013]).

	Western games 1990–1999	Western games 2000–2009	Western games 2010–2017	Western games 1990–2017	% of all 1990–2017	Examples
Action	12 (26)	11 (27)	32 (50))	55 (103)	25.8 % (48,4%)	Wild West Guns
Racing					0 %	
First Person Shooter	3	11	7	21	9.9 %	Call of Juarez
Action Adventure	4	4	7	15	7.0 %	Red Dead Redemption
Platformer	7		4	11	5.2 %	Gunman Clive
Beat 'em Up		1		1	0.5 %	
Strategy	18 (22)	12 (20)	14 (16)	44 (58)	20.7 % (27.2%)	Helldorado
Real-time Strategy	4	8	2	14	6.6 %	Sid Meier's Gettysburg!
Manager					0 %	
Sports		1		1	0.5 %	
Roleplaying	7	3 (4)	6	16 (17)	7.5 % (8.0 %)	Hard West
MMORPG		1		1	0.5 %	
Puzzle		4	7	11	5.2 %	Gunpowder
Adventure	11	6	6	23	10.8 %	Gold Rush!
Music/ Dancing					0 %	
Simulator					0 %	
Total	66	62	85	213		

Table 1. This table shows how Western-themed games for the PC and consoles between years 1990–2017 divide into different ludological genres. The first three columns are based on the decades, the

fourth is the overall situation, the fifth shows the percentages based on the overall situation, and in the last column we already take a peek at the qualitative part of the study, by naming some example games we have analyzed in detail. The genres on the left are grouped so that the main genre is first, then some of its subgenres with a similar background color, and the numbers in parentheses after the main genre refers to the numbers when the games are counted from all the subgenres of that genre.

The second-biggest genre is strategy. It is notable that about half of the games in the strategy genre and its subgenres were games set in the U.S. civil war, a popular topic for strategy games especially in the 1990s. About 80 % or the Western strategy games of the 90s were about the civil war, in the 2000s about half of the games were civil war -themed, while in the 2010s only 20 %. Even if the civil war period collides historically with the Wild West times, it could be argued that the civil war games have less to do with the most immediate Western identifiers like cowboy hats, revolvers and such. We still count these games into the Western genre, as civil war themes are a strong element or undercurrent in many Western movies, but had they been left out, the numbers would look different. Traditional strategy games with moving troops on the battlefield clearly fit the civil war much more naturally than lone gunslingers. Nonetheless, there were also other Western strategy games, with for example city management games and a few tactical games where you maneuver a band of individuals in a skirmish instead of larger military units.

The third-biggest ludological genre is adventure, including both graphic adventures and text-based games. Adventure games with their scripted story driven mechanics are quite different from many other genres of games, and in that sense they are very flexible to any thematic setting. Having their roots in riddles, text-based adventures often employ puzzles as main game problems, partly embedded in the spatial logic of the game (Montfort, 2005). While there were more adventure games in the 1990s, some have also been published over the recent decades. Tracing the ludological elements within a fully text-based, turn-based game can be challenging, as the game can fluctuate between novel-like storytelling and a computer-generated description derived from an invisible, internal game state. As adventure games and interactive fiction can describe any activity through text, the developers can choose any topics they like into the stories they tell. Text-based games also usually do not rely on repetitive challenge-based interaction like shooting, but the actions the player does are always in context.

The fourth-biggest ludological genre is role-playing games. This was initially surprising, but it turns out Japanese RPGs (JRPG) are the key to the mystery – in the 1990s and 2000s, all the Western themed RPGs were from Japan. It should be noted that Japanese games rarely feature a historical 19th-century Western environment, but rather science fiction and fantasy hybrids that might even be largely situated outside a Western setting. However, the long tradition of "Weird West" films and other media makes us consider them as part of the thematic genre. Approximately ten years ago Western-themed JRPGs seemed to quickly disappear.

Puzzle games are the fifth biggest category. It is still quite small, and as many puzzle games have a more abstract nature, so even the few Western-themed puzzlers are quite superficial in connecting the theme to the play mechanics. The more story oriented and thus thematic games with puzzles are really adventure games. Puzzles can also be a part of action adventures.

The rest of the ludological genres are almost nonexistent – one Western mini golf game was deemed a sports game, but again, the connection to the theme in it was fairly tenuous. No music/dancing games have been found so far, and also no simulators, even though it should be noted that in this research the simulation genre is defined as very realistic simulations (such as flight simulators), as opposed to resource management style simulators that have been classified as strategy.

When comparing the genre distribution to the one shown in Appendix 1, we can see that the Western genre is relatively evenly distributed between different ludological genres, apart from a few exceptions, such as the complete lack of racing games. If we compare the distribution to the different thematic genres observed and classified in the earlier data, it seems the different thematic genres there are more tied to a tighter set of ludological genres, but there is a possibility that this results from a small sample size. If we only look at the Western games from 2006, they are not as evenly distributed. Indeed, there were six strategy games, five action games, one RPG and one adventure game that year.

The fact that most genres are present in a mostly similar distribution than in the 2006 dataset when all the games are counted can be explained in at least two ways: the Western theme bends to a wide variety of ludological genres, or, alternatively, the thematization of games is so weak in general that any theme can be used in most settings (cf. Järvinen, 2008). If the latter is true, it

would mean that the ludological genre distribution is not highly connected to the theme. It would be interesting to see more data and make comparisons to assess which theory seems more accurate. We will discuss thematization further in the next section, which uses qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

In addition to the quantitative approach, we wanted to go deeper through qualitative analysis of a number of games. We chose a set of 31 games from our complete list for a more careful analysis – see Appendix 2. Their thematic and ludological aspects were mainly analyzed by watching longplay[2] videos online, but we also played some of the games ourselves.

While forming an overview of each game, we put special focus on the actions the player can take in each game. As both the ludological genre conventions and the theme tend to affect what actions are available, we wanted to see how the Western theme would manifest itself in different games. We picked games from different traditional ludological genres so that we could see if there are differences in the strength of thematization between them.

Weak vs. Strong Thematization

One of the main questions of this research is how much the Western theme has affected game design. Many game development projects might have had a ludological genre in mind in the beginning, with associated game mechanics, but the theme is then added in the process of thematization, which refers to finding a fitting metaphor for the abstract game mechanics, adding a new layer of meaning to the game.

Aki Järvinen (2008) mentions some important points about thematization. It is about mapping metaphorical meaning to the game system, and it can be used to maintain the diegetic coherence of the game world. The chosen theme also affects player expectations. Weak thematization refers to a situation where the theme does not affect the game rules at all (e.g. a Western-themed chess game), whereas strong thematization means there is a stronger bond between the theme and the rules of the game (e.g. firearm behavior loyal to the time period in an FPS). The theme

[2] Walkthroughs that do not particularly focus on speed, as opposed to *speedrun* videos.

can be too complex to function as a metaphor for the dynamic system, resulting in the need for cutscenes, or the theme's complexity increases the complexity of the game.

As different ludological genres tend to have different levels of complexity, we analyze how strong or weak the thematization is in the chosen games, what kind of concrete differences the games have, and how the strongest examples of thematization work in the case of Western games.

Analyzing Interaction

Interactivity is, no doubt, a core aspect of games, and thus analysing what kinds of actions a player can take in a game is an important part of discovering the interplay between the thematic and ludological aspects. Generally, ludological genres already define many of the available actions, but we are especially interested in seeing if the thematic setting brings something unique to the pool of actions. This also includes the question of how deeply the theme can be planted into the regular actions of a genre, potentially allowing a deeper sense of involvement toward game mechanics and the actions available.

There can be several levels of interactivity inside a game, having to do with the directness or indirectness of the action as it relates to the represented action and the involvement it requires from the player. For the purpose of analysing interactivity in games, we have built a model with levels of interactivity based on our observations of the games. We concentrate on the following levels of interaction:

- **Basic interactions.** Something the player can do at will whenever in the main game mode/s. Usually this involves a button the player can press to do that certain action-for example jumping in a platformer game or shooting in a first-person shooter.
- **Actions in context.** Some games allow certain actions in a certain context-for example the player can open a door when being close to a door, or ride a horse when there is a horse available.
- **Different game modes.** Some games have a main mode where most of the gameplay happens, but allow a different set of actions in sub-modes. Open world games often have certain minigames where the normal action (for example jumping and shooting) are not

available, but it is possible, for instance, to play poker inside the game world, a scene which has its own actions like betting and changing cards. This kind of compartmentalization may also result in different button mapping schemes on the game controller.

- **Scripted actions.** This refers to moments in games where an interaction can be used once in the game for a specific purpose, that usually isn't possible through the game engine. Whereas actions in context are repeated throughout the gameplay, a particular scripted action is usually an one-off occurrence. For example, the physics engine of the game wouldn't usually allow shooting a rope with a bullet, but this could be programmed into one specific moment in the game to give the player a chance to save a friend from being hanged. The ludological genre of adventure games tends to consist of a series of scripted actions, whereas other ludological genres rely more on dynamic systems. Also quick time events that make cutscenes more interactive to the player fall into this category.
- **Actions in cutscenes.** Actions that game characters take in cutscenes are one way of incorporating certain thematic actions into the game that could not be handled inside the gameplay. This is distinct from a scripted action in that the player has no control inside the scene and may not foresee what events will take place. We will not actively analyse these in this research, but they are still worth mentioning as one way the game designers put tropes and general drama into the game. But as these techniques are not specific to games, they do not really tie into the question of the correspondence between ludic elements and the theme, as any kind of cutscene can be inserted in any kind of game.

Different Abstraction Levels

While some game genres let the player experience things more directly, for example through seeing the avatar performing the actions in real time as the player presses the buttons, some genres keep the player further away from the immediacy by different representational methods, or blend abstract game concepts into the actions. In the Western context it makes a difference if a shooting scene is activated through a text command, a point'n'click action or a gun-like game controller, as seen in fairground-type target games.

It sounds logical that less abstract game mechanics would lead to a stronger thematization in a game – at least from the perspective of a weakly thematized game having an appearance that is easy to change to another one. In a game where the player takes the role of a person in an environment that purports to be the old west, the thematic elements have ludological bearings too. In a game like *Mad Dog McCree*, that features a light gun and holster at an arcade, the duel mode is harder to re-thematize as the action the player takes so concretely mimics the real world action of a Western duel.

Discussion

In this section we present the results of the qualitative analysis described above. The main angles are the actions offered to the player and the strength of the thematization. We also look at how the selected titles reflect the codified Western imagery familiar from other media. We do not go through all the games one by one, but rather discuss interesting and representative examples we came across over the course of the study. A full list of the games can be found in Appendix 2.

The actions we found in the 31 games are listed in Appendix 3. We left the scripted moments and actions in sub-modes out of this list, as the basic and context-specific actions are the ones the player mostly interacts through when playing. We will also discuss some of the latter in other examples below, for example how sub-modes have been used in certain titles to make the thematic experience deeper.

Typical Actions

Looking at the action list in Appendix 3, it can be seen that shooting and moving are the only actions that are available in most of the games. Also inventory management and interacting with the environment in one way or the other are used in some games. In this set of games, it was extremely rare to have dialogue between characters as a context-specific action, even though of course many more games used it in cutscenes or scripted moments – shooting really is shown as the main way to solve problems in the Wild West. In contrast, *Law of the West* (1985) is almost entirely made of dialogue choices that result in shootouts or peaceful resolutions, a game concept that would be somewhat out of place in a non-Western theme, but understandable within Western fiction conventions.

Riding is a surprisingly rare player action in these games, considering how important a role horses generally play in Westerns of all kinds. Many games have enemies on horseback, which suggests that bringing the Western into the actions of the player is much harder than bringing it to the visuals and other dynamics of the game. In the abstract environment of *Gunfright* (1986) the horse is a Pac-Man-esque power-up that provides speed and immunity to the player character, whereas in a modern open world game like *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), the horse substitutes for a vehicle, enabling horseback chase scenes and other modifications within the gameplay dynamics.

The lack of diverse actions and more deeply thematic actions within a single game partly follows from the fact that many of the games analysed are so old. Not only has there been less memory and pixels to add detail to the game world, but also the controllers might have been limited to digital 8-way sticks with a couple of buttons, suggesting a limited range of actions to begin with. Now that we continue discussing the strength of thematization, we will mostly concentrate on examples from the recent games, where the less technically limited platforms offer more space for game developers to explore possibilities in game design. Furthermore, the resources available for modern game developers have been vastly greater in most cases, compared to rudimentary early examples.

Mapping out the actions in Western-themed games shows that it was rare to see strong thematization in the games, at least on the level of the actions offered to the player. Many of the games did not noticeably differ from their ludological genre at large: in some cases even trying to deduct the theme based only on the list of actions would be difficult. Rail shooter games[3], for example *Atari Outlaw* (2012), *Gunslingers* (2011) and *Wild West Guns* (2008), are about shooting and reloading. *Gunman Clive* (2012), a platformer, offers jumping, running and shooting. *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!* (1997) features actions that have to do with moving troops on the battlefield. All of these examples are quite standard representatives of their ludological genres.

Only a couple of the analyzed games have actions that really seemed unique to the Western theme. There are other aspects of the game logic that could also affect the strength of the

[3] Shooting games where the player travels on a predefined path with effectively no way of affecting its direction.

thematization, for example the procedures like enemy AI, and what kind of dynamics the interplay between the mechanics and the procedures create, but as we focus on the player actions these are left out of our central analysis.

While most games in our sample feature only weak thematization, the most interesting case was *Red Dead Redemption (2010) (RDR)*. It is probably the largest Western-themed game production ever done (at the time of writing the sequel had not yet appeared). As an open world action adventure game it offers tens of hours of gameplay, should the player want to explore all the nooks and crannies of the world. The sheer size of the game made it an interesting yet challenging game to observe, and because of the size, we probably missed some of its aspects.

All in all, the amount of actions in *RDR* was vastly greater than the amount in any other game we analysed. 82 different actions were listed from the gameplay videos. Naturally, the basic actions of an action adventure, like moving around, aiming, shooting and changing weapons are present, but also numerous other actions, many of them in sub-modes. We will next discuss which of these seem to contain particularly strong thematization.

Unique Actions

When looking at *RDR*, one of the strong thematic elements that affects the game mechanics is horseback riding, which in different ways employs a large portion of the game. In addition to riding the horse and being able to fight from horseback, it is also possible to tame horses in a rodeo-like fashion – an action that would not make much sense in a different theme, such as cars in a game like Grand Theft Auto. Horse riding becomes a kind of a sub mode inside the game, trying to balance the player character on the horse without falling down. As noted earlier, interestingly only 3 games out of the 31 we analysed included horse riding as an active part of the game.

This also brings us to another rather unique game mechanic, namely lassoing. Being able to throw the lasso and then drag something/somebody towards you and then tying them up is something not often observed in other games, even though the action can be incorporated in a science fiction/fantasy setting – the gravity gun in *Half-Life 2* (2004) and the grapple in *Just*

Cause 2 (2010) spring to mind. The player can also carry tied up persons, and place them on the horse.

Call of Juarez (2006) features a slightly similar action, as one of the characters has a whip that can be used, for example, for climbing to certain locations. While it is not as definitely a Western action as throwing the lasso, it has clear ties to the Western setting. Whips can be thematically connected to lassos, cattle drive or horse riding. In Western films, a whip is central in films dealing with American slavery, but several other examples, such as *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *Unforgiven* (1992) show that it is clearly part of the standard imagery as well.

Sub-Modes and Minigames

Some of the sub-modes appear to add to the strength of the thematization. Many sub-modes were observed while looking at gameplay videos, but according to the Wiki of the game (RDRWiki, 2018), there are even more sub-modes that were not even observed during this research.

The most iconic mode is the duel mode. Duels are a strong element in Westerns at large[4], and could be the whole basis for earlier, simple Western-themed shooting games, such as *Gun Fight* (1975). In larger games, it has become a sub-mode. The separation of the duel mode in an older game, such as the aforementioned *Gunfright*, might point to a technical necessity, but even new games appear to separate duels into sections that follow different rules.

Even though shooting is a big part of *RDR*, it is interesting that the duel has still been made into a sub-mode (Figure 1), and here the main difference to the basic shooting action is that you have to draw your weapon as part of the duel. In the normal mode the player can just change weapons and start shooting. In the duel mode the player's attention is drawn to the drawing of the weapon by the option to bring the hand closer to the gun's holster with a button on the gamepad, and then the drawing itself is a timed challenge.

[4] Complete movies have been built around duelling, "who is the fastest on the draw?". To name just a few: *The Gunfighter* (1950), *The Last Challenge* (1967), *A Gunfight* (1971) and the crown jewel of duel fetishism, *The Quick and The Dead* (1995).

In the shooting part (in which time is slowed down), opponents can be disarmed by shooting their hand or weapon. These small details not present in the normal fighting mode enable classical dramatic Western moments. The sub-mode makes the action of dueling less abstract, and thus more strongly thematized.

Figure 1. Duels are given special attention in *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games 2010), too.

Call of Juarez also features game mechanics that relate to Western duels. A special sub-mode can be activated by drawing your weapons, time slows down and two crosshairs move across the screen, giving the player a chance to shoot multiple shots at multiple enemies in a short time. This mechanic seems to have a connection to duels, even though the mode can also be activated in a normal fighting situation.

It has been pointed out that the Western film duel establishes an alternate space for different moral norms, opening a possibility of a so-called justified killing within a supposed Western moral code (Falconer, 2014). For instance, in Sergio Corbucci's *The Great Silence* (1968), much of the plot revolves around the notion that the person who draws last will not be prosecuted. Even if video game duels do not always have the moral poignancy and definiteness of a filmic climax, the duel-mode nevertheless establishes a separate rule space on a technical and action dimension of the game mechanics and not only as a storytelling device. This way,

the duel sub-mode and its attention to detail emphasizes that the death is not a random gunning down but an event of significance.

To return to the sub-modes in *RDR*, there are a number of other sub-modes, playing poker, arm wrestling etc. Poker has become seen as an iconic Western event, due to the presence of the game in numerous films[5], and it is possible to cheat in poker and end up in duels, again bringing classic Western story elements into the game in an interactive way. It is noteworthy that the chain of events of cheating in poker and ending up in a duel, seen in numerous Western films, is open for the player in the form of dynamic game mechanics, instead of being merely a scripted event that happens once in a certain part of the game.

Adding a new sub-mode is always more work for the developers, so we can see that these sub-mode minigames give the game designers a chance to focus on themes that are important to the Western. Of course many of the sub-modes could be also framed in another way thematically. In *Witcher 3 (2015)* the player can play a made-up card game called gwent instead of poker. The Horseshoe Throwing sub-mode in *RDR* could easily be changed into some other challenge section in a game of a different theme. The mini game sub-mode is then not exclusive to Western, and our attention is rather drawn to observing what options and themes the player is presented with through these sections.

The theme of cards is another subject that a number of analysed games have included in different ways. In addition to the *RDR* poker sub-mode, *Hard West (2015)* and *Compass Point: West (2015)* have playing cards as part of their game mechanics. In these two games, cards were metaphors for something else than actual cards in the game world. In *Hard West*, the special skills the characters gain during the game are represented as cards (Figure 2). So instead of implementing a standard role playing game level up, with the player choosing new skills to their characters, in *Hard West* the player finds cards and can give them to the character they want. One card provides the character with an extra skill or bonus. Interestingly, it is also possible to build poker hands out of the cards, so if one character has a pair or a full house, an additional bonus is added to that character. The cards are not diegetic objects in the game world, but the poker metaphor still ties these character improvement mechanics to the theme in a loosely Western-appropriate way.

[5] Faro was a more popular card game in the real west (see Turner, Howard and Spence, 2006).

Figure 2. *Hard West*'s Card Screen, where the player can modify their characters by giving them cards that give them special abilities, and poker hands give additional bonuses.

Compass Point: West also uses playing cards as a metaphor. This time, it represents characters instead of their skills. The thematization is weaker here, as many free-to-play games nowadays use the logic of collectible card games as part of their play. Yet poker cards are more appropriate in a Western setting than in, for example, a science fiction game.

Scripted Actions

Most games rely on dynamic systems as a core feature of their gameplay, whereas fully scripted games make it possible for the game to present all actions from the perspective of the theme and story than the general game mechanics typical to the ludological genre. A good example of a fully scripted game is the traditional adventure game genre. *Gold Rush! (1988)* has very different actions available to the player at different parts of the game than the Western games from other ludological genres. The player has to type their actions into the parser, and during the game, for example the player has to brand a mule, lower a magnet and read Psalm 23. Nonetheless, many of the scripted actions in the game are things that you could also do in many other Western games (move, jump, buy, sell, talk etc.). Curiously, *Gold Rush!* does not have shooting of any kind as part of its actions at any point. This exception can be partially explained

by the lack of real-time gameplay and thus inability to make the player aim a gun, but it could also point to the authors' desire to see the text-based historical adventure game as an intellectual and educational challenge instead of a reaction game.

Gold Rush! is an old game with its restrictions, but much more recent *Hard West* also uses small text adventures as a sub-mode in the game outside the tactical fighting mode, and again, in those adventures the player can be given all kinds of very thematically specific actions, like stealing items from an old mine while exploring it etc. There is also a scripted special moment in *RDR* where the time slowing action is used in a special situation to allow shooting the hat off somebody's head, and then continuing shooting at it in the air, again recreating a moment seen in Western movies, most notably in *For a Few Dollars More* (1965). These scripted moments offer a chance to include special thematized moments into games with the price of making the situations less dynamic.

Conclusion

In this study we collected data on how Western-themed video games are spread across different ludological genres and how the theme affects the games, especially from the perspective of player interaction. We learned that the Western theme spreads out quite evenly into different ludological genres, even though there have been different trends during the past few decades, and the balance has been shifting during the years. Technological development is one straightforward factor in the history of the thematic genre, as early limited hardware simply did not provide for complex storytelling or detailed representation of game characters and scenes. Another general observation is the treatment of delicate issues – for instance, mindless slaughtering of indians would hardly be acceptable in a contemporary game.

Although Western is a theme that has lots of tropes based on its use in other popular media, our findings suggest that the theme affects games surprisingly little on the level of interaction. This is true at least in the sense that Western games do not offer to the player many actions that would not be standard in games of similar ludological genre with a different theme. Many games were and still are, essentially, about shooting and moving, despite their general theme.

Another answer may be that the Western theme only modifies the ludological actions in a very detailed scale, such as limiting weapons to six-shooters and rifles instead of submachine guns and lasers, whereas vehicles behave slightly more like horses instead of jeeps and helicopters. The stronger examples of thematization would then be found from within the different ways the ongoing action becomes subtly constrained, not immediately from the labeled actions available to the player.

In recent games featuring more sophisticated game mechanics, we could identify more ways of immersing the player into the Wild West. One example is creating sub-modes where the aspects of, for instance, a classic Western duel can be modeled in more detail, giving the player the option to bring their hand closer to the gun before drawing and disarming the opponent instead of killing. Although sub-modes are by no means exclusive to Western games, such a meticulous attention to detail in a duel scene is less likely outside this thematic genre. In addition, actions like lassoing that are difficult to imagine in another setting were found in some of the games, and some metaphorical abstract game mechanics, like improving the player character using playing cards, are lifted directly from the codified Western lore.

It would be interesting to continue the research by mapping out actions from non-Western games that ludologically resemble some of our examples to provide for comparisons, especially targeting genres where the theme plays a more central role. Furthermore, expanding the action analysis to other dynamic aspects of gameplay, such as enemy AI and other rules not strictly about player action, would be important, as the feedback loop between the player actions and the game world is so central to the experience. It might also be worthwhile to focus on modern titles[6], as recent games show richer possibilities of expressing the theme – even though some relevant historical findings followed from the decision to include old games as well.

Game players, journalists and researchers alike continue to identify game genres chiefly according to gameplay. Our research largely confirms the justification of this categorization, but also points to interesting directions where a genre like the Western might constitute something more than a preferred thematic skinning. A complex game world like *Red Dead Redemption* is a

[6] It would be possible to examine *Red Dead Redemption* together with Rockstar Games' other big franchise, the *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–) series. Comparing two similar games in different themes might be one way to elucidate the effects of theme on the ludic elements.

cluster of gameplay ideas bound together under the Western theme, constraints to action and sub-modes which may also reflect player preferences, and not simply a novel audio-visual differentiation. Such gameplay elements are still in a minority in defining a genre, and it remains to be seen if stronger thematization in the future will bring thematic aspects of games to the forefront also from a ludological perspective.

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Résumé : Le Far West a été produit et remédiatisé de nombreuses fois au cours des cent dernières années. Les jeux vidéo sont relativement nouveaux dans cette série de remédiations, distillant encore plus loin les éléments essentiels de l'Occident dans des scènes, des personnages et des modes de jeu archétypaux. Dans le prolongement de nos précédents travaux sur les genres, nous étudions une sélection de 31 jeux autour du thème du Far West, dans le but de révéler comment un thème fermement établi et codifié affecte la jouabilité. Un thème bien établi, tel que le Far West, se manifeste à des niveaux distincts selon le type de jeu - au minimum, ce thème agit comme une surface artificielle qui n'affecte en rien la jouabilité. À l'autre extrémité du spectre, le thème du Far West affecte tous les aspects d'un jeu, de sa présentation audiovisuelle au récit et aux actions à la disposition du joueur.

Mots-clés : Western [Far West], genres vidéoludiques, jeux vidéo, thématisation

Appendix 1

The differences of genre distribution between the 2006 sample games of all thematic genres and the Western games between 1990–2017. The genres on the left are grouped so that the main genre is first, and the subgenres are grouped with a similar background color. The numbers in parentheses after the main genre refers to the numbers when you count in the games from all the subgenres of that genre.

	Adventure	Arcade	War	Fantasy	Sports	Sci-Fi	Crime	Realism	Horror	Abstract	All games 2006	All games 2006 (%)	Western games 1990-2017 (%)	Western games 1990-2017 (amounts)
Action	5	8	9	4	1	9	16		4		61 (157)	22.8 % (58.9 %)	25.8 % (48.4 %)	69 (119)
Racing	13	7			10		1				31	11.6 %	0 %	
First Person Shooter	4	1	12			6			3		26	9.7 %	9.9 %	20
Action Adventure	3	1		10		1	1		3		19	7.1 %	7.0 %	15
Platformer	2	9		2							13	4.9 %	5.2 %	14
BeatEmUp	4	1		1			1				7	2.6 %	0.5 %	1
Strategy	1		8	2		6		12	1		30 (42)	11.2 % (15.7 %)	20.7 % (27.2 %)	37 (57)
Real-time Strategy			2	1		2		3			8	3.0 %	6.6 %	16
Manager					4						4	1.5 %	0 %	4
Sports	1	1			20						22	8.2 %	0.5 %	1
Roleplaying		3		11		1			2		17 (20)	6.3 % (7.5 %)	7.5 % (8.0 %)	14 (16)

MMO RPG				1		2					3	1.1 %	0.5 %	2
Puzzle	1	4								5	10	3.7 %	5.2 %	9
Adventure	1			3			1	2	1		8	3.0 %	10.8 %	28
Music / Dancing	3	2									5	1.9 %	0 %	
Simulator			4								4	1.5 %	0 %	
Total	43	37	35	35	35	27	20	17	14	5	268			230

Appendix 2

List of games selected for the qualitative analysis.

1. Gun Fight (Taito 1975)
2. Oregon Trail (Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium 1982)
3. Custer's Revenge (Mystique 1982)
4. Badlands (Konami 1984)
5. Bank Panic (Sanritsu 1984) publisher: Sega
6. High Noon (Ocean Software 1984)
7. Law of the West (Accolade 1985)
8. Six-Gun Shootout: Gunfights of the Wild West (Strategic Simulations Inc. 1985)
9. Gunfright (Ultimate 1986)
10. Iron Horse (Konami 1986)
11. Gold Rush! (Sierra On-Line 1988)
12. North and South (Infogrames 1989)
13. Mad Dog McCree (American Laser Games 1990)
14. Blood Bros. (TAD corporation 1990)
15. Town with No Name (Delta 4 interactive 1992)
16. Lucky Luke (Velez & Dubail 1996) publisher: Infogrames Multimedia SA
17. Outlaws (LucasArts 1997)
18. Sid Meier's Gettysburg (Firaxis Games 1997) publisher: Electronic Arts
19. Hangman: The Wild West (e-FunSoft 2000)
20. An American Tail: Fievel's Gold Rush (Hokus Pokus 2002) publisher: Conspiracy Entertainment, Crave Entertainment
21. Call of Juarez (Techland 2006) publisher: Ubisoft/Focus Home Interactive
22. Helldorado (Spellbound 2007) publisher: Viva Media
23. Wild West Guns (Gameloft Bucharest 2008)
24. Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar San Diego 2010)
25. Gunslingers (Valcon Games LLC 2011)
26. Gunman Clive (Hörberg Productions 2012)
27. Atari Outlaw (Atari SA 2012)
28. Even Cowgirls Bleed (Christine Love 2013)
29. Gunpowder (Rogue Rocket Games 2013)
30. Hard West (CreativeForge Games 2015) publisher: Good Shepherd Entertainment
31. Compass Point: West (Next Games 2015)

Appendix 3

Table of all basic interactions and actions in context in all (31) analysed games. Excludes the scripted actions due to their different nature.. The actions have been grouped into categories. One x refers to one game with that action, and single instances of actions have just been listed at the end of each category.

Basic Weapons and Shooting

Shoot	24
Aim weapon	14
Draw weapon	7
Reload	7
Change weapon	4

Single instance actions in this category: Holster weapon, Ready weapon, Drop gun

Moving

Walk	10
Move Character	7
Jump	7
Crouch	7
Turn	5
Stand up	2
Sneak	2
Run	2

Single instance actions in this category: Sprint, Roll to side, Lie down, Crawl, Lean to the sides

Special Weapon Actions and Other Interactions with Enemies

Throw weapon (knife/hat/tomahawk)	5
Throw dynamite/explosives	3

Single instance actions in this category: Light dynamite, Use dynamite, Use special weapon, Use/remove scope, Activate Dead Eye (Slow time), Focus (zoom in to aim better), Hand-to-hand combat, Throw lasso (After you get it), Use whip (to grab hold of something, then lower yourself, climb on it, and release it), Place watch (to lure enemies with sound), Activate TNT mode and place TNT, Activate combo actions (Brawlers/Binders), Exit fire routine, Choose dialogue, Make a soldier appear, Rape, Draw gunpowder trails, Place gunpowder kegs

Inventory management

Single instance actions in this category: Open Satchel (Check inventory), Use items in inventory, Manage inventory/card screen, Change outfit to pretend being someone else

User Interface Related Nondiegetic Actions

Turn Camera	5
Check info on character	3
Zoom in/out	2

Single instance actions in this category: Scroll screen, Open/close minimap, Activate noise tool, Turn quick action mode on/off, Turn film mode on/off, Activate/deactivate 3rd person view, Highlight line-of-sight

Unit Management / Group Actions (Mainly in Strategy Games)

Single instance actions in this category: Choose character, Move unit on map, Select unit, Move on map, Place troops, Place rally flag (move units), Move artillery, Charge with cavalry, Slash with sabres with cavalry, Change formation, Shoot with unit, Shoot with cannon, Retreat, Give orders to troops (For infantry: Line, Column, Skirmish, Wheel, Advance, Charge, Double

Quick, Hold, Fall Back, Retreat, Halt and for artillery: Limber, Unlimber, Wheel, Target Infantry, Target Artillery, Auto-target, Line-of-sight,Fall back, Retreat, Halt)

Interacting with the Environment

Climb (ladder/stairs)	7
Evade bullets/traps/arrows (by moving)	5
Open door	4
Ride minecart	2
Jump high from a trampoline (mushroom)	2
Explode rocks/wall	2
Use object	2
Shoot boards to break them to open door/windows	2
Read letter/text	2

Single instance actions in this category: Enter/exit cover, Leap over (fence), Brake when going down steep slope, Hang from ledge, Swim/dive, Ride a log in water, Ride rocket in space, Be pushed by wind machines, Balance on tilting platforms, Walk on boulder to make it move, Open locked door with keys, Kick weak door in, Lock door, Push button, Hack down trees, Throw water (to put out fire, Escape law enforcers/Get out of sight, Hide in bushes, Interact with object in level to create better cover, Grab objects in hand, Carry objects in hand, Read Wanted signs, Watch movie in a cinema, Watch video for cards, Search for clues, Focus on important people/places/events, Sleep/Save game (Where there is a bed), Take stagecoach to travel places

Making Choices on a Map

Look at map	5
Attack enemies (Mission)	5

Single instance actions in this category: Send raiders to expand your map area, Scout missions, Build railroads

Special Actions with NPCs / Fighting

Kill civilians for minus points/losing (by shooting)	4
Hand-to-hand combat	2

Single instance actions in this category: Shoot blind from cover, Tie a lassoed person up, Carry a tied up person (this can also be done with a horse), Carry corpse/knocked down enemy, Knock down enemy from close range, Tie knocked down enemy up, Seduce enemy, Subdue enemy, Use ability (Fanning/Ricochet/Prayer/Scream), Use weapon ability (Cone shot), Kill enemy with jump (Mario-style), Throw objects, Save hostages (by shooting the enemies), Shoot civilians, horses or corpses to end the game, Shoot buildings and obstacles to pieces, Choose target, Steal (key), Listen to enemies (Player does this), Spot enemies shadows (Player does this)

Interacting with NPCs

Single instance actions in this category: Speak (with certain people), Accept a duel challenge, Accept missions from strangers, Push people to fall, Pay fines to clear your name when wanted, Use a pardon letter to clear your name

Obtaining Resources and Managing Your Inventory

Buy/Sell items: ● Weapons, ammo, portables, etc. ● Maps and newspaper	4
Open container/crate	4
Collect armor/fire rate/money boost (by shooting at item)	3
Pick up items (weapons, ammo, thrown knife etc.)	3
Collect gold/goods	2
Collect powerups (by walking into them)	2

Single instance actions in this category: Pick up ammo from trunk, Upgrade weapon, Browse shop, Loot bodies, Take (ammo, Bible), Collect flowers, Skin animals, Pick up Wanted posters to get mission, Collect healing cake pieces (by walking into them), Use medicine (when found), Upgrade battle abilities, Activate cards, Merge units

Horse actions

Move with horse	3
Mount horse	3

Single instance actions in this category: Spur horse, Slow/Stop horse, Whistle for horse, Balance on a wild horse (Breaking it), Save horse, Match companions speed on horse, Drive wagon (Similar actions than with horse riding)

Obtaining Buildings and Managing Them on a Strategic Level

Purchase/rent properties/buildings: 2

Single instance actions in this category: Place a building, Move a building, Upgrade a building (and open up new things to build etc.), Start Gold Rush or Cattle event, Send train (with ore)

User Interface Related Nondiegetic Actions (in Context)

Single instance actions in this category: Activate view cone of enemy, Watch replay of fight

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Wargame, Strategy, Action, and Multiplayer in the Early 1980s[1]

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Abstract: Extensive literature underlines the importance to critically examine the phenomenon of game classification. In computer games magazines of the 1980 decade, the combination of "action", "arcade," or "real-time" with "strategy" is quite common. Here and there, the expression "real-time strategy" is used. But real-time strategy games as we will come to know them in the 1990s are not very similar to games labelled "real-time strategy" in the 1980s: we are simply not witnessing the description of the same gameplay or experience. Micro-histories of gameplay can underline different forms of continuities and reveal new perspectives on strategy gaming.

Keywords: Game genres; real-time strategy; strategy games; 1980 decade; history of games.

Résumé en français à la fin de l'article

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[1] I have to thank the LUDOV research team from Université de Montréal where I pursued my doctoral research for some of the findings used here. I also want to note that I would have loved to play each game mentioned here, but it is unfortunately in practice impossible; I hope the observations I make here will be corroborated or refuted by first-hand play when some of these games will be found or made available.

> To poorly paraphrase a maxim, the history of games was written by its great successes. … a discussion of real-time strategy games invariably conjures up visions of Dune 2, Command & Conquer, and Warcraft. … One can't deny the importance of those games, but too frequently games that were equally or more interesting, innovative, and fun escaped recognition if they weren't obvious successes.
>
> — T. Byrl Baker on *Gamespot* (s.d.).

Year 1979 sees the publication of two games that are the firsts *Gamespot* and *MobyGames* databases respectively identify as having both "real-time" and "strategy" labels. These games are *War of Nerves!* (Magnavox, 1979) for the Magnavox Odyssey[2] and *Galactic Empire* (Software Exchange, 1979) for the TRS-80 [**Fig. 1**].

War of Nerves! is a game where two squads fight. The goal is to eliminate the opposing commander by letting one of our soldiers reach them. Commanders are directly controlled by players' joysticks and soldiers automatically shoot enemies. They are immobilized if they take a hit, until the commander touches them to make them move again. On the other hand, *Galactic Empire* is a sci-fi empire managament game, much like John Dalenske's *Empire* (1973). The goal is to explore and conquer at least 20 planets. According to *MobyGames*, one diegetic year takes approximately four game minutes, and it can take up to 1000 diegetic years to win the game. The game can thus last up to 60 hours. These databases obviously don't have the pretention to engage in a genre discussion, but it is still relevant to underline how the games they label are very different.

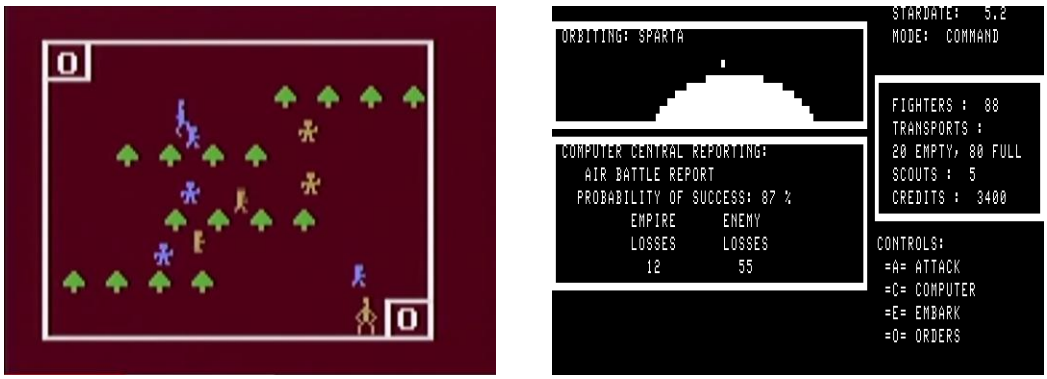

Fig. 1. *War of Nerves!* and *Galactic Empire* (source : *MobyGames*).

Extensive literature underlines the importance to critically examine the phenomenon of game classification (see, amongst others, Wolf, 2001; Apperley, 2006; Arsenault, 2009). In computer and video games magazines of the 1980 decade, the combination of "action", "arcade," or "real-time" with "strategy" is quite common. Here and there, the expression "real-time strategy" is used. But real-time strategy games as we will come to know them in the 1990s are not very similar to games labelled "real-time strategy" in the 1980s: we are simply not witnessing the description of the same gameplay or experience. Their classification in the same genre is problematic, to say the least.

Real-time strategy games (or RTS) of the 1990s and 2000s are nowadays most often linked to *Dune II: The Building of a Dynasty* (Westwood Studios, 1992) (see, for instance, Adams, 2006, p. 1; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, 2008, p. 86). But Dave Morris and Leo Hartas say that computer strategy games "can *trace their line of descent* from the monumental hex-grid boardgames used to simulate grand swathes of history …" (Morris & Hartas, 2004, p. 9, emphasis mine). As important as wargames can be in the computer gaming history, and especially strategy games history, it is always necessary to look critically at how categorizations are retrospectively made to create lines of continuity between historical events. Foucault argues in *L'archéologie du savoir* that categorizations "are themselves discourse acts that needs to be analyzed as every others; they have complex relationships, but they are never intrinsic, natural, and universally recognized characteristics" (Foucault, 1969, p. 35, my translation). It is then necessary to look at historical gaming practices to know how these games sometimes qualified as "real-time strategy" were played. The challenge is to develop "a method that maintains an awareness of early film's [or, here, game's] difference from later practices, without defining it simply as a relation of divergence from a model of continuity (that, in fact, has not yet appeared)" (Gunning, 1990, p. 86). Strategy games from the early 1980s should be analyzed for what they are, not for how they "announce" the real-time strategy games of the 1990s.

As I will demonstrate, there is no intrinsic continuity between early 1980s wargames and real-time strategy games: RTS did not "emerge from" wargames. Early 1980s computer games that were later dubbed "real-time strategy" are no more "ancestors" of 1990s real-time strategy games than games that contributed to a certain multiplayer culture in computer gaming. Stating that real-time strategy games are historically tied to games with "real-time" aspects and strategy is as relevant as to state that role-playing games are tied to games where the player plays a

character; it is true, but it does not clarify the historical explanation. Any historical continuity between cultural practices like gameplay forms is a retrospective construction. We have to look more closely at how games were discussed and played at the time in order to understand them from their contemporary perspective and justify any historical continuity that we trace according to this perspective. Some games that seem less important when focusing on the wargame and militaristic trend still have a legacy nowadays that is too often overlooked.

The goal of this paper is to begin this work by focusing on four small trends in early 1980s computer gaming. Firstly, I will summarize how "real-time" was introduced in wargames, exemplified amongst others by Chris Crawford's games. The second trend is the combination of strategy with "action" or "arcade" aspects. Thirdly, I will explain how strategy games exist beyond the wargaming culture. And lastly, I will underline how a few strategy games were inscribed in a multiplayer culture, exemplified by Danielle Bunten Berry's games. The goal will be to show that at least two gameplay paradigms (Dor, 2014) can be used to describe these games more accurately in their historical context: the prediction and the decryption paradigms.

1) Wargames in Real-Time

Greg Costikyan notes that computer wargames never really replaced traditional wargames. For him, a solitary pastime with unsatisfactory artificial intelligence could not replace a human versus human experience (Costikyan, 1996). However, some game designers literally used computer to supplement the wargaming experience. Chris Crawford released *Tanktics* (1978) with this in mind. The software only calculates encounters, while the visual aspect of the game is entirely assumed by a board, to a point where it is impossible to visualize the game without it [**Fig. 2**].

Fig. 2. *Tanktics* (sources : tacticalwargamer.com & *MobyGames*).

Both Chris Crawford and Danielle Bunten Berry (under her former name Dan Bunten) are recurrent columnists in the newly-founded *Computer Gaming World* magazine. Crawford signs the first paper of the publication, where he has a clear vision for the future of wargames. He writes:

> At present, most people associate real-time play with arcade games. They therefore turn up their noses at the concept. Real-time play is both more realistic and more challenging than turn-sequence play. It directly solves the problem of simultaneous movement that has never been adequately solved with boardgames. It also provides a reasonable and realistic simulation of tactical combat. Tactical combat does indeed involve decision-making under time pressure. Wargames that do not include this element fall far short of simulating tactical combat (Crawford, 1981, p. 4).

Fig. 3. *Eastern Front (1941)* (source: *MobyGames*).

For Crawford, it is basically for a more accurate simulation that wargames should embrace real-time. He released *Eastern Front (1941)* (Crawford, 1981) that same year, a single-player game where the German army fights USSR during World War II [**Fig. 3**]. The player selects units and

gives orders using a joystick (Crawford, 2005, p. 717) and both the player and AI actions are deployed simultaneously (Donovan, 2010, p. 61). It is one of the first games that uses horizontal and vertical scrolling to slowly show a larger map, although Crawford was inspired by a software probably written by Ed Logg in 1980 (Crawford, 2005, p. 715). In a 1981 review of the game, Stanley Greenlaw explains what is scrolling, further corroborating the idea that it is quite new[2]. The player can take their time to play, but "every second you took to plan your move, the computer got another million cycles to refine its own move" (Crawford, quoted in Hague, 2002). As Greenlaw puts it: "Can you think of a more effective way to speed up slow players?" (Greenlaw, 1981, p. 30). While not a "real-time" game, it has two clear similarities with RTS games: speed of execution and simultaneous actions. Yet, *Eastern Front (1941)* is designed as a solo experience, where fast-thinking essentially ensure that the opponent is not too efficient. Bob Proctor explains that the game is very limited in terms of strategy, as a dominant strategy is easy to find and makes it hard to play for those who did not find it, but easy to play to those who found it (Proctor, 1982, p. 10)[3]. For Proctor, the experience of this solo game is not one of winning or losing, but to reach personal goals such as a specific threshold in score.

The game box of *Legionnaire* (Microcomputer Games, 1982) designed by Crawford could be the first conjunction of "real-time" with "wargame." "Real-time" is also used in their ad ("This advertisement has no headline!," 1982) [**Fig. 4**]. *Legionnaire* is quite similar to *Eastern Front (1941)* : the player uses a joystick to give orders to Roman legions [**Fig. 5**]. Up to eight orders can be "stacked" while the player can give their attention elsewhere. Robert DeWitt from *InfoWorld* explains how wargamers will appreciate being challenged in real-time (1983, p. 56). His description of the game is clear:

> In typical play, Caesar might have five legions, each executing a stack of orders (i.e., moving simultaneously on the board), while the computerized enemy is attacking with twice as many units from various directions, sometimes out of sight (1983, p. 56).

[2] "The player uses a joystick to move the cursor in any of the four cardinal directions. As the cursor reaches the edge of the current map the entire map will scroll in the direction of the cursor move until the cursor is stopped or the edge of the whole map is reached" (Greenlaw, 1981, p. 30).

[3] A letter from a reader corroborates this idea: "To some, Chris Crawford's EASTERN FRONT is an impossible struggle against overwhelming odds. To others, the challenge lies not in winning, but rather whether or not ALL Russian units can be eliminated before time runs out" (Richard Thuriot, in "Strategy Game Tips," 1984, p. 36).

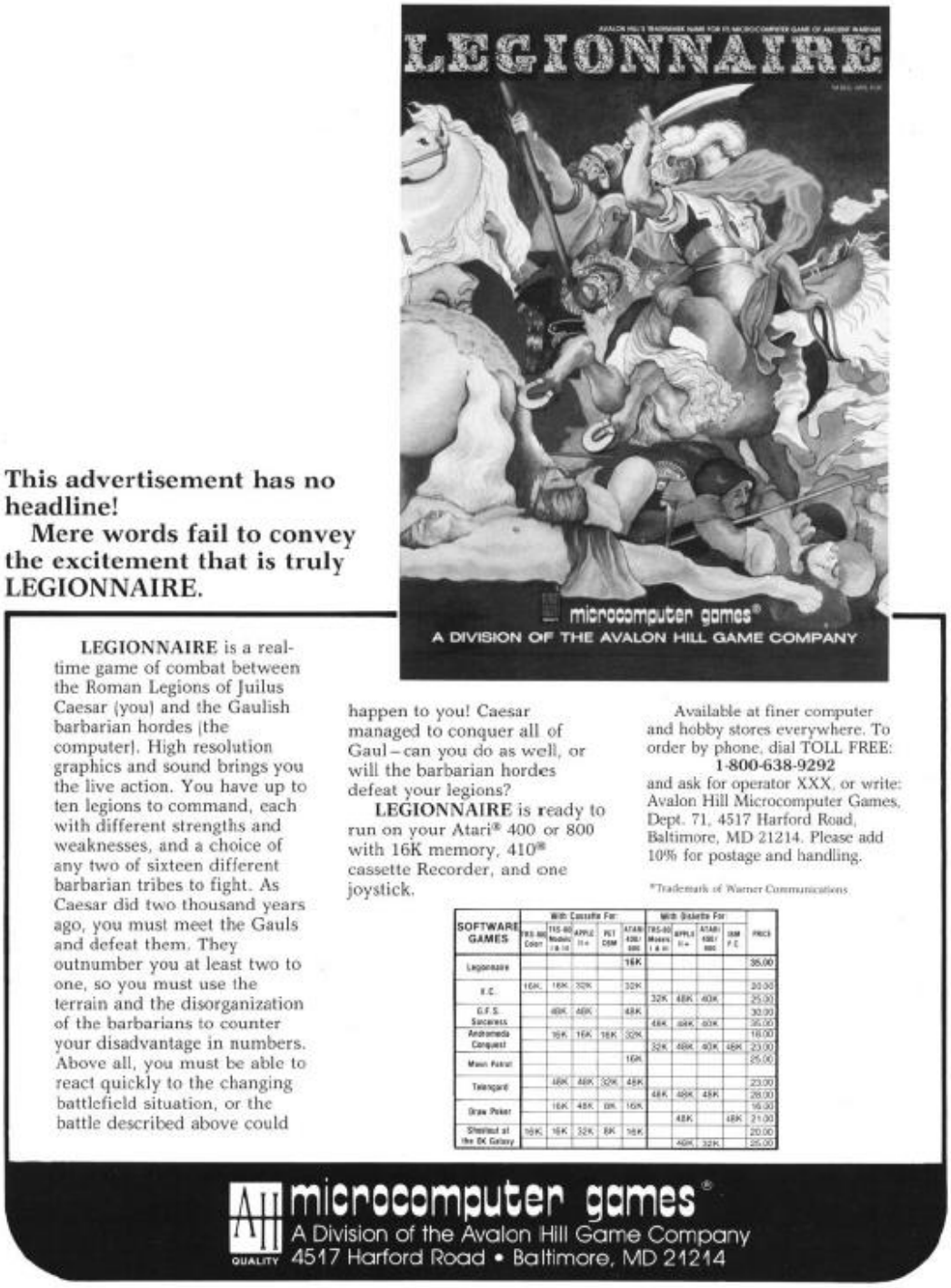

Fig. 4. Advertisement for *Legionnaire* ("This advertisement has no headline!," 1982, p. 5).

The simultaneity of actions, speed of execution, and imperfect information of *Eastern Front (1941)* is still there, while adding this "real-time" aspect.

Fig. 5. *Legionnaire* (source : *MobyGames*).

The next year, an ad for *Combat Leader* (Strategic Simulations Inc, 1983) integrates almost every keyword that connotes the hybridity between strategy and action: a "real-time wargame so fast you'll call it a strategy arcade game" ("Combat Leader," 1983, p. 19, emphasis preserved). French magazine *Micro 7* states in a text box that it is a wargame "that has every advantages of a real-time game" ("Combat Leader," 1984, p. 118, my translation). Roy Wagner sees a greater simplicity, since the player chooses simple commands with a letter and indicates a location where the command is to be issued (Wagner, 1984, p. 35).

This simplicity is also seen in one game retrospectively identified as an RTS: *Stonkers* (Imagine Software, 1983). Released only in Europe on the ZX Spectrum, Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams suggest that it is the first RTS (Rollings & Adams, 2003, p. 161). This single-player game gives the player control of infantry, tanks, artillery, and supply trucks to take the enemy's headquarters and port [**Fig. 6**]. Tony Bridge in *Micro Adventurer* explains the game principles as simple: "a large cursor which may be moved (under keyboard or joystick direction) over the unit you wish to move" (1984, p. 21).

Fig. 6. *Stonkers* (source : *MobyGames*).

Information on each unit (health, morale, supply) is revealed when the mouse is over it. Bridge describes the principles of giving "orders" to units, saying that the player has to first click on them, and then to click on a destination. The player then can manage other tasks while the unit carries the order. Bridge sees it as an especially simple and short wargame that is an efficient introduction to more complex wargames such as *Eastern Front (1941)*. Tony Tyler (1984, p. 30), editor of *Big K* magazine, also remarks a similarity with Crawford's games. An anonymous reviewer in *Crash* notes family resemblances with arcade games because of its speed: "It gets to the point where you barely have any time left to think, and you're punching keys all the while" ("Stonkers," 1984, p. 102). *Home Computing Weekly* suggests that both audiences will be left unsatisfied: "Too little action for arcaders — not enough information for strategists" (D. C, 1984, p. 30). A letter in the "Playing tips" section of *Crash* magazine underlines that a dominant strategy let the player wins every time[4]. Nevertheless, readers from this magazine declared it was the "Best wargame" for 1984 ("Crash," 1984, p. 100). The label "real-time" implicitly calls for more action in strategy games; *Stonkers* shows that strategy games with action elements can definitely rivalize with traditional wargames in 1983. The combination of "action" and "strategy" will be recurrent throughout the decade.

[4] This dominant strategy is described by S. Hennessy: "simply move your men and some tanks to the bridge head and wait, keeping them supplied and moving everything else to your port HQ. When the enemy reach you they are so depleted of power that you come out of the battle well on top. The remaining energy will go to the occupied base (usually only a few units left) where they are easy prey for your men" (quoted in "Playing tips," 1984, p. 77). D. Hobson adds that the most efficient method is simply to wait for every enemy unit up to the last one comes engaging yours ("Playing Tips," 1984, p. 143).

2) Action/Arcade and Strategy

This hybridization between arcade and strategy is frequent at the beginning of the 1980s, and not necessarily only in classical wargames per se. Following their readers' comments, *Computer Gaming World* underlines that one of the five most important events in 1982 in computer gaming is the introduction of "strategy/action games which combine strategy and arcade action" ("Some Reader," 1983, p. 9). In his series on Atari, Allen Doum comments on the difficulty to classify games, amongst other strategy and arcade games:

> In fact, distinctions between strategy and arcade games are getting harder as well. Real-time wargames such as *Combat Leader* and *Legionnaire* aren't fast enough to be called action games yet, but next years crop will include some that will be hard to categorize (Doum, 1984, p. 22).

Luther Shaw also notes this in his review of *BEZ-MX* (Bez, 1982), labelled as a "wargame/arcade". The game is described as a "a two player wargame in which the players try to destroy each other's military-industrial strength while preserving their own" (Shaw, 1982, p. 34). The player can assign different tasks to their population to fuel their war machine, or hide them from enemy bombings at the cost of their workforce. Shaw suggests that the game would be more interesting for strategy gamers with a certain taste for arcade rather than the other way around (p. 35).

This hybrid arcade-strategy is seen by Shaw as a contemporary tendency well represented by *Mission Escape*[5] and *Guns of the Fort Defiance* (Avalon Hill, 1981). The latter is, under certain aspects, similar to what tower defenses are today. The game puts the player in the role of a group of artillery soldiers that defends a weak spot on a fort during the 1812 Canadian-American war [**Fig. 7**]. Their goal is to rout the enemy regiment, which slowly approach pixel-by-pixel. They have to use different artillery bombshells and choose an efficient fuse and elevation to hit their constantly moving target.

[5] It is not clear as to which game Shaw refers. It could be *Mission: Escape!* (MicroSparc, 1982).

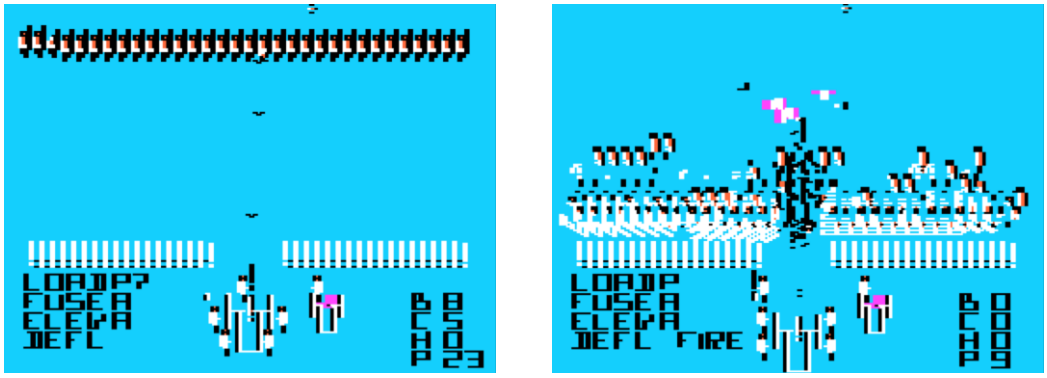

Fig. 7. *Guns of the Fort Defiance* (Apple II version). Left, soldiers beginning to approach. Right, soldiers routing after a successful defense.

In two short sentences, Johnny L. Wilson pins how it mixes strategy and speed: "The cavalry, especially, have a tendency to be able to close range faster than my befuddled fingers can type orders. Hence, one often has to think ahead in terms of range estimation" (Wilson, 1982, p. 35). The speed of the game becomes significant to the point where longer-term thinking is necessary.

A few years later, another hybrid case is released: *The Ancient Art of War* (Evryware, 1984). The player must lead batallions composed of three different units—knight, archer, or barbarian— on the battlefield and take care of their supply and fatigue. A fight starts when two batallions meet, fight which can be managed more precisely by going into "zoom" mode, in a lateral perspective space [**Fig. 8**]. The player can create a custom campaign by choosing on which type of map the skirmish will take place, difficulty level, special rules, and the opponent (from Sun Tzu to Napoleon). Russell Sipe underlines in *Computer Gaming World* that all things being equal, knight beats barbarian, which beats archer, which beats knight (Sipe, 1985, p. 25); more than 20 years later, Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings took this game to illustrate intransitive relationships in games (2007, pp. 364–365). The game is in "real-time" most of the time, except in one crucial moment: when a moving order is given, the time stops until the player selects a destination. It only plays in solo and there is not any way to create new units during play contrarily to modern RTS. Laurent Schwartz from *Tilt* explains in a wargame feature from 1986 that, in *The Ancient Art of War*, even if speed is interesting, "too many parameters direct combat so that your speed cannot determine the result" (Schwartz, 1986, p. 125, my translation).

Fig. 8. *The Ancient Art of War*. Left, the game map. Right, a combat (source: *Abandonia*).

"Real-time" and "real-time strategy" are used more than once in the next years. Within a list of entertainment software available for Amiga (Mitchell, 1986, p. 48), there are two 1984 games from Krentek Software: *Rome and the Barbarian*, labelled as a "[r]eal-time strategy game" », and *Napoleon at Waterloo*, a "simulation in real-time" retrospectively labelled as "real-time strategy" in the *MobyGames* database. An ad in *Computer Gaming World* announces *TRODART*, developed by GoWhile Software[6], a "war game" in real-time where there are simultaneous actions between two players by modem ("TRODART," 1986, p. 43).

Yet, the expression "real-time" in strategy games does not necessarily mean what it commonly accepted nowadays, i.e., that the game time flows continuously and pressure their players. This expression is sometimes used to qualify games from the trilogy Sid Meier and Ed Bever released in 1985-1986 inspired by Meier's earlier game *NATO Commander* (MicroProse, 1983). "Real-time" is used on the box of the first game of the series, *Crusade in Europe* (MicroProse, 1985) [**Fig. 9**]: "Non-stop action takes place in accelerated real-time". The five scenarios of *Crusade in Europe* take place in 1944-45 where the player gives order to units, but it is still possible to pause the game on demand and still give commands. The diegetic time flows by units of 30 minutes. Schwartz (1986, p. 129) does not remark the real-time aspect of the game or of its successors, *Decision in the Desert* (MicroProse, 1985) and *Conflict in Vietnam* (MicroProse, 1986), while it was seen as a singular aspect of *The Ancient Art of War* in the same article. The definition of "real-time" used on the game box seems different from real-time in modern strategy games, i.e., that time is a constant pressure. In design notes he published for

[6] The only other mention of the game that I found, except reprint of this same ad, is on the reviewer M. Evan Brooks' (2002) personal website.

his submarine simulator *Silent Service* (MicroProse, 1985) in *Computer Gaming World*, Sid Meier states that the game is in "real-time" when an action is needed, but in "accelerated real-time" in-between (Meier, 1986, p. 28). "Real-time" then refers to the time of a "real" action, while the accelerated time refers to the fact that, when nothing happens, the game accelerates the time. A "real-time" game then in the 1980s does not necessarily equivocates a fast game. The tradition with which real-time strategy gaming shares more in the early 1980s is probably to be found somewhere else; let us then go back to the beginning of the decade.

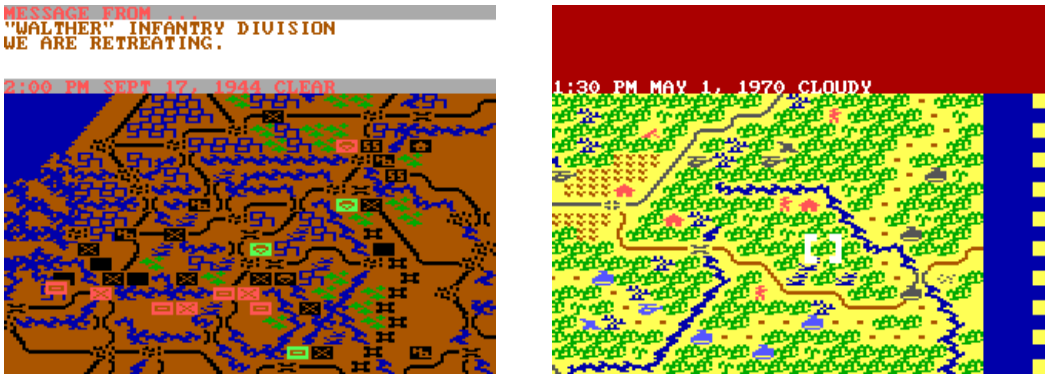

Fig. 9. Left, *Crusade in Europe*. Right, *Conflict in Vietnam* (source: *MobyGames*).

3) "Real-time" Strategy beyond Wargames

The December 1980 issue of *Creative Computing* has a section called "Compleat Computer Catalogue" where a reader can order games and computer products by mail using a "Reader Service Card" annexed to the magazine. One of the games is *Computer Quarterback* (1981), available for the Apple II, and is described as a "real-time strategy football game" ("Compleat Computer Catalogue," 1980, p. 174). It is the first mention of "real-time strategy" as far as my research could go. In an official advertisement in the same issue, the publisher mentions that it is in "real-time" and that it is a "strategy football game" (p. 19). The title screen mentions the name "Dan Bunten," the name under which Danielle Bunten Berry will also publish among others *M.U.L.E.* (Ozark Softscape, 1983) and *Modem Wars* (Ozark Softscape, 1988), largely considered today as landmarks in multiplayer gaming.

In *Computer Quarterback* [**Fig. 10**], an American football game "essentially strategic" (Harbonn, 1987, my translation), two players compete in front of the same computer, each with

their own paddle. Before the match, each player assigns offensive and defensive strategies to numbers from 1 to up to 36 depending on the side and the game mode. Each player has a limited time to choose their strategy and can change it depending on what they see of their opponent's player positioning, until the offensive team makes a move; then, the game automatically resolves the exchange. It is a game of imperfect information between two players: the choice of action does not appear on screen in order to hide that information even if players are sitting side by side. Other football computer games of the 1980s are similarly called "action/strategy" (Lee, 1987, p. 16).

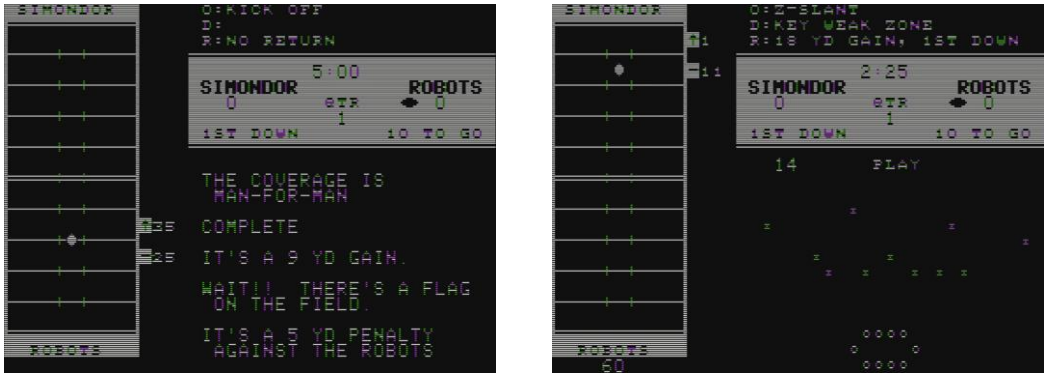

Fig. 10. *Computer Quarterback* (Apple II version, emulated with Applewin).

Even though wargames seem like a strong influence for strategy gaming, *Utopia* (Mattel, 1981) could be an early influence for the genre, whether it is as the "first true proto-RTS game" (chobopeon, 2012) or "the first real simulation game, or 'God Game,' for a home console" (Melissinos & O'Rourke, 2012, p. 43) [**Fig. 11**]. Published on the Mattel Intellivision and designed by Don Daglow, one or two players must manage an island, accumulating gold and points, fighting pirates, natural disasters, and rebels sabotaging production. They can buy buildings (school, factory, hospital, etc.) by moving a squared cursor with the joystick and by clicking on one of the nine numbered buttons on the Intellivision controller, or directly control boats to accumulate gold by fishing or to attack the opponent's boats. The game uses a system of "timed turns": it is in real time because the time flow is continuous, but turn-based in the sense that at a frequency of 30 to 120 seconds, at the players' choice, a turn ends. At the end of a turn, the game stops for a few seconds to attribute points, add gold, and display the islands' populations. The goal is to have more points than your opponent or to beat your personal score at the end of a predetermined number of turns.

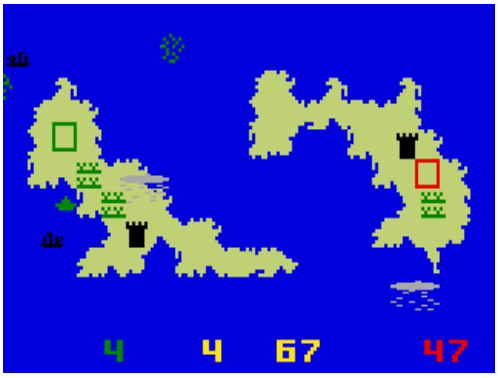

Fig. 11. *Utopia* (source : *MobyGames*).

Competition between two players is of course extremely common in electronic games, but games in the early 1980s rarely integrated this function by connecting two or more computers together. An ad box in *Basic Computing* presents the game *Commbat* (B. Schilling, 1981), claiming that it's about time a combat game let two players fight against each other, provided they have an Apple, Atari, or TRS-80 computer with a "full-duplex modem (or a modem eliminator if the computers are in the same room). Your mission : Find and destroy the enemy's base before he [sic] discovers and annhilates [sic] yours" ("The Company," 1983, p. 49)[7]. To get the claims to extract uranium in the Deneb galaxy, each player fights the other with eight tanks, four reconnaissance drones, and mines, missiles, bombshells, etc. Typographic characters represent units [**Fig. 12**]. In his review of the game, George Stewart explains the inherent interest in *Commbat*: fighting a human opponent. This "tele-game," as he dubs it, creates a different dynamic than when fighting computer opponents: "after all, what does a computer know about the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat?" (Stewart, 1981, p. 100). If Dobson states more than 30 years later that the game was not in real-time (Dobson, 2012, p. 3), the description made by Stewart clearly indicates the contrary:

[7] Robert A. Schilling wrote a letter in the *BYTE* magazine specifying that he wanted to make this game a trilogy, and that the second title was finished in April 1982 (R. A. Schilling, 1982, p. 22). My research could not identify this second game, which could have been ultimately published by another name.

Another essential game element is its interactiveness. You and your opponent can move, fire weapons, and select different tanks and decoys at any time. This makes the game infinitely more challenging than the typical, wait-your-turn war game played on a board. Suppose, for example, that while you're typing in a command, you notice some enemy action through one of your three windows. You can cancel the command and make an immediate response to your opponent. You can even send him [sic] a message at any time ("Let's quit for a while," "Aha!" or some distracting thought) (Stewart, 1981, p. 102).

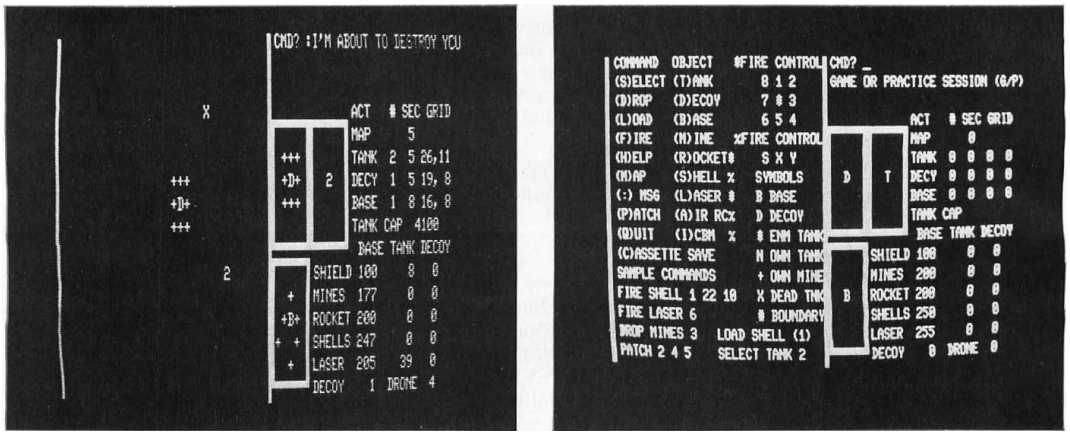

Fig. 12. *Commbat*, illustrated in *BYTE* magazine (Stewart, 1981 p. 102). Left, the fighting screen (« 2 » is a player tank and « X », an enemy tank). Right, the help screen illustrating the different possible maneuvers.

While some technical problems inevitably make modem play difficult—especially when a combat can extent somewhere from 30 minutes to 4 hours—, Stewart notes in conclusion that he sees two fundamental elements of this game that prefigures the future of computer gaming: 1) the diversity of play in human-versus-human interaction; 2) the combination of strategy, tactics, and reflexes. This combination bears family resemblances with RTS; this assemblage of gameplay elements will be part of a lot of subsequent games.

It is in the tradition of *Commbat*, *BEZ-MX*, and, of course, *Computer Quarterback* that the next game from Bunten Berry can be inscribed. *Cytron Masters* (Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1982) is "one of a new breed of games combining the action and graphics of arcade-type games with the authenticity of simulations" (Botner, 1982, p. 30), as one of its play tester puts it. *Cytron Masters* is the first Bunten Berry game that vaguely uses a military theme and, according to her,

the first that combines action and strategy with more or less success (Bunten Berry, s.d.). Two players will fight using five unit types, each with their particularities, including commanders that can relay orders to adjacent units [**Fig. 13**].

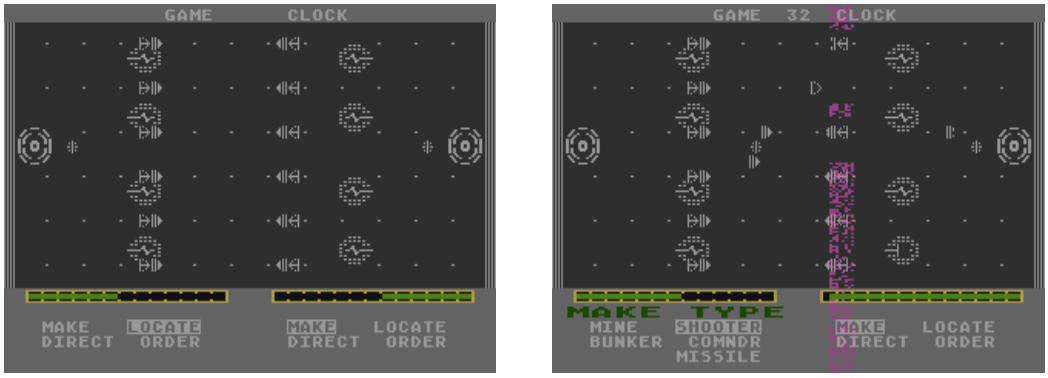

Fig. 13. *Cytron Masters* (source : Mobygames).

The goal is to destroy the enemy's command center. To create new units, the player must control some of the eight power centers, which are in a fixed number on the battlefield. By looking beyond traditional wargames in "real-time," we can see that a tradition of multiplayer slowly emerged in the early 1980s. The roots of this multiplayer culture is still to be unveiled.

4) A Multiplayer Culture

Online services such as CompuServe were not available for every gamer, but some games playable through these services were not far from contemporary multiplayer games. Suzan D. Prince from the *Video Games* magazine identifies explicitly the game *Megawars II*, for CompuServe, as a "multiplayer real-time strategy":

> This high-speed, multiplayer real-time strategy game with the arcade flavor and souped-up 3-D color graphics accommodates up to 10 players at any time, with each player's computer screen serving as his or her cockpit window through which he looks at the others (Prince, 1983, p. 24).

What Prince dubs as "timeshare games," with persistent universes in which players log in, "… provide human interaction that is missing from player vs. system games » (Prince, 1983, p. 24). Patricia Fitzgibbons calls *MegaWars* as well as *Empire* on PLATO as "fastpaced, exciting, multi-player games of warfare and conquest" (Fitzgibbons, 1985, p. 52). *Empire* and *MegaWars*

both seem to have different versions over the 1970s and 1980s, and their "real-time" aspect is difficult to evaluate.

However, one of the most renown multiplayer game from the 1980 decade is *M.U.L.E.* (Ozark Softscape, 1983), designed by Danielle Bunten Berry within her new company. Electronic Arts wanted to publish a previous Bunten Berry game, *Cartels & Cutthroat$* (Bunten & Bunten, 1981) but SSI still had its rights. Bunten Berry then suggested to remake the game, but better, while also borrowing ideas from her own *Wheeler Dealers*, a "real-time stock market simulation" (Moriarty, 1998) for Apple II with an extension that can support up to four players (Moroagh, 2008). The result was *M.U.L.E.* (Bunten Berry, s.d.).

M.U.L.E. is a four-player "trading game" (Wade, 1985, p. 24) and a "competitive strategy title" ("M.U.L.E.," 2001) for Atari 800, offering "an exquisite play balance of teamwork and rivalry, bitter cooperation and delicious treachery" (Moriarty, 1998). The *Commodore User* describes it as "[a]nother cerebral game of the management/strategy persuasion" (L. S, 1985, p. 29) and John J. Anderson underlines its educative aspect, stating that its competition necessitates cooperation (Anderson, 1983, p. 114). *M.U.L.E.* players develop a colony by claiming land, buying "multiple use labor elements" [M.U.L.E.] to collect resources on a planet called Irata [**Fig. 14**].

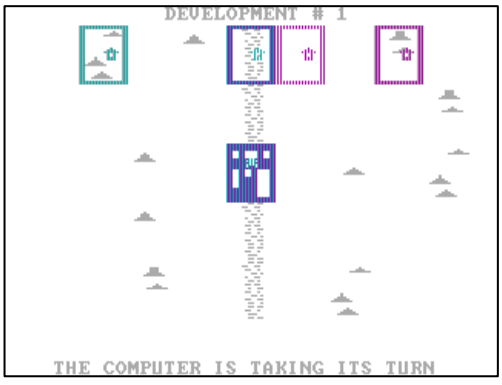

Fig. 14. *M.U.L.E.* (source : *MobyGames*).

Each player takes decisions during their development phase, which has a time limit; executing all their actions faster during a phase gives a bonus in cash (Curtis, 1983, p. 12). When every player has finished their development phase, everyone can put their resources in an auction for the other players to buy them. The auction works with joysticks; buyers and sellers set their

price with a gauge controlled analogically by the joystick, and a transaction occurs when an offer meets its demand. At the end of each turn, players have a score based on the value of their products and the colony in general is also evaluated. Different difficulty levels change game rules, the most difficult implying for example collusion rules where only some players can exchange goods. *Micro 7* calls in the "new standard in terms of economic simulation" (Giudicelli, 1984, p. 115). The AI is perceived as very predictable, which makes playing with less than four players less attractive (Curtis, 1983, p. 13). In a similar way, Carl M. Evans (1984, p. 34) from *Computer Gaming World* recommends some strategies that he judges efficient against the computer, but uniquely "adequate" against humans. The game is designed as a multiplayer game and its "real-time" aspect is only meaningful in the relationship between different human players. While a lot of complex strategy games share a military setting and a complexity with real-time strategy from the 1990s, *M.U.L.E.* clearly show how multiplayer games have a history of their own in strategy gaming.

I have argued elsewhere that real-time strategy gaming in the 1990s could be divided in two different gameplay paradigms (Dor, 2014) and these paradigms can also be seen in the corpus I have used here. The prediction paradigm is what drive games like *Computer Quarterback* or *M.U.L.E.*; the game is based on the idea that multiple players can foresee their opponents' possible actions and choose their action consequently. For example, in *Computer Quarterback*, a player knows which strategies are possible for their opponent and which ones would be more valuable for them; choosing a good opposing strategy is based on this prediction. The decryption paradigm is on the other hand exemplified by the traditional single-player wargames, from *Eastern Front (1941)* to *Stonkers* and *The Ancient Art of War*. The player thinks their opponent as a "puzzle" that needs to be solved. The human player is a privileged agent in the system, in the sense that everything is made up so that the experience can be interesting for them. The interest of games in this paradigm is to give enough challenge to players rather than trying to balance different similar agents. Surprise enemy actions can feel like a "jack-in-a-box," but that can be acceptable for players if they feel like they have some agency to cope with these actions. The 1980s are dominated by decryption, but the prediction paradigm slowly emerges from some multiplayer games we have introduced here. These two paradigms are a way of constructing histories in game studies rather than following pre-established continuities such as contemporary game genres or platforms.

5) Conclusion

In February 1987, game designer Jim Meadows published an article in *Amazing Computer* where he described the genesis of one of his games, *Gemini-2* (Paragon Software Corporation, 1986), a multiplayer first-person shooter between two tanks. He decorticated in details the way he succeeded in coding the interaction by modem between two computers, explaning that the first one he did for modem play in 1985—*Gemini-1*—was "basically a real-time strategy game that used only character graphics for the display" (Meadows, 1987, p. 19). It is impossible to attest the appearance or gameplay of *Gemini-1* to see what Meadows could have meant by "real-time strategy game," but arguably, this description seemed sufficient for him to think that his typical readership could understand what he meant[8]. The expression appeared sufficiently simple to be understood. This anecdotical evidence amongst other similar cases shows how gameplay and gaming lexicon needs to be clarified and contextualized historically.

Clearly, "real-time strategy" as an expression existed as early as 1981. But the expression does not refer to a homogeneous gameplay, design stance, or gaming practice; it can qualify a two-player football game, a solo wargame, or a strategy game with a persistent universe. These practices could have their own legitimate histories contextualizing them rather than being used as merely precursors of a future videogame genre. Taking into account different traditions shows things from different perspectives; games without a militaristic setting, for example, can be put forth for their gameplay experience rather than being only marginally considered.

If some games from the early 1980s are clearly inspired by traditional wargames, computer games quickly introduced their own "arcade" or "action" aspects and a lot of them were far from complex wargames except for their militaristic setting. "Real-time" and arcade games were a trend by themselves, eventually leading to a certain multiplayer culture that would need more research in order to grasp its importance on computer gaming culture. A history of gameplay shows us how strategy games and wargames from the 1980s do not form a "natural" continuity: gaming preferences, habits, or styles of play have a history of their own with interesting points of intersections.

[8] While *Gemini-2* exists in *MobyGames* and on *My Abandonware*, I found no other trace of *Gemini-1*. One could assume that its distribution was very small since its creator describes it as essentially a demonstration (Meadows, 1987, p. 19).

This research is strongly inscribed in an historical perspective I tend to call "history of gameplay," although it is not a new or personal perspective on the history of games. Rather than analyzing the objects themselves, I think historians should try to take into account as far as possible the way games were played, using first-hand sources when possible such as game reviews and strategy guides (Montembeault & Dor, 2018). The expression "history of gameplay" has already been used by Mia Consalvo in a similar way that I use it here (2007, p. 2). Henry Lowood used in 2004 the expression "history of interactivity" and described the idea like this: "Computer games provide the opportunity to think carefully about how to construct a history of *interactivity*. As we preserve interactive media, we must not lose sight of how we will document interactivity itself, which means capturing traces of *activity*, that is, gameplay" (Lowood, 2004, p. 6). The micro-history I have written here is part of a larger history of strategy gameplay that needs to be done.

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Résumé : De nombreux auteurs soulignent l'importance d'avoir un regard critique sur la classification des jeux. Dans les magazines de jeux vidéo de la décennie 1980, la combinaison des expressions « action », « arcade » ou « temps réel » avec le mot « stratégie » est fréquente. Mais les jeux de stratégie en temps réel de la décennie 1990 ne sont pas très similaires aux jeux de stratégie en temps réel des années 1980 : ce n'est pas la même jouabilité qui est décrite. Des micro-histoires de la jouabilité peuvent révéler de nouvelles perspectives sur les jeux de stratégie.

Mots-clés: Genres ludiques; jeu de stratégie en temps réel; jeu de stratégie; décennie 1980; histoire des jeux vidéo.

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The Ambiguity of Casual Game Parodies

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Abstract: This article analyzes three casual game parodies (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*) which mock the simplistic challenges and the behavioural reward system of casual games like *FarmVille*. In light of theories on parody, their visual elements, gameplay, and paratexts are analyzed to evaluate their critical potential. The comments posted by their players on forums and blogs, for their part, show that many of them do not detect the irony of these parodies or do not identify their target. In the discussion section, Bogost's theory on the efficiency of procedural rhetoric is therefore nuanced with the idea that it should be complemented by an appropriate visual and textual rhetoric for it to work properly. The article also questions the subversive potential of the studied parodies by highlighting the fact that they do not only denigrate the simplistic and manipulative mechanics of casual games, but also the women players to whom these games are primarily addressed and who are still, to this day, marginalized in the gaming culture. The article finally develops the idea that casual game parodies lost their subversive appeal since they multiplied and evolved into a video game genre devoid of critical intent called "clicker games", "idle games" or "incremental games".

Keywords: video game, genre, parody, casual game, casual gamer, FarmVille, incremental game, idle game, clicker game, women player

Résumé en français à la fin de l'article

In recent years, casual games have surged to become one of the largest sub-sectors in the gaming industry. The farm-simulation social network game *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009), for example, reached 80 million monthly active users at its peak (Hameed, 2010) and one billion in sales of virtual goods (Kanal, 2013). In the wake of this impressive success, harsh criticisms of casual games have flooded in from all sides. *Time* magazine described *FarmVille* as one of the "50 Worst Inventions" of the past decade due to it being "the most addictive of Facebook games" and a "series of mindless chores on a digital farm." (Fletcher, 2010) Sam Anderson (2012), from the *New York Times*, wrote : "*Tetris* and its offspring (*Angry Birds*, *Bejeweled*, *Fruit Ninja*, etc.) have colonized our pockets and our brains and shifted the entire economic model of the video-game industry. Today we are living, for better and worse, in a world of stupid games." (cited by Anable, 2013) Scholar Ian Bogost (2011), for his part, argued that casual games perfectly illustrate what is "kitsch" in the video game world. The remarkable rise in popularity of casual games has also fuelled feelings of annoyance within the gamer community (Juul, 2010, p. 26). Some players even went as far as to say that "casual games" are not "real" games and "casual gamers" not "real" gamers (Sulzdorf-Liszkiewicz, 2010). Along with these direct criticisms, some game designers created casual game parodies to denounce their simplistic mechanics and easy challenges that require minimal skills, but tremendous investment of time.

In this article, I analyze three of these casual game parodies (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*), which are based on a similar procedural rhetoric, and show how their criticism is ambiguous. Drawing on theories of parody, I examine their visual elements, game mechanics, and paratexts to evaluate their critical potential. I also analyze hundreds of comments posted by their players on forums, blogs and websites to see how they were interpreted and to assess the success or failure of their parodic communication. These analyses reveal that textual and paratextual elements affect the critical potential of their procedural rhetoric, and that not all players acknowledge their critical agenda or identify their target. In the discussion section, I therefore argue that procedural rhetoric is not sufficient to convey a parodic criticism efficiently. I also question these parodies' subversive potential by highlighting the fact that they do not only target simplistic game mechanics, overly mobilized by multimillionaire corporations, but also indirectly mock the people who play them, that is to say a predominantly female clientele which is, to this day, marginalized in the gaming culture. I finally suggest that the subversive potential of these casual game parodies has weakened since they proliferated and

evolved into a video game genre. However, before getting into the heart of the matter, I provide a definition of what I mean by "parody" and by "casual game", since the significance of these categories is often debated.

A Definition of Parody

A parody is a "form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon,1985, p. xii) with the help of techniques such as reiteration, inversion, misdirection[1], literalization[2], extraneous inclusion, exaggeration, recontextualization, etc. (Harries, 2000). Many scholars consider parody as a "genre", that is to say a category of media productions that share similarities in terms of style, content or operating rules (Genette, 1982; Hannoosh, 1989; Sangsue, 1994). Because a parody can target various genres, the idea that it can be a genre itself is, however, a contradiction in terms. As Schaeffer (1986) and Bakhtin (1978) explain, parody resists all forms of classification based on style, content or operating rules, because its style, content and operating rules change according to the nature of its target. For this reason, I prefer to consider parody as a discursive form based on a dialectic between two processes: the imitation and transformation of elements that characterize a specific type of discourse (a text, a game, a genre, a current, etc.). These two processes are deeply intertwined in parody techniques: exaggeration involves the repetition of a familiar element with a difference in terms of degree, while recontextualization implies the repetition of a conventional element in a different context (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013). Since genres are based on a fragile balance between the repetition of the same conventions within a group of texts and the inclusion of slight differences from a text to another, the *modus operandi* of a genre parody is to break this delicate equilibrium in order to highlight genre conventions and show how artificial and redundant they are. Parody techniques such as literalization and exaggeration push the targeted genre conventions in their conservative zone to shed light on them, while parody techniques like inversion, misdirection, and extraneous inclusion push the targeted conventions in their innovative zone to show how different they could be if creators were not all banking on the same model (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013).

[1] The sudden transformation of something familiar.
[2] The act of making explicit something that is usually implicit.

Parodies are often associated with comedies, but the original meaning of the Greek term παρῳδία [*parôdia*] (παρά [*pará*] = "beside" or "against" and ᾠδή [*ôdé*] = "song") does not evoke the idea of a comical discourse (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 32). If parodies tend to be funny, it is mostly because laughter also relies on processes such as imitation and transformation, repetition and difference[3] (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013). Even though laughter is a common effect of parody, my definition of this discursive form does not include the comical aspect because it is not a necessary criterion to consider a production as a parody. Furthermore, parody is different from what has been called "clone" in the game industry. Clones are "derivative products" of a game with new skins but same gameplay (Arsenault, 2009). They are not made to create a reference to the game that inspired them, but to capitalize on its popularity and to generate meaning on their own. In contrast, parodies are intended as commentaries on their target and only make sense in relation to it. While film, television and book parodies imitate and transform their target's lexicon, syntax or style (Harries, 2000), video game parodies additionally imitate and transform their target's gameplay elements, that is to say their rules, mechanics, and goals. Their commentary or criticism therefore partly relies on what Ian Bogost (2007) calls "procedural rhetoric", which is the art of persuasion through procedures and program codes, rather than textual or visual elements.

The Ambivalence of Parody

Parody is often considered as an ambivalent media form that can either pay tribute to its target or criticize it, as indicated by the double meaning of its prefix "para" which can mean "beside" or "against". A parody is at once close and far from its target, and simultaneously the result of admiration and disregard. As Margaret Rose (1993), Michelle Hannoosh (1989) and Linda Hutcheon (1985) point out, the most admiring parody still involves critical distance and desacralizes its target, while the most irreverent parody still acknowledges the authority or the importance of its target. The imitation or repetition process is generally seen as the conservative aspect of a parody, while the transformation or differentiation process is conceived as the

[3] According to incongruity theory, developed by Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, laughter happens when people's expectations are overturned because there is a surprising discrepancy between what they anticipate and what actually occurs (Morreall, 1987). For Bergson (1940, p. 29), on the other hand, we laugh when there is "something mechanical in something living"; when someone, for example, constantly repeats the same gesture or imitates someone else, when two people look alike, or when similar series of events occur in different situations. Although these two theories on laughter are often presented as opposites, we can consider the mechanization of life as an instance of incongruity. As Bergson mentions, such cases are funny because we expect people to be flexible, and unpredictable (1940, p. 8).

innovative and subversive aspect of this discursive form (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 77). As we saw earlier, these two processes are, however, constantly intertwined, which confers to parodies a continuous ambivalence between consolidation and innovation.

Among the numerous criticisms addressed to this media form features its degrading function: that is to say its demeaning of high-end discourses which deserve to be respected. From this perspective, parody is only relevant when it mocks the weaknesses of a production or the recurrent stereotypes of a genre (Sangsue, 1994, p. 26-29). Others are suspicious of parody because its irony masks its misleading intentions under the cover of laughter (Barthes 1973, p. 19) or gives the false impression that the parody is superior to its target (Barthes, 1970, p. 51-52). From this point of view, parodies are only pertinent when they attack their target without pretending to be smarter and when they criticize the canonical structures of their own language (Barthes, 1970, p. 146 and 212). Finally, parodies are sometimes accused of being elitist: that is to say inaccessible to the average receiver who is not equipped to perceive their underlying message (Sangsue, 1994, p. 85). However, this position itself is elitist since it presupposes that the average receiver is unable to read double-voiced discourses. It also fails to acknowledge that some parodies prevent hermeticism by mobilizing different strategies at the textual or paratextual levels.

Despite all these criticisms, several scholars confer positive functions to certain parodies. The Russian formalists, for instance, highlight their regenerative force, that is to say their capacity to alleviate the natural mechanization, sclerosis and decay of literary devices (Chklovski 1973; Tomachevski, 1925). In the same vein, Harries (2000) considers genre parody as a modernization tool. According to him, Hollywood genres are constantly reworked and updated under the influence of parodies. However, parodies do not deeply reform their targeted genre: they only free it from its outdated conventions and give it a fresh boost so it can persist over time: “film parody can be seen as a source of renewal by breathing new life into worn-out canons without specifically burying that tradition.” (2000, p. 123) Robert Phiddian, for his part, compares parody to Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction method: both demonstrate that all texts are caught up in a network of citations, imitations and appropriations (1997, p. 680). According to Phiddian, parodies rely on the *différance* that separates them from their target. While the word *différance* was created by Derrida (1972) to describe the idea that each sign carries traces

of the different meanings that were attributed to them in the past, Phiddian believes that this term applies to parodies better than to any other types of discourse.

> A parody brings out the possibility of its own ridicule in a text. It is the deconstruction which is always available. It comes from the margins of a preexisting text or discourse, supplementing it dangerously : giving it what it lacks (its own implicit critique), giving it what it deserves (a vision of its own absurdity), and taking its place (decentering it and overcoming it). (Phiddian, 1997, p. 689)

Some parodies also have a political function when they attack the cultural codes, values and ideologies embodied by their target. This is why parody became one of the marginalized's preferred tools to contest sexist, racist, colonialist or capitalist ideologies (Phiddian, 1997, p. 692).

In light of these theories, we can hypothesize that *Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress Wars* highlight the imitative nature of casual games, denounce their profit-oriented strategies, and encourage developers to renew their model. We can, however, suspect that they are not equally subversive and that part of their critical potential relies on their ability to convey their message efficiently. Since parodic criticisms can only operate with the collaboration of their interpreters, it is important to pinpoint the conditions that favour the success of parodic communication.

The Reception of a Parody

Identifying the target and inferring the irony of the parodist are two necessary conditions for a parody to be interpreted as such (Harries, 2000, p. 34). The repetition of the target's characteristics generally helps the receiver to identify the parodied text, while the inclusion of differences allows the detection of the parodist's irony. The acknowledgement of the parody's target or irony can be particularly tricky when the producer and the receiver do not share the same repertoire of knowledge and cultural references. The success of a parody also relies on the presence, in its texts or paratexts, of clues about the parody's target or the parodist's intention (Harries, 2000, p. 105). As Sangsue explains, the titles, subtitles, credits or any other peripheric texts are preferred areas to establish a reading contract with the interpreter (2006, p. 18). The film parody *This Is Spinal Tap* (Reiner, 1984), for example, integrates this explicit mention in its credits: "For anyone who thought the preceding Greatest Hits commercial was real... IT

WASN'T. The aforementioned record does not exist. Neither does Spinal Tap. And there's no Easter Bunny, either!" Titles of film parodies such as *Airplane!*, *Top Secret!*, *Mafia!* and *Hot Shots!* include exclamation points to indicate the ironical nature of the movies. In video games, clues can be found in interfaces, environments or narratives, as well as in credits, instructions, or advertisements. With the help of these clues, receivers who are not familiar with the parody's target can still detect the irony of the parodist and partly understand the parody's commentary or criticism.

A Definition of Casual Games

The label "casual game" commonly refers to a broad category of games played on different devices including console games, computer games, social games played on *Facebook*, and mobile games played on cellphones or tablets. Jesper Juul identifies five components that are common to "casual games": 1) emotionally positive fictions (excluding anything that concerns warfare), 2) high usability (they do not require extensive gaming skill or specific knowledge), 3) interruptibility (they can be played for short periods of time), 4) merciful punishments (that do not involve losing progress and replaying large portions of the game after failing), and 5) juiciness (the constant rewarding of successful action with excessive positive feedback) (2010, p. 50). As Juul (2010) mentions, the labels "casual" and "hardcore" games are, however, problematic. Contrary to popular belief, what is considered as casual games can be as time consuming as what is regarded as hardcore games. Moreover, some casual games, such as *Guitar Hero* (RedOctane, 2005), can be played seriously in the context of a competition, while some hardcore games, such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar, 1997), can be played casually when the player explores their open-world without completing the missions. Nonetheless, casual games are generally more flexible and accessible to a wider range of people than "hardcore games", because they can be played casually or not (Juul, 2010, p. 54).

The label "casual games" does not refer to a video game genre, because it encompasses various game genres such as puzzle games, simulation games and exploration games. Indeed, video game genres are different from film or television genres that are based on family resemblance in terms of semantic (topics, iconography), syntactic (narrative structure, relation between characters, etc.) or stylistic elements (film techniques, aesthetic, etc.) (Altman, 1999). Instead, they mostly rely on similarities in terms of gameplay, that is to say the challenges that players

face, the actions they must perform, and the goals they pursue (Apperley, 2006; Arsenault, 2010; Wolf, 2001). This is why journalists, publishers and players use labels such as "strategy games", "role-playing games" and "shooting games" instead of labels like "western games" or "spy games" in order to refer to video game genres.

The three parodies analyzed in this article target a subcategory of casual games like *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) that does not have a designated label. Some people use the term "clicker" to qualify them, but, as I will explain later, this expression was initially used to designate their parodies before being recycled to describe games that involve minimal interaction. In this article, I therefore use the expression "casual games *à-la FarmVille*" –for lack of a better term– to refer to a casual game genre in which the player simply has to click on items to accomplish complex tasks, gain points, collect virtual goods, and level up. These games can be related to diverse topics and iconographies, but all of them generally have simple graphics and mechanics. They are based on constant positive reinforcement and designed to be played during short and interruptable periods of time (between work tasks and domestic obligations for instance). They are addressed to so-called "casual gamers" and are generally browser or app-based. Most of them are available for free or sold at a very cheap price. However, they frequently involve monetization techniques that trick players into purchasing in-game currency or digital items with real money (Nieborg, 2016; Whitson, 2011). *FarmVille*, for instance, was available on the social network *Facebook* for free. Its players were required to plant seeds, water them, wait for them to grow, feed animals, collect their products and cook them, by repeatedly clicking on digital icons. They could sell the collected or cooked food to gain "Farm coins" that could be used to buy more equipment or animals, as well as bigger lots. They could also visit the farms of their *Facebook* friends and buy virtual items with real money. As the most emblematic game of the genre, *FarmVille* has often been mocked and criticized. The parody *Cow Clicker* is one of the most elaborated attempts to poke fun at its simplistic clicking mechanic and to denounce its "freemium" business model revolving around microtransactions.

An Analysis of *Cow Clicker* and Its Reception

Like many game scholars and game designers, Ian Bogost (2010) is critical of casual games with simplistic mechanics, behaviourist reward systems[4], and manipulative monetization techniques. To express his distaste for this kind of game through a medium that could reach those who are playing them, Bogost created the game parody *Cow Clicker*, in the summer of 2010, and published it on *Facebook*.

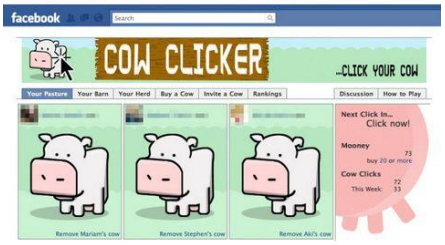

Image 1: Screen capture of *Cow Clicker*
(Source: https://www.qwant.com/game/cow-clicker?l=br)

This absurd game required players to click on a cute cow once every six hours, in order to win points called "Cow clicks" that could eventually be used to buy more clickable cows! To skip the six hours waiting period between two clicks, players could purchase a virtual currency called "Mooney".[5] They could also invite *Facebook* friends to join their pasture and click on their friends' cow to obtain more Cow clicks and try to reach the top of the leaderboard.

In his essay "*Cow Clicker*: The Making of Obsession"[6], published on his blog, Bogost (2010) describes his game as a "*Facebook* game on *Facebook* games", and as a "satire" (although one that meets my criteria of parody[7]) that criticizes four aspects of social games like *FarmVille*: 1) *enframing*: the instrumentalizing of social ties and the exploitation of *Facebook* friends as resources to be optimized; 2) *compulsion*: the behavioural nature of gaming systems that reward minimal effort with trivial digital items; 3) *optionalism*: the possibility of avoiding play by

[4] The behaviourist reward system is inspired by Skinner's operant conditing chamber (also known as the Skinner box); a device used to teach a subject animal to perform specific actions (press a lever) in response to a stimuli (light or sound) by delivering a reward (food) each time the action is executed correctly.
[5] Bogost claims that the name of the currency was not an intended reference to Zynga's vice-president of the time, Bill Mooney.
[6] http://bogost.com/writing/blog/cow_clicker_1/
[7] Satire is often confused with parody, as these discursive forms operate in a similar fashion. However, satire targets various social practices such as customs, traditions, myths, social stereotypes, politics, religions, etc., while parodies aim at discourses, representations, and media material (Rose, 1993).

spending real money; and 4) *destroyed time*: the guilt that players feel when they do not play the game and miss opportunities. After its release, *Cow Clicker* was played by a bunch of fans who clicked on cows in protest of casual games *à-la FarmVille*, but within a few weeks, more than 50,000 players were more earnestly clicking on Bogost's cute cows (Bogost, 2010). The game was no longer played ironically by a handful of insiders, and unexpectedly became a commercial success. Faced with the growing popularity of his game, Bogost (2010) could not resist the temptation to create new content and to expand the scale of his project. To maximize interactions between players, he added the possibility to publish feed stories about clicking on a cow that could themselves be clicked to gain Cow clicks. He released an application allowing players to click on their cow via mobile devices, provided funny premium cows (such as the Bacon Cow, the Oil Cow, the Mao Cow, the Bling Cow, etc.) in exchange for micropayments, and added virtual items that could only be bought with a ridiculously high amount of Cow clicks or with real money.

Image 2: Screenshot of *Cow Clicker* premium cows
(Source: https://www.coolbuster.net/2010/07/cow-clicker.html)

By pushing monetization techniques to an extreme, Bogost (2010) was hoping that people would stop playing the game. However, each time he added new items and functionalities, players sent positive feedback and played the game with even more enthusiasm. Eventually, enhancing the game became an obsession for Bogost (2010) who later admitted that he had fallen foul of his own trap.

The procedural rhetoric of *Cow Clicker* was based on parodic exaggerations of the genre's common rule-based elements such as the wait time between clicks, the number of clicks required to obtain a virtual item, and the cost of virtual items in real money. By exaggerating these gameplay elements, the parody showed how trivial and manipulative the rules of this

game genre are. At the semantic level, the parody literalized the "clicking" game mechanic by using the expression "Cow clicks" to designate the game's points. At the stylistic level, *Cow Clicker* reiterated the vivid colour palette of most casual games and created a direct reference to *FarmVille* with its cute cow icon and logo. These parody techniques, mostly based on repetition, are in theory supposed to shed light on the targeted genre conventions while helping the players to identify the parody's target. Overall, *Cow Clicker* reiterated and amplified many elements of its targeted genre without transforming them substantially. Moreover, the publication of this game parody on the same social network as its target did not recontextualize the genre conventions and distance the parody from games like *FarmVille*. We can therefore hypothesize that the difference between the parody and its target was not significant enough to convince all players that *Cow Clicker* was an ironical parody. The fact that it mobilized more parody techniques based on imitation than parody techniques relying on transformation might have increased the risk of confusion with the parodied genre. *Cow Clicker* is a good example of games that heavily rely on procedural rhetoric to make a point. Aside from literalizing the target's clicking game mechanic in the game's title and points, the innovative aspect of *Cow Clicker* is almost entirely based on the exaggeration of the "clicking" mechanic.

As for its paratextual elements, the title of the game makes a direct reference to *FarmVille* by evoking the cow, while literalizing the "clicking" game mechanic. Yet, there were no clear indications of Bogost's parodic intent in its subtitle, instructions or promotional texts. On the game's *Facebook* page, Bogost included a link towards a website[8] that explains in detail the intention behind the game, but we can suspect that not all players clicked on it.

As Bogost (2010) reported on his blog, several players considered the game to be stupid and boring because they did not perceive it as a parody of casual games. Many others enjoyed playing *Cow Clicker* even though they did not detect its irony. I tried to understand why this game became so popular and was played for its own sake, despite Bogost's intention to create the most boring game ever made in order to raise consciousness about the problematic aspects of casual games *à-la FarmVille*. An analysis of players' comments, posted below Bogost's explanatory essay[9], offers clues as to why this game parody was often liked for other reasons than its underlying criticism or behaviourist reward system.

[8] http://cowclicker.com/?fbclid=IwAR3-n-Nkl8ZwN5hBcTq0k57sLpHduQ01TbDglPipidLQn5CyuXpGRcYnXVs
[9] We can suppose that most players read Bogost's explanatory essay before commenting on the game.

Atrawog, for example, enjoyed the game for the social interactions it facilitated and for its interruptability: "This app is absolutely lovely. It isn't as time consuming as other apps and you can still engage your friend into doing something silly together." Malcom Ryan appreciated the creation and collaboration possibilities it opened up. He and his friends used the game to engage in collaborative writing of poetic *cowmmentaries* on *Facebook*:

> Cow Clicker may have been intended as satire, but personally I quite enjoy it. For me it is kind of like a collaborative writing exercise. My friends and I routinely share our clicks and attach a cow-related semi-philosophical quote or other twist on a popular meme. [...] You could say that we have invented our own meta-game around Cow Clicker. (Malcom Ryan)

These testimonies suggest that the subversive potential of *Cow Clicker* was compromised by an element that Bogost later included in the game to favour interactions between players and that opened the door to players' appropriation of the game. This is what AnotherJason means when he writes: "Ian has somewhat failed in his mission, allowing players to invent their own meta-games which they actually enjoy, at no profit to himself"; a statement to which Bogost replied: "This is true." In his book *Play Anything*, published six years after the creation of the game, Bogost (2016) admitted that *Cow Clicker* became a "playground" despite how "urgent" it was to him "that the game performs the critique [he] set out for it." From his perspective, this could be explained by how "resilient is the human spirit" and by the capacity of people to transform "shit into gold." We can also consider the possibility that the game system was too open, while it should have been closer to *ludus* than *paidia*[10] to limit appropriative play and the invention of meta-games by the players. Allowing them to publish creative feed stories about cows on *Facebook* contradicted the criticism that Bogost was trying to make about the instrumental nature of relationships in casual games *à-la FarmVille*. As Jon suggests, it is the social aspects of these games that contribute to their appeal:

> According to my network model, you NEED this kind of obsessive time-based clicking in order for a game to go viral. If people don't keep feeding into each-others' addiction they all individually give up. What keeps them going is that if they stop for even a while they quickly see reports of their friends playing, which motivates them to start again, which in turn motivates any of their other friends who might otherwise unhook. (Jon)

[10] In the typology of Roger Caillois (1958), "Paidia" is a type of game that allows free play and the pursuit of one's own goal, while "Ludus" is a type of game that is highly regulated.

Because the game parody was fun enough to be played, it failed to persuade everybody that casual games are worthless, as mentioned by Alexandra Holloway: "Playing *Cow Clicker* reminds me of how large and bovine I am becoming, sitting at the computer — yet the game compels me to keep at it! It sends the wrong message, Ian, the wrong message!" Jason Tanz (2011), from *Wired* magazine, for his part, stated that he enjoyed the game for its cute cows and for the satisfying sound they emitted when being clicked on:

> *Cow Clicker* was perversely enjoyable. The cartoon cow was cute, with a boxy nose and nonplussed expression. After every click, it emitted a satisfying moo. The game may have been dumb and even mean. But it was also, for some reason that resisted easy explanation, kind of appealing. (Tanz, 2011)

This testimony suggests that *Cow Clicker* would have been more effective as a criticism of casual games *à-la FarmVille* if it were stripped of the elements that make these games attractive.

This is precisely what Bogost attempted when he orchestrated the *Cowpocalypse* to put an end to his absurd experiment. On September 7, 2011, he permanently removed all cows from the game, while leaving the empty pastures on which players can still click to collect the one million Cow clicks needed to buy a silver cow bell. This minimalist version of the game seems more efficient in terms of criticism, since no artifice distracts players from its underlying message.

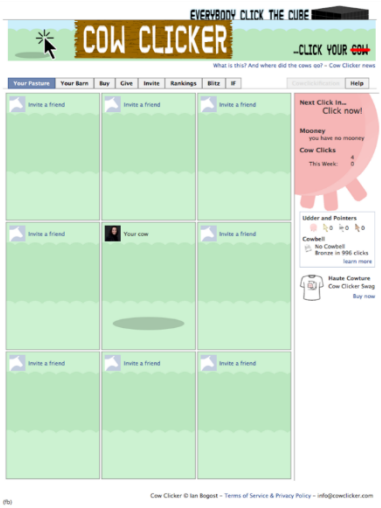

Image 3: Screen capture of *Cow Clicker* after the Cowpocalypse

As Jason Tanz (2011) mentions: “this is the truest version of *Cow Clicker*—the pure, cold game mechanic without any ornamentation.” The comment a player who kept clicking on the empty pastures to reach one million clicks, illustrates how useful the *Cowpocalypse* was to clarify Bogost’s criticism and encourage players to reflect upon the simplistic mechanics of casual games: “It is very interesting, clicking nothing, but then, we were clicking nothing the whole time. It just looked like we were clicking cows.” (Scriven) To Bogost’s despair, the *Cowpocalypse* did not convince all players that the game was a joke made at their expense. After the fateful day, Bogost kept receiving messages such as: “I’ve noticed that the Cowpocalypse has happened and users have to pay to see their cow. Do you have a goal or time frame of when this will be set back to normal?” to which he replied: “There’s no way to pay to see your cow. The cows got raptured.” To the player who complained that he would no longer play the game as it had become boring, Bogost mockingly replied that “It wasn’t very fun before :).” (Alexander, 2011)

In retrospect, we can ask ourselves what Bogost could have done to maximize the chances of success of its parodic communication from the beginning. As advised by one player, he could have included clues or warnings in the game’s description paragraph or sent direct messages to the players, in order to clarify his critical intention and avoid misinterpretation:

> I think it would be really interesting if you engaged your “clients” as a real individual instead of a shadowy developer or company. You could shut down the game and send a communique to the users explaining the project as seen by you, what were your goals and expectations, and how you feel about it now, etc. Maybe even say to them why you think they shouldn’t be playing cowclicker. That would be a really good way of overcoming the alienation that systems as cowclicker grow off and communicating truth in a place made only of lies. (Bruno)

Despite *Cow Clicker* being unsuccessful at convincing everybody that they should not be playing casual games *à-la FarmVille*, as it cannot generate meaningful play, it nonetheless deserves credit for sparking off heated debates on this game genre. Indeed, many players defended this kind of game on Bogost’s blog and explained what they like about it: “I like *FarmVille* because I get to build stuff instead of competing with everyone or killing people/things” (Kathlee). One person argues, in a four-page long comment, that the design principles parodied by *Cow Clicker* are the very ones that make these games socially relevant: “Every social game is educational, as it shows you that you have to work hard and study a lot to

be more successful than others." (JM) According to this player, *Cow Clicker* misses what many people consider to be the essence of these games, that is to say the possibility of developing a nice environment and watching it grow:

> FarmVille is FUN because you get to have a FARM. People — every day normal regular people — actually LIKE the idea of having a farm. It's part of our agrarian heritage. It's comforting. It's heartwarming. It's a nice little dream. [...] What you think of as an odious compulsion to return, players think of as a respite, a brief retreat from the rest of their day. (JM)

Cow Clicker perhaps generates such strong reactions because it mocks gameplay elements that require the involvement of the players to be actualized, and therefore laugh at their expense more than television and film parody mocks viewers. As mentioned by a player of *Cow Clicker*: "by playing it you become a part of the satire, but also a victim of it." (Jonathan Whiting) Another commentator states that the problem is not the people who play casual games, but the people who play these games non-casually: "It doesn't matter one whit that someone chooses to waste a bit of their day messing around on *FarmVille*. It only matters if someone takes it to excess." (Brian) According to a player named Ross Woodcock, this excess is triggered by a fifth aspect of social games that was overlooked by Bogost: the "Investment Trap", that is to say the fact that "the more you keep playing, to protect that investment [of time], the more time you would be "wasting" if you stopped."

Cow Clicker's failure to be identified as a parody by many players illustrates the need to combine procedural rhetoric with adequate textual and visual rhetoric in order to convey a message efficiently. Even though *Cow Clicker* did not discourage everybody from playing casual games *à-la FarmVille*, it gave people the occasion to reflect on their gaming practices, as well as on what makes these games appealing or problematic. Some of the aforementioned comments also demonstrate that certain players are very aware of the tactics used by game designers to keep them "hooked" on games.

An Analysis of *A.V.G.M.* and Its Reception

Bogost was not the first game designer to create a parody of casual games' simplistic mechanics for critical purpose. During the Global Game Jam in 2009, Edmund McMillen and Tyler Glaiel

created *A.V.G.M.*[11]; a game in which players have to click on a switch to turn a light on and off, and to receive weird digital items (skeleton, computer desk, clocks, bone, dead bird, deer trophy, cross, etc.) that can be moved around in a small digital bedroom. As players progress in the game, more clicks are required to gain an extra item. Once players have clicked on the switch 10,212 times, the meaning of the anagram A.V.G.M. is revealed: Abusive Video Game Manipulation. During an interview featured in the film *Indie Game: Life After* (2016), McMillen and Glaiel explain that *A.V.G.M.* targets *Facebook* games that encourage players to perform repetitive and boring actions in exchange for worthless rewards, such as *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) and *PetSociety* (Playfish, 2009).

A.V.G.M.'s procedural rhetoric is based on a parodic exaggeration of the number of clicks necessary to obtain a virtual item and the quantity of items that it is possible to collect in a short period of time. Unlike casual games *à-la FarmVille*, there is no rational explanation as to why and when these items pop up. They quickly become cumbersome as they pile up in a the limited space of the digital bedroom. These transformations of the genre's rule-based conventions and environment highlight the absurdity of collecting useless virtual goods. At the semantic level, the image of a switch is a clever way to literalize the "clicking" game mechanic. As for the style, the hand-drawn objects recall the aesthetic of many indie games (Juul, 2014), as opposed to *Cow Clicker*'s stylistic imitation of cute and colourful graphics from casual games. Because indie game developers are often critical of mainstream games' aesthetics, values and business models, the adoption of this style can help players to infer the critical intention of *A.V.G.M.* The inclusion of extraneous elements that would be out of place in casual games *à-la FarmVille*, such as sexual artefacts (penis, sex doll, naked woman poster, etc.), as well as the publication of *A.V.G.M.* on indie game platforms such as *Kongregate*, *Newgrounds* and *Steam* instead of *Facebook*, help in distinguishing the parody from its target.

[11] This game can be played on this website: https://www.kongregate.com/games/Edmund/avgm

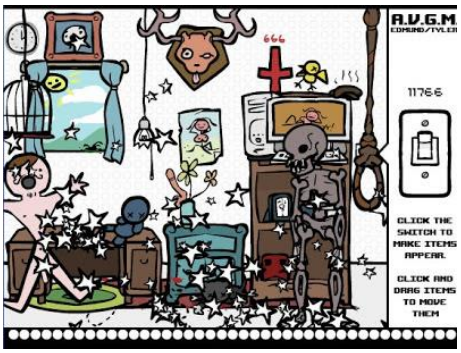

Image 4: Screenshot of *A.V.G.M.*
(Source: http://edmundmcmillen.blogspot.com/2009/02/avgm-retrospective.html)

While *A.V.G.M.* involves less risk to be confused with casual games *à-la Farmville* than *Cow Clicker*, the strong dominance of parody techniques reliant on difference, over parody techniques based on repetition, could jeopardize the identification of the parodied game genre. As for the paratext, the game's instructions "A.V.G.M. is an experimental art game and winner of 2010's IGF award for innovation. Finishing the game unlocks the game's real title" does not provide any clue about its target, but might help players to anticipate a figurative meaning. The title *Abusive Video Game Manipulation*, for its part, clarifies the critical intention of the creators, but only the few players who clicked 10,212 times on the switch will see it.

It is apparent from my analysis of 188 comments about the game, posted on the website *Kongregate*, that a majority of players did not identify the game as a parody and remained puzzled by its gameplay: "OMG whats wrong with this? This must be called a "game"? Sorry, I don't understand the "concept", my mouse will explode before "win" something here...1/5" (Flypool). This might be explained by the fact that the large majority of players gave up before completing the game and then having the occasion to read its full title, because playing it is too boring and physically painful: "641 clicks and my screen is crowded with semi-related items. I have no desire to continue. I award this game 1/5 points, and may God have mercy on your soul" (Deterodae). Some tech-savvy players used autoclickers to finish the game quickly and effortlessly, while others developed tactics to progress faster: "use 2 hands to click [...] alternately tap like this: right index, left index, right index, left middle. and repeat." (loingelf) Reaching the end of the game does not, however, guarantee the identification of the game as a parody, since the revelation of the title can be interpreted as a "you wasted your time" notice (MuphinnMix). Furthermore, the sexual artefacts that appear after a considerable number of

clicks distracted some players from the message. Indeed, many of them made remarks on the female sex doll –which eventually turns into a male sex doll– as if it were the reward of the game: "*randomly clicks around the game* Boring... *Flicks lights on and off and naked woman appears* Yeah I think I'm gonna stay" (White_Face). "EWWWWWWWWWWWW.....NAKED LADY WITH REALLY BIG BOOBS" (Ugmethesecond). "It needs about 10211 clicks to finish, weird game, and naked chick colour to naked man :(" (Dcshuzon).

Few players enjoyed the game for the digital items that it provides: "I have a noose, and a skeleton's bones, spider, voodoo doll, dead bird, computer, drapes, cross, picture frame, hand cleanser, tissues, WHAT THE F-?! I love the game!" (Landflow124). Others simply appreciated the game for the challenge of clicking 10,212 times: "the glory of finally finishing was well worth it. over 10,000 clicks Jesus Christ" (MuphinnMix). Those who read the intention of its creators on McMillen's blog seemed to have a better understanding of its criticism: "Read Edmund's blog! Before you play it!! Seriously!!!" (EPR89). Knowledge of the creators' previous games, however, helped players to accept *A.V.G.M.*'s "weirdness" more than to identify the parody: "If you've ever played any of Edmund's previous games, then you'd understand a lot of what goes on in his games. IOW, weirdness." (TheoSoft) Only a minority of players appreciated the irony of the game and interpreted it as a comment on people who like to click a button repeatedly: "umm wow!! i love how it makes you want to click it. ... although it does say more about the people that enjoy then [sic] it does about self..." (PosFeedBackCycle)

Overall, *A.V.G.M.* succeeds where *Cow Clicker* fails, and fails where *Cow Clicker* succeeds: it convinces players to stop playing the game, as it does not generate meaningful play, without provoking constructive debates around casual games *à-la FarmVille*. The effectiveness of its procedural rhetoric, based on parodic exaggeration, seems to be short-circuited by the lack of similarity between the parody and its target at the stylistic level, as well as by the publication of the parody on online platforms that are usually reserved for indie games. Most players are therefore unable to identify the target and to detect the underlying criticism.

An Analysis of *Progress Wars* and Its Reception

The parody of casual games *à-la FarmVille* entitled *Progress Wars*[12] seems to avoid the pitfalls that compromised the subversive potential of *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* Created by Jakob Skjerning in 2010, this game parody encourages the player to click repetitively on the red button "Perform mission" to set a progress bar in motion. When progress is complete, a short statement summarizes the absurd quest that was performed, such as "Annoy Thugs" or "Hijack Eggplant". Just like in *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.*, the procedural rhetoric of the game is based on parody techniques: the acceleration of the time it takes to complete a quest and, as players level-up, the exaggeration of the number of clicks necessary to progress. This game, however, mobilizes many other parody techniques at the textual and stylistic levels which seems to support the message conveyed through the game procedures. Indeed, it reiterates many elements that characterize casual games' interface, such as the icon indicating the achieved level, the progression bar, the targeted advertisements, as well as the background colour palette and design.

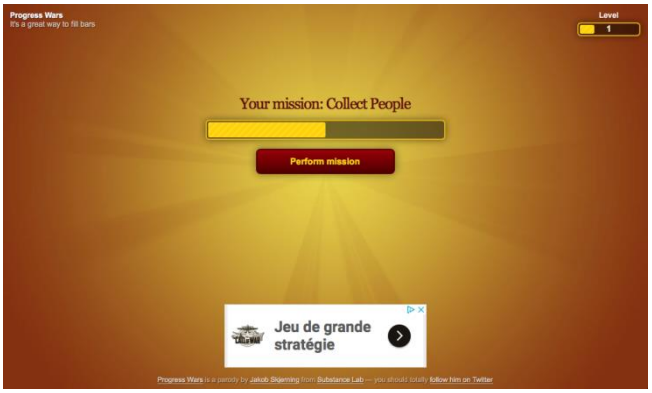

Image 3: Screenshot of *Progress Wars*

These semantic and stylistic elements contribute to the identification of the parody's target, while the magnification of the progression bar and its positioning in the middle of the screen help players to perceive the game as a parody. The fact that the game is stripped of all elements that make casual games attractive, such as cute characters, animals or anthropomorphic objects, minimizes the risk of confusing the parody with its target, and of enjoying playing the parody. The publication of *Progress Wars* on an independent website, rather than on *Facebook*, also contributes to differentiate it from the parodied genre. In comparison to *Cow Clicker* and

[12] This parody can be played on the website: http://www.progresswars.com

A.V.G.M., *Progress Wars* exploits better the interplay between repetition and difference that characterizes the *modus operandi* of genre parodies. It also includes more clues in its paratexts: the title reminds one of the social game *Mafia Wars*, while literalizing the gameplay element of progression. The subtitles "Watching progress bars change has never been this much fun" or "It's a great way to fill bars", as well as the statement "Progress Wars is a parody" showing at the bottom of the screen, clearly state the parodic intent of the creator. Moreover, links towards the *Twitter* account and the website of the creator appear at the bottom of the screen for players who want to comment on the game or learn more about the intention behind it. When *Progress Wars* was released, in March 2010, it was possible to read the following explanation on Skjerning's website[13] .

> I have analyzed popular Facebook games and distilled their enticing gameplay into their core game mechanics. What's left is only the stuff that makes a game like Mafia Wars tick – none of the fluff. The result is Progress Wars.Progress Wars is the result of a lazy Sunday and a desire to point out the pointlessness of many casual games.

For all these reasons, *Progress Wars* seems to have a higher critical potential than *Cow Clicker* or *A.V.G.M.,* and a better chance of successfully communicating its criticism, as demonstrated by the reactions of players and journalists. 24-hours after its release, 27,000 people had visited the game's website.[14] According to its creator, this unexpected traffic was probably due to the fact that *Progress Wars* was reported in the weblogs *Metafilter*[15] and *Boing Boing*[16], as well as in the Internet Media *BuzzFeed*[17]. Journalist Neil Vidyarthi (2010), from *Adweek*, said:

> While social games like Mafia Wars tend to allow us to live out the fantasy of being a kingpin mobster, the truth is that a lot of the action consists of clicking through task bars. This game is a parody of that […] Jakob works for a company called Substance Labs, and likely created this to demonstrate that social games involve a lot of clicking.

Mike Fahey, from *Kotaku*, made a similar remark about the game:

[13] https://mentalized.net/journal/2010/03/15/introducing-progress-wars/
[14] https://mentalized.net/journal/2010/03/22/progress-wars-followup/
[15] https://www.metafilter.com/90137/Watching-progress-bars-change-has-never-been-this-much-fun,
[16] https://boingboing.net/2010/03/16/progress-wars-grindi.html
[17] https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/scott/progress-wars

> Progress Wars pokes fun at popular Facebook applications, distilling the gameplay down to its simplest level. If you feel ridiculous clicking just to watch a progress meter fill, then perhaps you should reconsider that farm you've been cultivating these past few months.

In the discussion thread of *Metafilter*, players often compared *Progress Wars* to its predecessor *Progress Quest* (Fredricksen, 2002); a game parody that runs its own course, as soon as the players are done creating their characters, to mock repetitive actions that we sometimes have to perform in MMORPGs like *EverQuest* (Sony, 1999) in order to get better equipment. Several references were also made to *FarmVille* and other *Facebook* games. Most players were therefore clearly aware of the game's parodic intent and target. The use, in several players' tweets[18], of exclamation points and of expresions such as "gem" (GeSignIT) and "twisted genius" (Dickon Laws) to qualify the game also indicates that they discerned the irony of the parody and joined in on the joke. For some players, the game also raised thoughts about simplistic game design: "When I think of #gamification I remind myself of @mentalizer's progresswars.com - need to have challenge + meaning, not just game mechanics." (Esteban Contreras)

Because it is difficult to interpret the meaning of 160-character tweets or posts, a reception study would be a worthwhile undertaking to confirm my assumption about the success of this parody criticism. Despite this apparent success, the absence of a dedicated comment section linked to this game did not favour deeper discussions and debates around casual games *à-la FarmVille* like Bogost's blog and Kongregate's forum did.

Discussion About the Subversive Potential of Casual Game Parodies

If we consider that these three parodies target oversimplistic, recurrent and manipulative game mechanics, mobilized by multibillionaire companies to maximize profit while minimizing risks, it becomes tempting to conceive them as a regenerative and subversive force within the casual game industry. By exaggerating the repetitive gameplay and behavioural reward systems of casual games *à-la FarmVille*, these parodies seem like creative ways to show how shallow and manipulative they are, as well as to encourage casual game designers to break the mould and

[18] https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=progresswars&src=typd

innovate. Because these parodies attack the conventions of a video game genre and the market ideology that encourages their repetition, without placing themselves on a pedestal, they seem to have a relevant political function. The *différance* between these parodies and their target allows them to deconstruct the model of casual games *à-la FarmVille* by showing that they are all, somehow, parodies because of the imitative nature of their mechanics. From that perspective, *Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress Wars* appear as what Foucault (2004) calls "points of resistance" or what De Certeau (1980) calls "tactics": they provide tools for people who are not in a position of power to operate within and against the powerful genre system of the casual game industry.

These three parodies are, however, not equally subversive. While they all rely on a similar procedural rhetoric, based on parodic imitation and exaggeration of the "clicking" game mechanic, their subversive potential also depends on other parody techniques at the semantic and stylistic levels that each of them mobilizes differently, as well as on clues provided in their respective paratexts. We saw that the critical potential of *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* is not always realized by their players. In the first case, players often interpret the parody as just another casual game *à-la FarmVille* while, in the second case, players do not always identify the target. We also saw that these two parodies fail to create a perfect balance between elements that pinpoint the targeted genre and elements that differentiate the parody from it. This could partly be explained by the fact that their textual and visual elements do not perfectly complement their procedural rhetoric in a way that would reinforce its subversive potential.

In light of these observations, it seems legitimate to nuance Bogost's theory on procedural rhetoric. Even though he admits that visual, verbal or written rhetoric are often at work in video games, Bogost (2007) considers procedural rhetoric as a more sophisticated and efficient technique to provoke significant long-term social change. While casual game parodies do not entirely throw into question the idea of persuading through gameplay, their mixed reception demonstrates that textual and visual elements can interfere with the message conveyed by procedures. When it comes to game parody, relying solely on procedural rhetoric to convey a message efficiently therefore seems like a risky undertaking. The mixed reception of *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* should also encourage game scholars who value procedural complexity, and consider that game mechanics and algorithms are more significant to the players' experience than representation, fiction or narration, to nuance their position. It should incite

them to perceive visual, textual or written rhetoric not as alternative or supplemental to procedural rhetoric, but rather as complementary and correlative.

If we consider that these parodies not only target simplistic and manipulative game mechanics, but also mock (intentionally or not) the predominant feminine audience who plays casual games and who remains, to this day, marginalized in the gaming culture, it becomes harder to allocate a subversive force to them. As many feminist scholars highlighted (Anable; 2013; Vanderhoef, 2013, Consalvo, 2009), casual games like *FarmVille* are widely denigrated and considered to be culturally insignificant, not only because they are associated with procrastination, passivity or work, but also because they are associated with women. Indeed, the casual game audience has historically been the only segment of the gamer population that is mostly composed of women.[19] The casual/hardcore dichotomy has therefore been organized around gender binaries: casual games have been paired with femininity, and opposed to hardcore games and masculinity.While it is true that the overall gamer population has diversified over the past few years and gained a solid female player base, the masculine hardcore gamer identity remains the norm and is still celebrated, while the female casual gamer is perceived as a variation to the norm and denigrated (Kubik in Vanderhoef, 2013).

As John Vanderhoef (2013) shows in his article "Casual Threats: The feminization of Casual Video Games", discourses about casual games, produced by journalists, industry professionals and marketing teams, contributed to the "othering" and the "feminization" of casual games, by associating them with the mother figure or with emotions for instance. As a result, men who play casual games are not encouraged to talk about it. This also led to a cultural hierarchy between the hardcore and the casual in which the latter is positioned as inferior: "Feminized casual games become insignificant, frivolous, and a waste of time and money as opposed to masculinized hardcore games, which are viewed as important, serious, and worthy of investment." (Vanderhoef, 2013) As Vanderhoef (2013) explains, "the casual space is defined negatively by a lack of hardcore gaming qualities" such as photorealistic graphics, complex storylines and challenging interactions, while casual gamers are defined by their lack of gaming

[19] According to a surve conducted in 2006, 71 percent of the casual games audience is female and most of these players are over the age of 35. Another survey, made by Jesper Juul in 2010, shows that up to 93 percent of casual gamers might be female (Vanderhoef, 2013).

literacy, as well as their lack of desire for violence and sexuality. In addition to being considered as culturally irrelevant, casual games are sometimes perceived as a threat by players who fear that they will replace the typical hardcore games they enjoy, and that casual gamers will destroy the traditional gamer identity[20] (Vanderhoef, 2013).

According to Anable (2013) and Consalvo (2009, p. 50), it is therefore not a coincidence if the game industry, the popular press and the academia rarely ascribe cultural meaning to casual games and fail to acknowledge that casual gamers can also be devoted fans who produce game culture in their own way. Yet, Consalvo (2009) demonstrates, in her article "Hardcore Casual: Game Culture *Return(s) to Ravenhearst*", that casual gamers also share hints about games, complain about glitches, discuss storylines on forums, create paratexts such as reviews, fan fictions and walkthroughs, and acquire gaming capital when they do so. People who are considered as "casual gamers" are therefore not as casual and different from mainstream gamers as we might have expected: they are deeply invested in different activities surrounding the games and form closely- knit communities of players who help each other.

Assumptions about casual games prevented journalists and scholars from perceiving their cultural relevance. Casual games such as *Diner Dash*, for example, were seen as a kitsch and overly sentimental celebration of the Protestant work ethic[21] (Bogost, 2011) or as a insignificant distraction from more serious pursuits such as work (Anderson, 2012 cited by Anable, 2013). Yet, Anable (2013) demonstrates that they can also be interpreted as a "tactical response to our conditions of labor." When played at work, they can be considered as a way for players to gain more personal leisure time in a service-based economy where the time and space of labour have increasingly infiltrated the private time and space of leisure. When casual games are only interpreted in terms of immaterial labour, it becomes hard to see that they mobilize affects about our relationship to work, and that their conflation of work and play is what makes them appealing to women who constantly have to juggle shifts at work and at home (Chess in Anable, 2013). When their simplistic mechanics are quickly dismissed, it becomes difficult to see that

[20] As Shaw specifies, the gamer identity has always been fragile because geeks were for a long time infantilized, emasculated and stigmatized from the mainstream culture (cited in Vanderhoef, 2013).
[21] Sentimentality has historically been associated to femininity and depreciated.

the repetitive clicks –allowing players to perform complex actions such as harvesting a field– actually transform our relationship to the digital device on which we work daily.[22]

From a social constructivist perspective, what is considered as a "game" is a social construct, not a natural fact. In the same vein, "one is not born a gamer, but becomes one"[23] (Shaw, 2013). Because casual games do not require a gaming system, gaming skill or procedural complexity, and because they are repetitive and easy, they challenge our perception of what is considered as a game and what is considered a gamer. Without saying that they are radical or progressive media forms, Anable (2013) reminds us that they "animate a different structure of feeling" than other types of video games, and that setting aside our biases towards them allows to perceive their cultural significance and pertinence.

While the parodies analyzed in the present article are not sexist per se and do not highlight the feminine attributes of casual games or associate them with women, they remain blind to these considerations. As Deterding (2016) mentions, their "*reductio ad absurdum* of progress mechanics" sends the underlying message that these mechanics do not involve "real" skills and cannot be made for "real" gamers. We can therefore ask ourselves if these parodies risk to reinforce binaries between hardcore "real" gamers and casual "fake" gamers. We can even fear that they consolidate stereotypes about women casual players and involuntarily contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities in the gaming culture. From that perspective, their subversive potential seems to be compromised.

If these parodies did ever have a subversive potential at the time of their creation, that seems to be less certain in 2019. A few years after the release of *Cow Clicker*, Julien "Orteil" Thiennot released the game parody *Cookie Clicker* (2013) in which players can click on cookies to bake them, and eventually buy resources (grandmas, farms, factories, etc.) that automatically bake the cookies much faster. At that point, the players can just "sit back, rest their fingers, and watch batch after batch of fresh cookies roll in." (Sankin; 2014) *Cookie Clicker* gained over 50,000 players in the first few hours and was described as "the most addictive new game on the

[22] According to Anable (2013), the frenetic clicking of the player lays bare the time we spend and the hard work we accomplish on our digital devices "when we move from one window to another, negotiating the different languages, rules, and logics of the different software programs that we are using." It unmasks the fact that our everyday work with digital tools is not only an experience of ease, efficiency, and flow, but also an experience of exhausting "pauses, breakdowns, interruptions, eruptions, and glitches."

[23] This sentence is a twist on Simone De Beauvoir's famous quote: "one is not born a woman, but becomes one."

Internet." (Sankin, 2014). According to the Marxist interpretation of Sankin (2014), this game illustrates "someone's class transition from labor to capital."

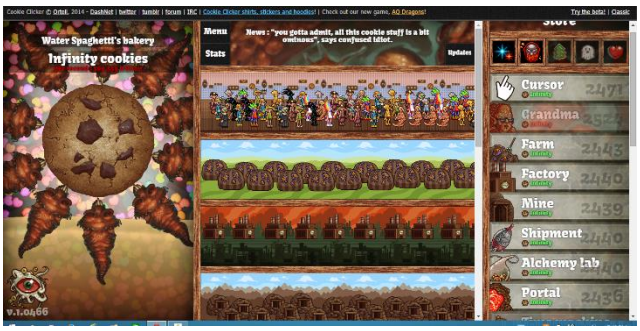

Image 5: Screenshot of *Cookie Clicker*
(Source: http://cookieclicker.wikia.com/wiki/File:HELP.png)

For Bogost (2016), *Cookie Clicker* is the "logical conclusion of *Cow Clicker*": by allowing the player to bake cookies without even playing the game, it brings his concept to the next level.

However, the release of *Cookie Clicker* spawned many clones that simply copied its program code and replaced the cookies with other items such as sushi. As Deterding (2016) mentions, these "fully serious, highly polished, freemium-monetized games", like "Clicker Heroes" (Playsaurus, 2014), "Make it Rain: Love of Money" (Space Inch, 2014), or "AdVenture Capitalist" (Hyper Hippo, 2015), "capitalized" on the success of game parodies and contributed to their normalization. In this context, parody seems to be used as a pretext to repeat trivial game mechanics in order to achieve instant success and make a profit. What Dan Harries says about Hollywood film parody can therefore apply to casual game parody: "Its discursive standardization has, in fact, contributed to its own canonization and secured a relatively easy co-option by a market economy oh-so-eager to capitalize on 'radical' iconicity." (2000, p. 130) No matter how well designed they are, parodies of casual games *à-la Farmville* seem to have lost their subversive appeal along the way. As they have multiplied, they have in fact evolved into a video game genre currently called "incremental games", "idle games" or "clicker games".[24] Described as games that provide a low-pressure experience, constant positive feedback, and growth with minimal interaction (Pecorella, 2015), or as games characterized by a currency (or number) that increases at an accelerated rate with little or no effort on the player's part (King,

[24] The proliferation of clones modelled after a successful game often marks the beginning of a genre crystallization process, at the end of which a generic label is created (Arsenault, 2009). For example, many clones of *Doom* (id Software, 1993) flooded the game industry before the label "first-person shooter" started to be employed by players and journalists.

2015), these games are currently enjoyed by millions of players for their own sake, as shown by the articles "Numbers Getting Bigger: What Are Incremental Games, and Why Are They Fun" (Alexander, 2015) and "Clicker Games Are Suddenly Everywhere On Steam" (Grayson, 2015). As Deterding explains (2016): "What started as an artistic inversion of game design conventions to demarcate the boundary of "real" games resulted in a sub-genre expanding rather than delimiting the category." Casual game parodies therefore had the opposite effect of what their creators might have expected.

The fact that they developed into a genre confirms what many scholars have said about the evolution of parodies from subversive tools to canons:

> [P]arody may have moved from being a potential paradigm of modern aesthetic form to being a cliché. Parody seems, to many, to have ceased being a way to new forms, as the Russian formalists believed, and to have become – ironically – a model of the prevailing norm. (Hutcheon, 1985: 28)

This also illustrates Foucault's theory according to which "points of resistance" are often normalized and reintegrated into the system instead of strategically "swarming" to provoke a revolution (2004, p. 621). Today, it has become almost impossible to distinguish critical casual game parodies from idle games that were created to be enjoyed for their own sake and to make profit. Even *Cow Clicker* is now referred to as an incremental game on *Wikipedia,* while many casual games are called "parodies" because of their clone-driven mode of production (Zimmerman in Juul, 2010, p. 101). In this environment saturated with imitation, irony, and endless self-referential loops, can we still expect people to play casual game parodies ironically?

Conclusion

In this article, I analyzed three parodies (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*) which mock the simplistic challenges and behavioural reward system of casual games like *FarmVille* with the help of a procedural rhetoric based on the imitation and transformation of the clicking game mechanic. I examined their visual elements, gameplay, and paratexts to evaluate their critical potential and concluded that *Cow Clicker* and *A.V.G.M.* do not achieve a perfect balance between parody techniques that are based on repetition and those that are based on difference, which increases the risk of misinterpretation and compromises the clarity of their criticism. The

analysis of comments posted by their players on forums, blogs and articles, for its part, revealed that many players do not detect the irony of these parodies or do not identify their target. *Progress Wars*, for its part, exploits more efficiently the parodic interplay between repetition and difference, and this seems to have facilitated the comprehension of its criticism among the players. These analyses led me to nuance Bogost's theory on procedural rhetoric and to argue that it should be complemented by adequate visual and textual rhetoric to be effective. Because the tendency to denigrate casual games and the people who play them is partly symptomatic of the gaming culture's blatant sexism, I also questioned the subversive force of casual game parodies which indirectly mock a segment of the player population that has been marginalized: women. I finally developed the idea that casual game parodies lost their subversive appeal since they proliferated and evolved into a video game genre.

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Résumé : Cet article analyse trois parodies vidéoludiques (*Cow Clicker*, *A.V.G.M.* et *Progress War*) se moquant des défis simplistes et du système de récompense behavioral des jeux occasionnels à la *FarmVille.* À la lumière de théories sur la parodie, leurs éléments visuels, leurs mécaniques de jeu et leurs paratextes sont examinés de sorte à évaluer leur potentiel critique. La centaine de commentaires formulés par leurs joueurs sur des blogues et forums démontrent pour leur part qu'un bon nombre d'entre eux ne décèlent pas l'ironie de ces parodies ou ne parviennent pas à identifier leur cible. Dans la section discussion, la théorie de Bogost sur l'efficacité de la rhétorique procédurale est alors nuancée à partir de l'idée qu'une rhétorique visuelle ou textuelle doit l'appuyer pour qu'elle fonctionne. L'article remet par ailleurs en question la force subversive des parodies à l'étude en soulignant le fait qu'elles ne dénigrent pas seulement les mécaniques simplistes et manipulatrices des jeux occasionnels, mais aussi les joueuses à qui ces jeux s'adressent principalement et qui sont encore, à ce jour, marginalisées dans la culture vidéoludique. L'article développe enfin l'idée que les parodies de jeux occasionnels à la *FarmVille* ont perdu leur potentiel subversif depuis qu'elles ont proliféré et évolué vers un genre vidéoludique dénué de toute intention critique appelée « clicker games », « idle games » ou « incremental games ».

Mots-clés: jeu vidéo, genre, parodie, jeu occasionnel, joueur occasionnel, FarmVille, jeu incrémental, joueuse

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Amour et haine de la marche : Évolution et cristallisation discursives sur le *walking simulator*

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Résumé : Le *walking simulator* fait l'objet d'une profonde controverse au sein des communautés de jeu. Ses détracteurs rejettent sa valeur et même sa place dans le paysage vidéoludique alors que ses défenseurs ne s'entendent pas sur la légitimité de son étiquette dénigrante. Ce texte se tâche d'historiciser l'émergence du *walking simulator* à l'aide d'une analyse discursive de quatre communautés vidéoludiques : les joueurs, les instances marketing, les concepteurs et la presse spécialisée. L'étude relève l'évolution et la cristallisation d'usages, significations et fonctions prévalentes de la dénomination « walking simulator » dans le paysage vidéoludique.

Mots-clefs : walking simulator ; genre de jeux vidéo ; analyse discursive ; Dear Esther ; DayZ.

Abstract in English at the end of the article

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Il semble y avoir dans les dernières années un accroissement de jeux vidéo étiquetés « walking simulator » ;[1] une expression saugrenue qui ne fait pas l'unanimité chez les communautés vidéoludiques, comme l'a déjà documenté la presse spécialisée. Un article d'intérêt sur la question est « Is It Time to Stop Using the Term "Walking Simulator" » de la revue en ligne Kill Screen (2016) consacrée à l'actualité et la culture des jeux vidéo. L'article présente un sondage réalisé auprès de journalistes et de concepteurs dont les jeux sont associés à l'expression controversée, réunissant un total de 26 opinions. Parmi les plus optimistes, on remarque que le terme « walking simulator » permet de s'entendre collectivement sur ce quoi il réfère et on défend la possibilité de se le réapproprier pour affirmer les valeurs positives de la marche en jeu vidéo. Chez les opposants de l'appellation, on avance que « walking simulator » relève plutôt de la condescendance, agit en tant que descripteur imprécis et réducteur, et cherche à marginaliser un type d'expérience de manière à l'exclure de la culture vidéoludique dominante.

En tant que genre vidéoludique, le *walking simulator* porte effectivement un nom peu représentatif au premier abord. Un exemple canonique, *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room et Briscoe, 2012), ne consiste pas à « simuler » la marche à proprement dit. Le joueur n'a qu'à appuyer sur la touche « W » de son clavier pour avancer dans un espace en 3D, ce qui n'a rien à voir avec le réalisme actionnel et la complexité systémique de jeux comme les simulateurs de vol. En contrepartie, *Dear Esther* propose la marche comme unique moyen de locomotion, imbriqué dans une modalité actionnelle relevant de ce que Dor et Perron (2014, p. 183-4) appellent une implémentation triviale, c'est-à-dire de manipulations qui ne requièrent pas d'habiletés particulières. Une lente promenade ne demande certes pas les habiletés sensori-motrices de l'habituelle course des jeux de plateforme ou d'action, et les autres possibilités d'action du jeu, la rotation du point de vue et le léger zoom avant, ne sont pas plus exigeantes. Le joueur de *Dear Esther* doit simplement accomplir le trajet relativement linéaire d'une île abandonnée au cœur de ce qui semble être l'archipel des Hébrides. Ce parcours est ponctué d'une narration sporadique et cryptique en voix *off*, qui consiste en la récitation de lettres destinées à Esther par le protagoniste, dans lesquelles ce dernier partage une profonde détresse et raconte l'histoire de l'île et ses anciens habitants. La promenade solitaire s'accompagne aussi

[1] Dans ce texte, l'expression « walking simulator » est parfois mise en italique, d'autres fois entre guillemets. Dans le premier cas, elle désigne un jeu ou un ensemble de jeux lui correspondant ; dans le deuxième cas, elle souligne un simple fait de discours. Le terme anglais est préféré aux traductions « simulateur de marche » ou « simulation de promenade », encore trop marginales dans le discours des communautés francophones de jeu vidéo, en plus de ne pas rendre compte de pratiques langagières spécifiquement anglophones (relatées plus loin à la section 2.).

de la découverte d'une variété d'objets et symboles dispersés dans l'environnement — des formules moléculaires peintes sur les parois des rochers et des bâtiments délabrés, des morceaux de carrosserie entassés sur le sol, des chandelles allumées disposées méticuleusement au bord des sentiers, l'échographie d'un fœtus à l'intérieur d'une maison en ruine, etc. — qui renseignent tous indirectement sur les circonstances du drame que vit le monologueur. À travers cette marche contemplative, le joueur est amené à interpréter les liens incertains qui unissent l'histoire de l'île à celle du narrateur. Aucun objectif ne lui est explicité. Aucune menace ne lui barre la route.

À partir de cet exemple, on peut induire un certain type d'expérience peu conventionnel qu'indique l'appellation « walking simulator ». Cependant, sans se référer au contexte discursif du genre et aux emplois réels de l'étiquette, il est difficile de déchiffrer les raisons d'être de celle-ci et de saisir la profonde division qu'elle suscite. Pour obtenir un portrait discursif à propos du *walking simulator*, il faut examiner les connotations et fonctions que l'expression peut prendre chez chacune des communautés vidéoludiques, retracer les possibles évolutions et cristallisations de son usage, en plus de vérifier les jeux vidéo qu'elle désigne et se familiariser avec les expériences que ces objets offrent. Poursuivant ses objectifs, ce texte s'appuiera sur une analyse des discours sur et autour de l'étiquette en question au sein de plateformes de discussion, d'actualité et de vente en ligne dédiées au jeu vidéo. La documentation récoltée dévoilera deux significations principales qu'incarne l'appellation « walking simulator » : (1) un qualificatif sarcastique destiné aux jeux vidéo ennuyants, qui proposent des expériences si passives que le statut de jeu leur est contesté ; (2) et une dénomination générique qui se rattache à un ensemble d'objets plus spécifiques, ayant fait tout de même élever quelques voix dissidentes en raison de la résonance de la première signification.

Ce travail est crucial pour saisir la dimension générique du *walking simulator* ; dimension qui n'a toujours pas reçu d'attention sérieuse dans les écrits réalisés sur ce corpus.[2] Effectivement, en aucun cas ceux-ci ne s'appuient sur un cadre théorique tiré d'études génériques ou ne

[2] C'est entre autres cette constatation qui a motivé la création du projet de baladodiffusion universitaire *Profil ludique* < https://soundcloud.com/profil-ludique > par Hugo Montembeault et moi-même. En cours depuis septembre 2017, *Profil ludique* cherche à dresser le portrait du *walking simulator*, à dégager ses filiations ainsi qu'à repérer ses disséminations dans le paysage vidéoludique et ailleurs. En date du 8 mars 2019, 14 épisodes d'une durée moyenne d'environ deux heures ont été produits. Ce présent texte a donc été construit en parallèle à ce projet et s'est nourri des passionnantes réflexions émises par ses participants (auditeurs y compris). J'en profite pour remercier avec gratitude ces personnes et spécialement mon coanimateur, l'admirable Hugo Montembeault.

recourent à une analyse discursive, bien que le genre soit aujourd'hui compris comme provenant des discours populaires (e.g. Moine 2005, Arsenault 2011, Therrien 2015). Même lorsqu'ils reconnaissent les débats à propos du *walking simulator*, ces textes consistent plutôt à isoler des jeux associés (parfois à tort) au genre pour décortiquer leur jouabilité (*playability* ; Leino 2014), leur tradition esthétique (Juul 2018, Carbo-Mascarell 2016), leurs thèmes de design (Muscat 2016), ou leurs formes (Grabarczyk 2016). Tel qu'il sera justifié davantage à la prochaine section, une approche générique concède aux récurrences formelles un rôle subordonné aux faits culturels. Ce n'est qu'en se concentrant sur le discours qu'il sera possible d'historiciser l'émergence du *walking simulator* et les controverses relatives à sa place dans le paysage vidéoludique et à la connotation de son étiquette.

Après avoir établi les assises théoriques et méthodologiques sur lequel cette recherche se fond, le rapport de quatre communautés vidéoludiques à l'étiquette « walking simulator » sera présenté. La mise en parallèle des discours jettera un éclairage sur l'évolution de l'appellation et la multiplicité d'usages et connotations qu'elle matérialise. La fin de texte sera réservée pour préciser la fonction communicationnelle de « walking simulator » et spéculer sur la viabilité de l'expression.

1. Le genre comme phénomène discursif

Les premières études sur les genres du jeu vidéo comportent surtout des préoccupations ludologiques, c'est-à-dire qu'elles prennent en compte des critères propres au jeu pour déterminer ses genres, comme l'interactivité (Wolf 2001, Apperley 2006), les mécaniques (Järvinen 2008), les styles de jouabilité (Carr, Buckingham, Burn et Schott 2006), ou les critères de succès (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith et Tosca, 2008). Dans leur tentative à raffiner la classification des genres, ces travaux se distancient des discours populaires pour théoriser le genre indépendamment de ses fonctions culturelles. Par exemple, la taxonomie de 42 genres créée par Mark J.P. Wolf (2001) comprend des dénominations génériques surprenantes, probablement inutilisées par les communautés vidéoludiques, telles que « dodging », « capturing », « utility », « target », « obstacle course », et bien d'autres. En délimitant un nombre de genres existants et d'étiquettes génériques valides, les typologies de genre s'invoquent comme autorité, alors qu'elles évacuent le discours populaire et présentent des catégories structurelles arbitraires.

Dominic Arsenault démontre dans sa thèse de doctorat (2011) que le genre est un « phénomène discursif », car il se façonne sans cesse à travers les échanges à l'intérieur des communautés de jeu, résistant ainsi aux catégorisations fixes et étanches. Personne n'a donc l'autorité de délimiter un genre sans se rapporter à ce que Arsenault désigne, à la suite de Andrew Tudor (1974), comme la « cristallisation temporaire d'un consensus culturel commun » (p. 333-4). Autrement dit, cela signifie qu'aucun chercheur ne peut inventer un genre ou associer un genre à un jeu d'une époque qui le prédate. C'est également ce que signale Raphaëlle Moine en définissant le genre au cinéma comme « acte de naissance postdaté », c'est-à-dire qu'il :

> n'apparaît que lorsqu'il est nommé et désigné comme tel, puisque son existence est liée à la conscience, partagée et consensuelle, qu'une communauté en a. Ainsi, la première occurrence du genre n'est-elle pas à chercher, rétrospectivement, dans les films qui correspondent à la catégorie établie a posteriori, mais dans les discours tenus sur les films (2005, p. 122).

Attribuer la paternité d'un genre à un jeu, autant qu'à un film, en l'identifiant comme le premier d'une lignée formelle comporte son lot de risques, particulièrement si les discours des communautés de l'époque ont été ignorés. Carl Therrien (2015) remarque que l'omission étymologique des étiquettes génériques, telles qu'utilisées contextuellement par les communautés discursives, a mené les universitaires à maintenir un regard rétrospectif sur le genre du jeu de tir à la première personne, arrêtant sa genèse à *DOOM* (id Software, 1993), alors que l'expression remonte à plus loin, possède de multiples sources et hybridités, et s'est mise à désigner progressivement l'œuvre phare de id Software seulement dans la deuxième moitié des années 90 chez la presse spécialisée, soit des années après sa sortie. Arsenault, Moine et Therrien pointent vers l'importance pour une étude des genres de documenter la terminologie avec laquelle les communautés vidéoludiques tentent de catégoriser des objets et qualifier leur expérience.

Sous cet angle, l'analyse de discours est une solution adaptée au phénomène du genre. La notion de discours est comprise ici au sens où Jay Lemke l'entend, c'est-à-dire à un niveau plus abstrait et structurel que le texte : « When we want to focus on the specifics of an event or occasion, we speak of the text; when we want to look at patterns, commonality, relationships that embrace different texts and occasions, we can speak of discourses » (dans Wodak 2008, p. 6). Le même discours peut se réaliser dans une pluralité de textes à travers la récurrence

d'une rhétorique, d'un vocabulaire ou de valeurs. Un discours est actualisé par le texte et entre autres déterminé par la communauté de laquelle il est issu. Selon Patricia Bizzell, une communauté discursive est liée par des pratiques de langage partagées, organisées par des conventions stylistiques et des connaissances canoniques (1992, p. 222). Bien que le genre possède une fonction communicationnelle qui bénéficie à toutes les communautés vidéoludiques, c'est-à-dire qu'il est utilisé pour référer à des formes, thèmes et actions typiques connus des initiés, il sera approché de différentes manières selon les sous-collectivités : les universitaires chercheront à systématiser le phénomène sous les contraintes de leur méthode et cadre théorique ; les instances marketing à s'adresser à un public cible pour mieux leur vendre un produit ; les critiques à partager leur expérience et leur appréciation d'un objet ; les amateurs à débattre des meilleurs jeux de leur catégorie respective, etc. Une analyse de discours doit donc tenir compte des conventions propres à chacune des communautés : même si celles-ci peuvent recourir à une même étiquette, elles peuvent aussi bien en faire un usage différent.

2. Méthodologie

La présente étude de discours tire son corpus de la période de 2012 à 2018 chez les communautés anglophones des joueurs, concepteurs, instances marketing et de la presse spécialisée œuvrant dans le domaine vidéoludique.[3] Le choix de cette période se justifie par la sortie officielle en 2012 de *Dear Esther*, que la communauté journalistique désigne aujourd'hui comme étant le premier *walking simulator*. Puisque ce genre demeure un phénomène récent et relativement marginal, le corpus s'arrête aux plateformes anglophones de vente, d'actualité et de discussion en ligne spécialisées en jeu vidéo. Cette délimitation permet en outre de pouvoir rendre compte de pratiques langagières plus spécifiques aux communautés anglophones, qui font parfois précéder avec humour à « simulator » un verbe d'action ou un sujet typique d'un jeu — par exemple, *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014), *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios, 2013), ou encore le qualificatif « Michael Bay simulator » que donnent certains à *Just Cause 3* (Avalanche Studios, 2015) pour décrire le spectacle de destruction constitutif du jeu, rappelant celui des films d'action du réalisateur.

[3] Il sera tout à fait pertinent d'inclure dans une recherche ultérieure la communauté des universitaires. Ici, le discours de cette dernière n'a pas été considéré pour plusieurs raisons, notamment : son faible bassin de textes, sa distance prise sur les débats autour du *walking simulator* et la priorité accordée aux discours populaires qu'implique une approche générique.

Étant donné que des conventions propres à chaque communauté régissent le discours, la signification de l'étiquette « walking simulator » ne pourra être généralisée à toutes les sous-collectivités, d'où l'importance de les séparer. Pour ce faire, il est préférable de cibler des espaces d'expression dédiés à des communautés discursives précises. Pour chacun de ces espaces d'expression, une recherche avec le mot-clef « walking simulator » et ses variantes (« walking sims », « walking simulation », etc.) a permis de recenser 177 commentaires de joueurs, textes de journalistes et concepteurs ainsi que paratextes de jeux vidéo pertinents à l'étude. L'analyse discursive a été motivée par l'interprétation profonde des significations de l'étiquette, donc par un souci de profondeur plutôt que de quantité. Cela signifie que pour chaque résultat, le contexte dans lequel l'expression apparaît, que ce soit celui de la pratique discursive ou de la discussion générale, a été considéré dans l'analyse. Ainsi, celle-ci s'est bonifiée par la détection d'informations complémentaires, comme des qualificatifs gravitant autour de l'appellation et des termes de remplacement, qui l'ont renseignée davantage sur les divergences d'attitudes. Un usage et un contexte (parfois plusieurs) ont été attribués à chaque matériel récolté afin d'être en mesure de déceler des tendances et récurrences dans le discours sur le *walking simulator*.

Les sections « discussions » de trois titres emblématiques de l'étiquette, soit *Dear Esther*, *Dear Esther : Landmark Edition* (The Chinese Room et Briscoe, 2016) et *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive Studio, 2013), sur la plateforme de vente Steam ont composé le corpus de discours de la communauté des joueurs. Ces sections sont notamment utilisées pour poser des questions, exprimer des critiques, offrir des suggestions, partager des anecdotes, dire des plaisanteries, et plus. Tandis que *Dear Esther* est reconnu pour être à l'origine du *walking simulator*, *DayZ* est aussi associé à cette expression malgré sa grande disparité formelle avec lui, tel qu'il sera détaillé à la partie 3.1. En désignant deux objets dissemblables, l'étiquette a semblé dévoiler aux prémices de cette recherche une pluralité de significations, ce qui a justifié leur intégration au corpus. Pour *Dayz*, 68 des 338 entrées « walking simulator » ont été retenues, en sélectionnant le premier et dernier fil de discussion des 34 pages résultant de la recherche du mot-clef afin d'obtenir un corpus analysable en détail. Suivant son traitement, 64 commentaires pertinents ont été préservés. Pour *Dear Esther* et sa version remastérisée de 2016, la somme totale des 34 fils de discussion à leur sujet (27 pour le premier, 7 pour le dernier) a mené à l'identification de 44 commentaires contenant « walking simulator » et autres termes voisins.

La communauté des concepteurs de jeu a requis le dépouillement d'un corpus provenant d'une autre plateforme, où ces derniers peuvent témoigner d'une manière plus personnelle. Consacré au développement de jeux vidéo, le site web Gamasutra accorde la parole aux concepteurs dans des entrevues, mais aussi dans des textes d'opinion et bilans rétrospectifs écrits de leur main, souvent à l'intention de leurs pairs. Le mot-clef « walking simulator » a produit dans la barre de recherche du site web 95 résultats. Parmi ceux-ci, 20 textes prenant l'une des trois formes précédentes contiennent au moins un passage où un concepteur discute de son propre jeu, désigné par lui-même ou par l'interviewer comme « walking simulator ».

Le discours des instances marketing a été distingué de celui des concepteurs en raison de leur rhétorique et intention différentes : les premiers veulent attiser la curiosité envers leur produit alors que les derniers, notamment sur Gamasutra, auront tendance à revenir rétrospectivement sur le parcours de leur jeu et leur propre démarche créative. La section accordée à la description de produits sur la page de vente Steam de *walking simulators* a permis de circonscrire un discours spécifique à la communauté marketing. Afin d'établir si le discours en question concerne réellement un *walking simulator* selon le consensus commun, la recherche de jeux vidéo s'est faite à l'aide de listes préassemblées par des amateurs du genre et de l'outil SteamSpy, qui dénombre les « tags » que les joueurs ont assignés à un jeu et les votes pour chacun d'eux. Selon la plateforme Steam : « Les tags les plus populaires seront utilisés pour déterminer des catégories et permettront à chacun de découvrir de nouveaux produits, genres, thématiques et caractéristiques que vous [les utilisateurs] définirez avec l'ensemble de la communauté » (Steam, s.d.). Plus bas sur la même page, dans la partie « foire aux questions », il est précisé que les tags peuvent même prédominer les suggestions initiales de l'équipe de jeu, la valeur d'un descripteur étant reliée ainsi à l'autorité des joueurs. Alors que Steam n'affiche pas le total de votes derrière chaque tag, SteamSpy accède à des données autrement invisibles aux utilisateurs de Steam, divulguant les jeux auxquels la dénomination « walking simulator » est attribuée de manière plus unanime chez les joueurs.[4] Après avoir consulté la page SteamSpy de plus de 40 jeux vidéo faisant partie de listes produits par les joueurs, il a été noté que l'étiquette

[4] L'outil web montre que l'étiquette « walking simulator » se démarque radicalement dans les seuls cas de *Dear Esther* (SteamSpy, s.d.a.) et de *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013)(s.d.b.) avec un nombre de votes presque deux fois plus élevé que le descriptif en seconde position. Ces résultats suggèrent que ces deux œuvres font partie d'un consensus culturel parmi les joueurs sur le walking simulator. En date du 11 mars 2018, les cinq descripteurs les plus populaires de *Dear Esther* sont : « Walking Simulator » (avec 969 votes), « Indie » (485), « Exploration » (423), « First-Person » (378), « Short » (289) ; et ceux de *Gone Home* sont : « Walking Simulator » (3293), « Short » (1703), « Indie » (1229), « Exploration » (1207), « Atmospheric » (1074).

« walking simulator » figure dans les cinq descripteurs les plus populaires dans 24 cas,[5] indiquant que ces deniers font partie du consensus commun.

Comme pour les textes générés par les joueurs, la vaste quantité de publications par la presse spécialisée a demandé une restriction plus sévère du corpus. L'analyse s'est donc limitée au cas de *Dear Esther* et aux critiques produites à la sortie des versions originale et remastérisée par des institutions journalistiques. Le site web d'agrégation de critiques MetaCritic a été utilisé pour collecter des articles provenant d'une multitude de sources et inventorier les notes attribuées au jeu. 10 textes ont été sélectionnés pour chacune des deux versions de *Dear Esther*, réunissant un total de 20 articles sur les 35 dont le lien était valide au moment de la dernière consultation (le 6 février 2019). Dans le but d'obtenir une diversité de discours, les 5 critiques aux notes les plus hautes et les 5 aux notes les plus basses pour chacune des éditions ont été relevées.

Cette segmentation des plateformes a permis d'isoler les discours récurrents de chacune des communautés et de les comparer pour vérifier des recoupements ou des écarts entre ceux-ci. Puisque les textes amassés sont tous datés, il a été possible d'évaluer des évolutions et cristallisations dans l'usage de l'étiquette « walking simulator ». La prochaine section consiste à présenter le discours des quatre communautés à partir des données obtenues.

3. Le discours des communautés

3.1. Les joueurs

L'étiquette « walking simulator » est tout particulièrement accolée au jeu de survie *DayZ*, malgré ses affinités au genre du jeu de survie multijoueur. Dans celui-ci, le joueur contrôle un survivant faisant face à la menace d'épidémie de zombies que renferme le pays fictif de

[5] En date du 6 février 2019, les 24 *walking simulators* sont : *Dear Esther*, *Dear Esther: Landmark Edition*, *Gone Home*, *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015), *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016), *Proteus* (Key et Kanagan, 2013), *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013), *Sunset* (*Tale of Tales*, 2015), *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (The Astronauts, 2014), *Mind: Path to Thalamus* (Pantumaca Barcelona), *Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs* (The Chinese Room, 2013), *Dream* (Hypersloth, 2015), *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chine Room, 2015), *Virginia* (Variable State, 2015), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team SA, 2016), *Tacoma* (Fullbright, 2017), *The Old City: Leviathan* (PostMod Softworks, 2014), *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), *Lifeless Planet Premier Edition* (State 2 Studios, 2014), *Marie's Room* (like Charlie, 2018), *Eidolon* (Ice Water Games, 2014), *TIMEframe* (Random Seed Games, 2015), et *The Lost Valley* (Drumov et Berdochan, 2015).

Chernarus. Dans les premiers moments, ce dernier n'a aucun moyen de se défendre contre les morts-vivants et les autres survivants hostiles. Il doit par conséquent parcourir l'unique carte du jeu pour trouver des alliés, des armes et de l'équipement de protection, mais aussi d'autres types de ressource pour éviter de périr de faim, de soif, de succomber aux blessures ou aux maladies qui peuvent l'assaillir. En quoi *DayZ* mérite-t-il donc le qualificatif « walking simulator » ?

Parmi les 64 commentaires du corpus, 48 d'entre eux contiennent un usage de l'étiquette destiné à critiquer les défauts du jeu.[6] Il est important de noter que *DayZ* propose un terrain vaste dans lequel les joueurs-survivants peuvent être dispersés à ses extrêmes. Découvrir un item, apercevoir un signe de vie ou atteindre un lieu clef peut impliquer une longue traversée de la carte du jeu sans rencontrer de résistance ni d'événement ou d'objet digne d'intérêt. « Walking simulator » apparaît ainsi dans des plaintes liées aux longueurs dans l'expérience du jeu :

> Still a walking simulator […] **In 3 hours play time tonight I saw 1, 1 zombie** […] I think even the alpha [version] could have done with a little more work to avoid the average gamer from raging over the **lack of content**, **stupidly long walks** and problems that were in the mod (Smith 2013).[7]

> Haven't played for a while, is it finally not walking simulator **where you walk for 30 minutes** to meet your **friend then walk for an hour** to gather loot to then die for whatever reason then repeat the process? (Princess Luigi 2015).

> [I]n this game you only get attacked once in a blue moon, everything else is just a walking simulator as so to **make you fall asleep** before your eventually shot (Exavior 3.1 2016).

> Worst. Purchase. Ever. Walking Simulator. Walk to apple tree to apple tree in the hope to find some apples but in the end you starve. **There's not much to do** (Florx 2017).

Puisque *DayZ* a opté pour un système de développement ouvert, nombreuses discussions concernent la direction que devrait prendre le jeu, entre autres en ajoutant des véhicules pour accélérer les déplacements (e.g. MattStranger 2018; Haxxxxxxxxxxx 2014; Purple Bacon

[6] Quatre autres catégories se partagent 14 cas et ont permis d'interpréter des usages humoristiques (sans sarcasme), réflexifs (des joueurs remarquent comment l'étiquette est utilisée tout en restant distants), imaginatifs (certains reconnaissent que DayZ serait un walking simulator seulement si des éléments clefs étaient retirés) et flatteurs (ou du moins, qui témoignent de l'appréciation). Quatre commentaires ont résisté à toute catégorisation en raison d'un manque de contexte.

[7] Pour chaque citation, les caractères en gras ne sont pas présents dans le texte original. Ils ont été ajoutés pour attirer l'attention sur certains passages.

2014). Les lents correctifs apportés à la conception du jeu, sorti dans sa version stable cinq ans après sa première parution en « accès anticipé » sur Steam, explique en partie l'acerbité des critiques.

L'analyse de la totalité des fils de discussion a dévoilé que le terme « simulator » n'est pas systématiquement accompagné du qualificatif « walking ». Dans un de ceux-ci, des utilisateurs emploient des descriptifs comme « running simulator » ou « hiking/looting/bandit simulator » (dans Blue November, 2014). En fait, le mot-clef « running simulator » génère 674 entrées dans la section « discussions » du jeu et d'autres combinaisons similaires, comme « marathon simulator » et « jogging simulator », produisent aussi quelques résultats. « Walking simulator » n'est alors qu'une expression parmi tant d'autres pour évoquer le rythme monotone du jeu ; phénomène propre aux discours sur *DayZ*.

En ce qui a trait l'édition de 2012 de *Dear Esther*, l'étiquette est d'une nature générique dans 17 des 27 cas. Pour y attribuer une telle catégorie, son contexte devait contenir soit des références explicites à la notion de genre ou à l'acte de classifier un ensemble d'objets, soit une mise en relation à des jeux similaires ou à d'autres genres, sinon l'expression devait être utilisée pour exprimer un modèle de jeu plus complexe qu'une stricte promenade. Par exemple :

> I own dear esther and loved it, but honestly i refer to it as a walking simulator. **It is the best way to classify it.** Don't take it so personally. […] I love **Fps, strategy games, survival/rogue games, Rpg's, open world games and walking simulators** (Belgarath, 2014).

> Regardless, I absolutely view Dear Esther as a "stress reliever." **It's serene, relaxing, great soundtrack, and simple.** Pretty sure that's **the whole idea of a walking sim** in the first place, and this one is the most walkingest sim of any walking sim I've played (MADk1ngHatter, 2016).

> I actually decided to check this game out. As I recently found out, **this new genre**, walking simulator is my favourite one as I like to **take my time and explore the world** (Bō / Toni, 2016).

Même si le terme « genre » n'apparaît pas dans tous les extraits, « walking simulator » renvoie au concept lorsqu'il côtoie d'autres genres, comme dans le premier commentaire, ou lorsqu'il évoque une idée de jeu qui peut être mené à bien, non pas une défaillance en soi, comme dans le deuxième commentaire.

Reste que la séparation entre la connotation péjorative et l'attribut générique de l'expression n'est pas toujours évidente, particulièrement dans les discours se situant dans les deux années subséquentes à la sortie officielle du jeu, durant lesquelles le genre du *walking simulator* n'était peut-être pas encore cristallisé. En tout et pour tout, l'appellation a mérité les deux usages à la fois ou n'a pas été classée par manque d'information signifiante à six occasions. Elle s'est manifestée en tant que défaut intrinsèque à six reprises également. Le discours des détracteurs n'est pas bien différent que celui des critiques de *DayZ*, insistant sur son caractère fastidieux, passif et futile, en plus de remettre en cause dans quatre cas le statut de jeu de *Dear Esther* :

> Well no where does it tell you it's a damn walking simulator. If you bought this for a **simple/confusing story and pretty graphics** then it's probably worth a buy. FFS though **don't call this a "game"** I might as well have walked around outside while someone whispered a story in my ear and that would have been just as much a game. I don't care if it's on steam really but again, get rid of the "adventure" genre and I'd be happy (Shadow, 2013).

> To clarify, I always thought I'd like dear esther, I don't mind walking around simulators. Not to mention everyone raves about how pretty it is. So I bought it a while ago, and my god I could barely sit through 15 minutes. It's **boring**, and not to mention **ugly** as all hell […] Honestly, **there is a place for 'games' (experiences?) like this, but steam really isn't the place** (Fox, 2014).

Les deux utilisateurs ci-dessus fournissent dans le même fil de discussion un lien vers une vidéo du populaire youtubeur TotalBiscuit (2012). D'après ce dernier, *Dear Esther* aurait un ratio « prix/durée plutôt mauvais », serait « prétentieux », « ennuyant », « frustrant », « insignifiant », « une perte de temps », et surtout, tel que répété à maintes reprises par le Britannique, « pas un jeu » (traduction libre). Même si le youtubeur n'accueille pas nécessairement l'arrivée du jeu avec la dénomination « walking simulator », ses remarques montrent comment l'appellation péjorative a pu être préparée.

Les critiques acerbes s'estompent cependant pour le cas de *Dear Esther : Landmark Edition*, au sujet duquel un discours générique domine dans 15 des 17 publications, signalant une cristallisation du genre. Dans les conversations qu'entretiennent ces 15 commentaires, les utilisateurs débattent de l'origine et des critères du genre et offrent des suggestions de *walking simulators* à leurs pairs :

> Walking simulators dont do shooting stuff. The whole idea is that you walk… and thats it mechanically-wise. So puzzling and shooting are **no-no's for a walking simulator classification**. But maybe thats just me who thinks like that (Dekaku 2017).
>
> Along with **Gone Home**, the very best walking simulators I've played but I still haven't gotten to **Kholat, Everybody's Gone To The Rapture and What Remains of Edith Flinch**. I'll reiterate that **Firewatch** is really good and as a bit more going on than Dear Esther (Willow 2018).

Ces deux exemples témoignent d'un recul sur la proposition du jeu, qui n'est plus marginale et inattendue, mais mieux définie et située parmi d'autres jeux vidéo. Alors que l'étiquette « walking simulator » était principalement un descriptif qualitatif indiquant un défaut de jeu dans *DayZ* et plus rarement dans *Dear Esther*, elle s'est plutôt mise à référer un ensemble de jeux au même concept aux alentours du lancement du *Landmark Edition* en 2016. Cela étant dit, il est crucial de prendre note que la présente analyse retient des tendances dans le discours, pas des changements définitifs d'usage. Il reste encore aujourd'hui des tensions entre les deux significations de sorte qu'il serait imprudent de dater une transformation discursive finale.

3.2. Les instances marketing

Même des années après la sortie officielle de *Dear Esther*, l'expression n'est toujours pas employée par les instances marketing pour décrire leurs produits sur leur page de vente Steam. Les 24 *walking simulators* répertoriés sont dépeints avec des combinaisons variées de descriptifs tels que « story exploration game » (*Gone Home* ; Steam 2013a), « narrative video game » (*The Beginner's Guide* ; 2015a), « first-person mystery » (*Firewatch* ; 2016a) et « first-person thriller » (*Virginia* ; 2016b). Les synopsis mettent invariablement l'accent sur des propriétés autres que la marche, comme la perspective à la première personne (11 fois), l'acte de découvrir ou d'explorer (10) et la narration (8) — à l'exception de celui de *The Lost Valley* (2015b), qui justifie narrativement que le protagoniste, en raison d'un accident de vélo, poursuit son chemin à la marche. Le *walking simulator* est au plus évoqué par la mention de titres populaires du genre, par exemple : « from the creators of Gone Home » (*Tacoma* ; 2017) et « from the creators of […] Dear Esther » (*Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs* ; 2013b).

Sauf pour ces trois derniers exemples, qui réfèrent explicitement à la marche ou à des *walking simulators* connus, les couvertures numériques insistent sur des conventions vidéoludiques

familières aux joueurs, tout en restant trop vagues pour préciser les attentes de ces derniers. Le point de vue à la première personne, le récit d'enquête (suggéré par des termes comme « mystery » et « thriller ») et l'exploration sont toutes des caractéristiques qui traversent les genres vidéoludiques. Ce flou descriptif explique probablement pourquoi certains se sont sentis trompés en découvrant malgré eux le *walking simulator*, sans compter que dans la moitié des cas (dont *Dear Esther*), le produit est présenté en tant que jeu, alors que des joueurs ne le reconnaissent pas comme tel. Puisque l'étiquette s'est répandue et revient massivement dans la section « tags », son absence dans le discours de la communauté marketing ne peut être le résultat d'une ignorance. Son omission est plutôt stratégique : « walking simulator » n'est pas une expression méliorative chez cette communauté de discours.

3.3. Les concepteurs

Parmi le corpus de textes publiés dans *Gamasutra*, l'expression « walking simulator » est employée d'une manière croissante dans le temps (2 occurrences en 2014, 2 en 2015, 4 en 2016, 4 en 2017, et 8 en 2018). De même que pour la communauté des joueurs, les usages de l'étiquette dans la période de 2016 à 2018 sont plus populaires, décomplexés et réflexifs, alors qu'ils témoignent d'un genre pas tout à fait cristallisé dans les premières années. À deux occasions, les concepteurs se montrent hésitants à classifier leur création avec une appellation qui ne renvoie pas à un modèle vidéoludique clairement défini :

> I think we could have just as legitimately chosen **'environmental story game or 'empathy game' or 'walking simulator'**. I'd suggest we'll be treading similar ground to other **first person adventure games** like Gone Home and Dear Esther (Burroughs dans Alexander, 2014).

> […] these new forms of games don't have solid genres to belong in- they are **"Interactive Experiences", or "Art Game", or "Walking Sim", or whatever label** that really doesn't explain much of what this genre is (Sineni, 2015).

Par après, « walking simulator » devient progressivement une catégorie mieux définie, qui ne demande pas d'explications ou de comparaisons.

Des concepteurs de jeu confirment néanmoins que l'étiquette dérange, ce qui indique sans doute pourquoi la communauté marketing en fait abstraction. Brandon Sheffield rapporte comment l'appellation s'est présentée sous forme d'insulte lorsqu'il a décidé d'annuler la sortie de son jeu

sur la Wii U en solidarité à une employée de Nintendo congédiée injustement : « I learned from hundreds of people tweeting at me that: […] - nobody wants our stupid walking simulator anyway (we are not making a walking simulator – we were planning to bring out a new version of our small puzzle game Gunhouse) » (2016). Dans un entretien avec d'autres créateurs du genre, Dan Pinchbeck, à l'origine de *Dear Esther*, partage les désagréments que l'expression cause : « It's a stupid term because it doesn't in any way represent the actual player experience of the games » (dans Irwin, 2017). L'expression est insultante pour des artisans du milieu du jeu vidéo puisqu'elle banalise l'expérience que propose leur œuvre qui, à leurs yeux, ne se limite pas à une promenade insignifiante. Le cofondateur de Variable State, Jonathan Burroughs, corrobore le témoignage de Pinchbeck : « It's inherently a reductive description […] It's silly », mais il ajoute une nuance : « it is useful in the sense that if someone describes a game as a walking simulator, it's immediately of interest to me » (*idem.*).

L'expression a peut-être l'avantage de susciter la curiosité par son amalgame terminologique inusité, mais elle possède surtout une fonction propre au genre, qui sert les concepteurs de jeu. Dans 14 des 20 occurrences, les équipes de jeu s'en servent pour communiquer brièvement ce qu'est leur création. Notamment :

> Charlotte is an exploration/walking simulator game (Goins, 2016).
>
> We eventually combined elements of walking simulators, shooting galleries, and scavenger hunts into an ultra-casual experience (Dunbar, 2018).
>
> In January we made two different games: Angela worked on a really weird clicker/idle/incremental game and I decided to make sort of a 2D walking simulator for a game jam (da Silva, 2018).

Il est intéressant de noter que tous les concepteurs derrière les 14 textes ont participé à des œuvres relativement marginales, qui ne font pas partie de la quarantaine de *walking simulators* extraits des listes d'amateur du genre. Une interprétation possible de cet usage de l'étiquette est que l'intérêt de la fonction communicationnelle de celle-ci prime sur l'allusion à une expérience ennuyante et loin des canons vidéoludiques qu'elle dégage également. Cette ambivalence chez les concepteurs revient aussi dans le sondage de Kill Screen en introduction de texte et rappelle que le débat sur la viabilité de l'étiquette « walking simulator » n'est pas clos.

3.4. La presse spécialisée

Parmi la presse spécialisée, un regard favorable presque unanime est porté sur *Dear Esther* (et les plus populaires des *walking simulators*). Si l'on se fie au site web d'agrégation de critiques MetaCritic (s.d.), 29 avis positifs, 5 mitigés, et 3 négatifs sont dénombrés au sujet de l'œuvre phare en provenance des journalistes, contre 114 avis positifs, 51 mitigés et 82 négatifs parmi les joueurs (fig. 1). « Walking simulator » ne fait pas du tout partie du vocabulaire de la presse spécialisée dans les 10 articles récoltés sur *Dear Esther*. Celle-ci le désigne plutôt comme « experimental work » (Hoggins, 2012), « interactive experience » (Jeremy, 2012) ou « piece of art » (Huinker, 2012). Ces termes de remplacement laissent entendre que *Dear Esther* est à l'époque une proposition innovatrice et originale, sans modèle générique et même médiatique auquel référer. Certains journalistes rapportent d'ailleurs la controverse sur le statut ludique de l'œuvre sans vouloir se prononcer, mais se retrouvent paradoxalement dans l'obligation de trahir leur volonté puisqu'ils doivent immanquablement préciser la nature de l'objet qu'ils évaluent pour clarifier aux lecteurs l'expérience que celui-ci offre. Sans exception, ils prennent position dans le débat et l'alimentent en qualifiant *Dear Esther* de jeu, de non-jeu ou encore en lui accordant un statut hybride — par exemple : « story-game » (Fernandez, 2012).

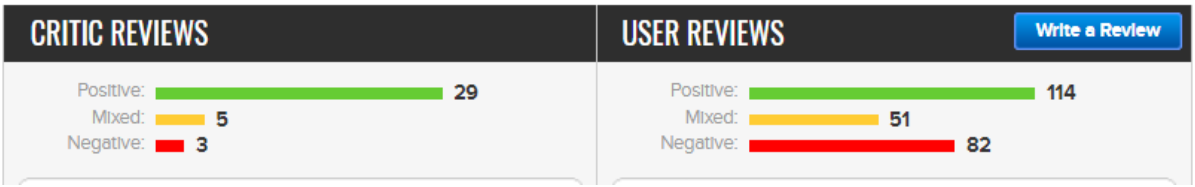

Figure 1 : Comparatif des scores octroyés à *Dear Esther* par les critiques et par les joueurs.

Tandis qu'aucun journaliste n'emploie la dénomination « walking simulator » en 2012, leur discours à l'égard de sa version remastérisée de 2016 est drastiquement différent. Dans 8 des 10 cas, la presse spécialisée octroie la paternité du genre à *Dear Esther*. Que cette attribution soit véridique ou non n'a pas d'importance, car ce seul changement de discours est une preuve convaincante de l'émergence générique du *walking simulator*. Conformément au cadre théorique postulé en début d'article, il rappelle que c'est le discours, non pas un jeu vidéo en soi, qui met au monde le genre dans un acte postdaté. Pour cette raison, les racines du *walking simulator* ne peuvent être retracées dans des jeux prototypiques d'un autre temps, dont les formes coïncident avec des exemples paradigmatiques du genre, comme le fait Pawel Grabarczyk (2016, p 249-51) en retournant à *Alice – an interactive museum* (Haruhiko Shono,

1991), *The Dark Eye* (Inscape, 1995) et *LSD: Dream Emulator* (OutSide Directors Company, 1998). L'analyse de discours implique de respecter le contexte historique d'un genre, faisant en sorte que les réels usages et évolutions des étiquettes descriptives soient pris en compte.

4. Conclusion

L'étiquette « walking simulator » a servi aux joueurs pour critiquer le rythme lent et la jouabilité passive de *Dear Esther*, au même titre que *DayZ*. Mais, en contraste à ce dernier jeu, elle a souligné aussi que l'œuvre de Briscoe et The Chinese Room est trop lacunaire pour être un jeu. Cela dit, la majorité des commentaires du corpus ont une utilisation générique de l'expression, quoique celle-ci n'est pas toujours évidente à déterminer, surtout dans les deux premières années suivant la parution du jeu. C'est également vrai chez la communauté des concepteurs : plus le discours est récent, plus le terme « walking simulator » renvoie clairement à un genre, soit à une famille de jeux et un modèle vidéoludique plus définis et admis. Alors que la communauté des concepteurs et des joueurs possède ses propres dissidences, les instances marketing et la presse spécialisée ont un rapport plus consensuel à l'appellation. Chez les premiers, celle-ci n'inspire pas l'enthousiasme nécessaire pour stimuler des ventes et se retrouve donc ignorée. Dans la communauté journalistique, elle est progressivement venue représenter un jeu difficilement catégorisable en 2012. Évidemment, une recherche plus exhaustive, incluant davantage de textes, *walking simulators* et plateformes discursives au corpus, permettrait d'obtenir un échantillonnage plus représentatif et de cerner des variations dans le discours. Reste que la mise en rapport des communautés discursives étudiées ici indique une évolution fondamentale dans l'emploi et la signification de l'étiquette « walking simulator » : d'un qualificatif insultant qui émane d'une première controverse, soit le statut de jeu ou non-jeu que méritent ces objets, à une dénomination générique qui elle aussi fait l'objet d'un débat, à savoir si le terme devrait être toujours utilisé pour désigner des œuvres comme *Dear Esther*. Même si « walking simulator » est devenu une étiquette générique, sa connotation péjorative ne s'est pas effacée pour autant, puisqu'elle suscite toujours des réactions.

La notion d'horizon d'attentes de Hans Robert Jauss (2015) permet en guise de conclusion d'ajouter quelques réflexions sur l'articulation de « walking simulator » dans les différents discours. D'après ce dernier, un texte littéraire n'est jamais reçu en isolation : il « prédispose un certain mode de réception » et « évoque des choses déjà lues » (p. 55). Ainsi, il implique un

« système de références » contenant une expérience antérieure de la réalité quotidienne, des formes et des thématiques intertextuelles ainsi que des genres (p. 54). Avec ce système vient un horizon d'attente qui peut être trompé devant une œuvre nouvelle, créant ce que l'auteur appelle un « écart esthétique », ou tout simplement confirmé devant une œuvre familière (p. 58). En ce sens, les instances marketing ont cherché à réduire tout décalage en utilisant des descripteurs familiers tels que « exploration », « story » et « game ». À l'opposée, en désignant *Dear Esther* avec des termes comme « experimental work » chez la presse spécialisée et « walking simulator » chez les premiers détracteurs de la communauté des joueurs, les communautés ont voulu témoigner respectivement d'un écart esthétique et signaler l'expérience d'un jeu peu orthodoxe.[8] Mais ces deux derniers qualificatifs ne fixent certainement pas le même horizon d'attente. L'un renvoie à l'innovation, l'autre à une déficience de jouabilité. Et c'est justement cette manipulation de l'horizon d'attente qui continue d'être au cœur des débats sur l'étiquette « walking simulator ».

S'objectant à l'expression dénigrante « walking simulator », des termes alternatifs qui se veulent plus neutres ou légitimes sont proposés un peu partout sur le web par les amateurs du genre avec espoir qu'ils soient adoptés en très grand nombre, entre autres : « first-person walker » (Penabella, 2015), « phantom rides » (Beirne, 2015), « environmental narrative game » (Tv Tropes, s.d.), « secret box games » (Goodwin, 2014) et « first-person exploration » (Arlo, 2016). Bien que certaines de ces étiquettes de remplacement aient été reprises, notamment chez les universitaires (e.g. Muscat *et al.* 2016), « walking simulator » persiste dans les discours parce qu'il est déjà chargé de références vidéoludiques, étant désormais lié à un horizon d'attente commun. Les auteurs mêmes de ces suggestions plus respectueuses doivent recourir à l'étiquette péjorative dans leur plaidoyer pour renvoyer à un ensemble de jeux existant et transmettre efficacement ce que désigne leur nouvelle appellation. Dans la mesure où le genre se définit par une fonction communicationnelle (voir Moine 2005, p. 79-85) et une capacité à forger une compréhension partagée de ce dont il désigne (Gregersen 2014, p. 163), il paraît impossible de se débarrasser d'une étiquette générique cristallisée par un horizon d'attentes commun.

[8] Cet écart esthétique suppose d'ailleurs une innovation au sens où Alastair Fowler l'entend (dans Arsenault 2011, p. 167-9). Le théoricien de la littérature comprend l'évolution d'un genre à travers la réalisation de trois œuvres clefs : l'une innovatrice, une autre paradigmatique, et la dernière définitive. L'œuvre innovatrice se traduit par une formule nouvelle et marginale, telle qu'était *Dear Esther*. Mais le modèle de Fowler est trompeur : la conception téléologique qu'il produit de l'histoire des genres médiatiques suggère que ceux-ci évoluent tous à l'intérieur d'un processus prédéterminé et marqué d'une fin.

Considérant l'histoire similaire de termes comme « impressionnisme », « shoegaze » et « hack and slash », qui étaient initialement employés pour dénigrer respectivement des peintures, performances musicales et pratiques ludiques ne se conformant pas aux canons de leur époque (voir Maxon et Cox dans Kill Screen Staff 2016, s.p. ; Gillespie et Darren 2012, p. 455), et qui sont maintenant émancipées de leur connotation négative initiale, force est d'admettre que le même sort attend celui de « walking simulator ». Les joueurs dévouent des sites web au genre, les concepteurs s'en servent pour définir leurs œuvres, et la presse spécialisée fait part de listes des meilleurs jeux appartenant à cette catégorie. L'adoption d'un nouveau terme serait en ce sens futile : en plus de faire partie du bagage vidéoludique des communautés vidéoludiques, l'étiquette est désormais en voie d'être réappropriée définitivement, si ce n'est pas déjà fait. « Walking simulator » n'est pas près de disparaître. Même que l'expression n'évoquera peut-être dans le futur qu'une brève panique générique, c'est-à-dire une polémique suscitée par des joueurs réactionnaires, alarmés de l'institutionnalisation d'un ensemble d'objets qui écorchent leur idée normée du jeu vidéo.

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Ludographie

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Goat Simulator (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014)
Gone Home (Fullbright 2013)
Just Cause 3 (Avalanche Studios, 2015)
Layers of Fear (Bloober Team SA, 2016)
Lifeless Planet Premier Edition (State 2 Studios, 2014)
LSD: Dream Emulator (OutSide Directors Company, 1998)
Marie's Room (like Charlie, 2018)
Mind: Path of the Thalamus (Pantumaca Barcelona, 2015)
Proteus (Key et Kanaga, 2013)
Sunset (Tale of Tales, 2015)
Surgeon Simulator (Bossa Studios, 2013)
Tacoma (Fullbright, 2017)
That Dragon, Cancer (Numinous Games, 2016)
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The Old City: Leviathan (PostMod Softworks, 2014)
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The Vanishing of Ethan Carter (The Astronauts, 2014)

TIMEframe (Random Seed Games, 2015)

Virginia (Variable State, 2015)

What Remains of Edith Finch (Giant Sparrow, 2017)

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Abstract: The walking simulator genre is at the center of a deep controversy among game communities. Its critics reject its worth and even its place in the video game landscape while its supporters disagree on the legitimization of its derogatory label. This paper intends to historicize the rise of the walking simulator by means of a discursive analysis of four game communities : the players, the marketing entities, the developers, and the specialized press. The study reveals the evolution and crysallization of predominant uses, meanings and functions of the designation "walking simulator" in the video game landscape.

Keywords: walking simulator; video games genre; discourse analysis; Dear Esther; DayZ.