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Traumatic, Spectacular Prologues

AAA Players as Ethical Witnesses

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the depiction of violent, traumatic spectacles in the opening of select AAA videogames, questioning how these affective devices function to attach and motivate the player. This research deployed two methods: a qualitative content analysis adapted to engage with many layers of games and gaming; and an immersive-affective autoethnography that makes visible the researcher's role in the creation of knowledge and thus allows the critical 'gaze' to be turned upon this relationship. Utilising (vicarious) trauma theory, this paper considers the role of witnessing and the provocation of ethical responses when the player experiences the early victimisation of the player character. This

paper asserts that these early violent spectacles act as cues for moral disengagement and function as an enabling fiction legitimating the use of 'righteous' violence. Combined with the iterative 'overcoming' afforded by such games, this paper argues that these traumatic prologues create an affective and ethical attachment to the game's outcome.

Keywords

AAA videogames; prologues; vicarious trauma; empathy; spectacle; witnessing; ethics; affect.

INTRODUCTION

An unknown assailant is attacking. Fires have broken out. Now and then you may have to engage pockets of enemies, but the ringleaders are always unreachable or unknown – they are 'out there', somewhere else. You see scenes of devastation. In the distance, people are gunned down from behind reinforced glass, gored and mauled, blood splattering and bodies twisting as they die before your eyes. Screams and cries ring in your ears, but you are powerless to help. You can only push forward, learning each control in turn as you go. All that awaits you at the end is tragedy: injury, loss, kidnapping, death.

So begins many AAA videogames. Threat, failure, and confusion accompany the spectacle of violence, destruction, and chaos comprising the first hour of gameplay. AAA refers to a classification of games that can be thought of as equivalent to 'blockbuster' films. They usually have large development budgets, are widely promoted before, during and after release, and are consequently often bestsellers. While they are expected to be of a high quality, the AAA grading does not necessarily denote originality, nor does it predict a positive critical reception. Whether a stealth, melee or role-playing game, a first- or third-person shooter; the primary mechanic of these games is usually combat, and violence the main means of progression. Consequently, they are routinely part of the 'moral panic' (Cohen 2011 [1972]) surrounding videogames, present in

both the media (e.g. Pow, 2012; Daily Mail, 2012) and in videogame research (Ferguson, 2009). The commonsense notion fueling this moral panic holds that participating in interactive violent media will make the player more violent. While this is a reasonable hypothesis, research paints a more nuanced and complex picture of the relationship between mediated and ‘real’ violence (e.g. Eastin 2006; Szycik et al. 2017; Ward, 2010). However, in this paper, I am primarily concerned with how players may respond to mediated violence in-game. Many explanations for players’ decisions to perform ‘immoral’ actions in-game have been proffered. For instance, some argue that players see it as not being real – i.e. it harms no one and is only a game (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). Other scholars have explored the personality of the player as a variable, concluding that there is, among other things, a gendered division in the approach to violent and immoral in-game acts and decisions (Lin, 2011). Moreover, others have recognised the importance of the game as a rule-bound space within which the player is forced to participate in certain moral or immoral actions (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986), and how narrative cues help the player morally ‘disengage’ from actions they find repugnant (Hartmann 2013). Moving away even from this discussion of the moral-immoral dichotomy of gameplay actions, in this paper I mobilise understandings of vicarious trauma and ethical witnessing to explore the early vulnerability and victimisation of the player character. Doing so, I question how these violent and traumatic prologues operate to attach, affect, and direct the player.

Throughout this paper, I use the term ‘ethical’ to highlight the way acts may be differentially viewed as right or wrong, and the game’s judgement of particular actions. In discussing ethical actions in games, I do not seek to draw a normative or meta-ethical conclusion; that is, to determine the ‘rightness’ of certain in-game actions. Nor do I consider what ‘right’ means. Rather, I seek to address the way game processes may be argued to have an ethical valence, structured by the game or affectively rationalised by the player. I deploy the term ethical when describing an in-game action which may be seen as having an ethical valence. For instance, a game decision based on the ‘trolley problem’,

whereby the player can kill one person in order to save five, would be described as an ethical act. In discussing this action, I am not interested in the rightness or wrongness of the act beyond the fact that it is an ‘ethical’ act (that is, ‘ethically problematic’). In describing an act as ‘ethical’, then, I am not saying it is good or bad, right or wrong, but rather that it is an act which could *potentially* be judged as good, bad, right or wrong.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND ETHICAL WITNESSING

In its exploration of traumatic spectacles in game prologues, this paper does not seek to engage with ‘real world’ instances of trauma—that is, a person’s response to overwhelming levels of stress which impacts their ability to regulate their emotional state. Rather, it is concerned with the representation of traumatic experiences as a narrative device and as expressed through the game’s mechanics. It discusses how the vicarious trauma of witnessing and participating in interactive, violent, and spectacular games might operate affectively and ethically.

In clinical settings, vicarious trauma refers to occasions when clinicians “feel the pain evoked by empathy-arousing mechanisms interacting with their own previous traumatic experience” (Hoffman 2003, 17, in Kaplan 2005, 88). In her book, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005), E. Ann Kaplan asks whether vicarious trauma in those who have viewed mediated traumatic events can “facilitate or interfere with pro-social individual or cultural change [... or might it] arouse anxiety and trigger defence against further exposure?” (87). Kaplan concludes that spectators who witness mediated traumatic events may, depending on the literary and filmic techniques employed, experience vicarious trauma. They do not feel the protagonist’s trauma directly, but rather “feel the pain evoked by empathy” (90) which in turn can arouse feelings from their own past traumatic experiences.

The ethical responses to witnessing mediated trauma are also discussed by John Berger (1980) in his essay that considers photographs that depict

traumatic events from the Vietnam War. Berger argues that those who view such ‘arresting’ photographs, (as opposed to those who pass them over) have one of two responses—despair or indignation. The former results in the viewer ‘taking on’ some suffering of the other, while the latter “demands action” (42). However, the provocation of action is usually politically impotent due to the viewer’s relative positioning in the field of global politics. Berger asserts that the strong responses to photographs which depict suffering are dispelled through the way they create feelings of “moral inadequacy” in the viewer (44). There is a sense of helplessness on the part of the observer—a feeling of impotence in relation to the atrocities committed in the picture. Thus, while they contain implicit criticisms of governments, “their effect is ultimately to depoliticise public response through feelings of impotence” (Meek 2010, 33). Kaplan recognises that witnessing “is not passive observation but active engagement... an engagement produced by the work of art itself through its techniques” (Kaplan 2016, 14). In its exploration of the openings of AAA games, it is necessary to ask whether this depoliticisation of traumatic spectacles functions in the same way in games as it does in mass media. Or do the techniques of games—their mechanics and interactivity—alter this process?

Alan Meek (2010) is critical of the use of trauma theory in media and film criticism, and argues that presuming the viewer ‘ethically’ witnesses the trauma is to assume a progressive reading. Indeed, there may be some who witness graphic violence and do not feel disgust, horror, or empathy. However, according to Matthew Grizzard et al.’s (2017) recent study of people’s reactions to watching videos of ISIS beheadings, many do indeed take a ‘progressive’ reading of such violence, demonstrating that “graphic media violence can serve as a moral motivator” (2).

While Kaplan predominantly interrogates viewers’ empathic relationship to film characters, and Berger is interested in the photographic representation of global violence, their conclusions also have potential implications for game scholars. Of course, there are no inherently ‘traumatic’ events, and in this study’s examination of the use of

traumatic events in immersive gaming, I am examining the deployment of traumatic spectacle as a device which functions to attach the player to the game and the protagonist. The extent to which a player ‘identifies’ with their player character has been much discussed and contended by several scholars working within different disciplines within the field of games studies. Player characters are certainly important in that they act as a vehicle; they are the means by which the player acts within the world—the embodied will of the player within the gameworld. But do players also take on elements of their player character by “adopt[ing] (part of) the identity of [their] character” (Hefner et al. 2007: 41)? Do players see them as both a part of themselves whilst still being “unequivocally other” (Rehak 2003: 106)? Identification with the player character appears contingent on various factors, such as: the strength of the narrative (Shaw 2011); whether the player can influence the design of their character (Shaw 2011; Filiciak 2015); as well as mechanic factors such as whether the game is first-person perspective (Cairns 2015), and the interactivity of the player’s actions (Smethurst & Craps 2015). In this paper’s discussion, I do not seek to advance the discussion of the extent to which the player invests in or identifies with their character. Rather, considering that shock “can form part of voyeuristic pleasure, but can also foster identification with the position of victim” (Meek 2016, 35), I consider whether the player’s empathic relationship to the player character, and the early tribulations that the character is shown to suffer, could interpellate¹ (Althusser, 1971) them into the position of ethical witness and thus motivate them to action.

SPECTACLE

The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image—of an agony, of ruin—is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war (Sontag 2003, 24).

1. Interpellation describes the process whereby subjects are ‘hailed’ in social interactions (especially in political and social institutions). It is when the hailed individual recognises themselves as the addressee that the subject is constituted by this (mis)recognition.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1995 [1967]) argues that spectacle is “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (12) which “unifies and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena” (14). The mobilisation of spectacle is ‘seductive’ in its ability to captivate and fascinate consumers and spectators, and it is through this seduction and the ability to “involve them in the semiotics of an ever-expanding world of entertainment, information and consumption [that spectacle is able to] deeply influence thought and action” (Kellner 2005, 25). Developed from Karl Marx’s notions of commodity fetishism, alienation and reification, Debord’s concept of the spectacular construes spectators as separate, passive, and depoliticised subjects (ibid., 25-26).

Video games have been recognised as being part of the economy of the spectacle, both in terms of their patterns of consumption as well as how they aid the development of specific skills required in the post-industrial economy. In his broad overview of spectacular media, Douglas Kellner (2005) briefly considers the spectacle of violent gaming:

These games are highly competitive, violent, and provide allegories for life under corporate capitalism and Terror War militarism.... While some game producers have tried to cultivate kinder, gentler, and more intelligent gaming, most of the best-selling corporate games are spectacles for predatory capitalism and macho militarism and not a more peaceful, playful, and cooperative world (30-31).

Turning more specifically to the use of spectacle within gaming, in his exploration of spectacle and gratification in ‘beat ’em ups’, David Surman (2007) proposes that spectacle is deployed in two modes—that which is produced for the player (unalterable utilisation of spectacle within the game), and that which the player produces themselves (for example, skillful play as spectacle) (207). He terms the spectacular play which combines these two modes ‘reward-spectacle’—moments of audial and visual spectacle-as-reward for executing precise, difficult and deadly fighting combos. In this paper’s exploration of the use of spectacular imagery in AAA games’ opening levels, I seek to question whether the ‘depoliticisation’ Debord discusses is also an in-game

product of spectacle, or whether, when combined with themes of traumatic destruction wreaked upon the player character, their loved ones and their home, could be said to be an affective and ethical device motivating certain modes of player interaction.

METHODOLOGY

This research, undertaken as part of my doctoral studies, utilises methods that critically examine how games' goals, rewards and ethical systems can in part produce the 'affectivities' of play. They require that the researcher has an in-depth knowledge of videogames and possesses various skills—including familiarity with hardware, interfaces, and awareness of generic conventions. I selected thirteen titles which were released in the half decade leading up to the start of this project's research period. The thirteen titles include a trilogy. Consequently, fifteen separate games were analysed: *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios 2012); *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011); *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009); *Halo: Reach* (Bungie 2010); *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013); *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011); *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2012); *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios 2010); *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013); *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (Naughty Dog 2011); *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013), and the *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare 2007-2012). The criteria used to select these titles included that they are AAA titles; "high-tech" (MacTavish, 2002); for adults; contain narrative or mechanical violence; developed in Western Europe or North America (because of cultural and mechanical differences); single player; original intellectual properties (not intertextual adaptations); widely played and praised (I considered both player and critic reviews by tabulating review data gathered from GameRankings, Metacritic, IGN, Edge, Game Informer, as well as sales figures); billed/promoted/discussed as being "immersive" and with strong narrative; as well as attempting to cover a general mixture of genres, themes and mechanics. When considering the range of

mechanics, I particularly privileged mechanics with which I already possess playing skills to enable greater exploration of various levels and difficulties. This also meant I did not have to undergo a ‘learning curve’ to develop the gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) needed for success. Where possible, the release date was between 2011 and 2013 inclusively. However, other elements of the game were privileged over date of release relative to their importance to the methodology and the doctorate’s overall focus on violence, interactivity, and narrative. These titles were then intensively and repeatedly played and analysed over the course of eight months. The two qualitative methods undertaken enabled this research to interrogate several layers of games and gaming experience concurrently; including the rule-bound, playful, interreactive, and narrative elements of gameplay, as well as the affective and persuasive qualities of these various elements.

Firstly, a mode of qualitative content analysis (QCA) was undertaken whereby several aspects of the game were analysed and coded. The mode of QCA developed took as its basis ‘conventional’ QCA (Zhang & Wildemuth 2009, 310-312) and integrated textual analysis (ITA; developed by Michelle Kempson [2012] during her doctoral research into feminist zine culture). Conventional QCA requires that the researcher be immersed in the data such that the categorisation and naming process can emerge inductively (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1279; Zhang & Wildemuth 2009, 309). Like Kempson’s ITA, this research integrated elements of semiotic and thematic analysis in order that the specific ‘units’ found via the QCA concerning narrative and mechanic features of the selected games, as well as the structuring of player action, could be interrogated vis-à-vis notions of desire, affect, agency and subjectivity. The selected games were played to allow the categorisation and naming to emerge from many elements of play and experience; specifically analysing text (both written, such as codex, clues, and notes, as well as dialogue), narrative tropes, sound and music, visuals (world and character design), mechanics (including, but not limited to enemy/companion/NPC AI, character building, skill trees, combat, movement, cover, physics, maps, goals), and interaction (interface, goals, and

restrictions). The development and highlighting of ‘units’ occurred organically throughout the eight-month research phase. The results of the QCA as well as the second method (described below) were transcribed over a period of two months, and through a combination of coding by hand and using NVivo 10, these initial data and the ‘units’ inductively generated through the course of the research were systematically coded and described, with evidence given for each instance. Secondary nodes were developed from the initial coding of these units, which were then grouped into broader relevant categories relative to the focus of the research. Categories which constituted the key themes of analysis were identified and conceptually mapped, such that they might be interrogated rather than “merely presented” (Kempson 2012, 122).

To interrogate the different layers of games and gaming, Stephen Malliet (2007) calls for game scholars to repeatedly and ‘expertly’ play the game (para. 11). Moreover, in order to analyse game structures, researchers must consider the role gaming technology plays in directing play (Bateman 2008, 12), including the necessary interactivity of gaming. As Julian Kücklich (2002) recognizes, by interacting with a game, we necessarily influence it, meaning that the context of the player will impact the meaning made from the process of gameplay (Malliet 2007, para 9). To gain a broad perspective on modes of gameplay, Malliet (2007) suggests that they should roleplay as different ‘categories of gamer’ (perhaps by using Richard Bartle’s [1996] categorisation of video game players as socialisers, killers, achievers, or explorers). Beyond playing from various perspectives, it is also necessary for game researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of the metagame and subculture surrounding the games studied by engaging with forums, fan creations, walkthroughs, ‘let’s play’ videos, livestreams, and industry and fan reviews (Aarseth 2003). In following the advice of these scholars, this research achieved an understanding of each game beyond my own play style. In thoroughly and repetitively exploring the game structures, possibilities for different modes of play, and the surrounding metagame, this research considers both the ‘preferred playing’ (from ‘preferred reading’)—those modes of play which conform to the rules

and narrative structures of the game—as well as those which go ‘against the grain’.

This approach was extended into the interactive and experiential with an immersive-participatory method developed from autoethnographic traditions. This method utilises the researcher’s knowledge of, and familiarity with, games and game controls, as well as enabling them to reflexively turn the critical ‘gaze’ upon their personal relationship with the object of research. Following autoethnographic conventions, it recognises the researcher as ‘situated’ (Haraway 1988) and requires that they practice a high level of critical reflection about their experience of being embedded within the specific process of gaming and the culture of games. In employing elements of autoethnography as part of this immersive-participatory method, my experiences therefore became “the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns” (Spry 2001, 711, in Ettore 2005, 544). The processes of ‘reading’ and meaning-making from the games which are deployed in this method are a “contingent activity deeply rooted in [my] autobiograph[y] and the tools, means and knowledge they provide” (Stanley 1992, 84). In light of this, I utilised reflexivity as a key research tool, which enabled discussion of data produced as being *my* readings, and yet also allows for them to be located in a specific place and time. This places my research within a specific context and offers it to the reader as a discussion of the many and varied affective experiences of gaming. As a white middle-class British woman, my situation undeniably shapes the ways I make meaning whilst playing video games. As a lifelong gamer, I am already attuned to various debates and discussions within the community – from ‘in-jokes’ to the #gamergate controversy – which may influence my ‘reading’ process. However, in deploying a method which reflexively documents and examines my affective experiences of playing games, I am not merely restricted to researching myself. My self “encompasses second- and third-hand knowledges as well as first-hand knowledges” (Stanley 1993, 50). I am a socially-connected and situated agent. Whilst it is true that my ‘reading’ of the game cannot be said to be based on developer(s) intent, as “intentionality cannot be read from the text at all.

[...] What matters, and what is immediately accessibly, is the [game] itself” (Stanley 1992, 85). For this method to be autoethnographic as opposed to autobiographic, the researcher must reflexively connect their personal experiences to broader social, cultural, and political understandings (Ettorre 2005, 536). As such, in practicing this method, I maintained an intense relationship with both the gameworld and the online metagame surrounding the chosen titles, and kept a reflexive journal about the immersive-affective experience of gaming. In so doing, this method enabled me to not only shed light on a routinely obscured epistemological component of research in general, but content and discourse analysis especially.²

TRAUMATIC AAA PROLOGUES

All varieties of suffering are therefore the theme of drama, which promises to create out of them pleasure for the spectator (Freud & Bunker 1960, 145).

During my doctoral research into the affectivities of a selection of AAA games—their forms and content—it became apparent that many of the prologues and opening levels are spectacular and violent, often deploying traumatic experience as a narrative device. In this section I present several examples of these instances of represented and vicarious trauma, broadly mapped into three categories, before moving on to a discussion of how they operate affectively.

The traumatic events that unfold in the opening levels of the AAA games studied in this project are deployed through both narrative and within the game mechanics. To aid this discussion, they have been broadly mapped into three common modes of representation. The first mode of representation focuses on the personal trauma of the player character. Existing within the narrative of the game, this trope is usually depicted through the character’s loss of a loved one or through their bodily injury. An example of this mode of spectacle is in the prologue

2. For more detail about how this method gives critical insight, how it was conducted, and an example of the kind of results it can produce, please see Cuttell [2015]).

of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011). Within the first twenty minutes of gameplay, the player witnesses the kidnapping and presumed death of the player character's ex-girlfriend. The co-workers whom the player character should be protecting (in their role as chief of security) are dead and dying throughout the level (fig. 1). And finally, the prologue closes with the brutal physical maiming of the player character. Similarly, in *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios 2012), the death of the Empress (whom, according to the backstory, the player character was sworn to protect) happens before the player's eyes within the first ten minutes of gameplay (fig. 2). In both games, the player character must seek answers pertaining to these prologues – who attacked them and why? These events function as the narrative lynchpin of the entire game and are the primary *narrative* impetus for character action.



Figure 1: Dying co-workers in the opening of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011)



Figure 2: *Death of the Empress in the prologue to Dishonored (Arcane Studios 2012)*

The second mode is also a narrative device—the depiction of devastating world incidents such as outbreaks of diseases causing zombification; alien, monster, or human-led attacks on the city or vessel of the player character; natural disasters; and the accompanying spectacular scenes of horror, chaos, destruction, and death caused by these events. For example, at the beginning of all three games in the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007-2012), scenes of destruction and bodily harm are deployed to create fear and awe of the enemy (fig. 3).

The final traumatic device identified in this research is combat vulnerability. In many of the titles analysed in this research, during the earliest stages of the game the player controls a character who is vulnerable; usually within the gameplay (e.g. they possess no abilities), but also potentially within the narrative (e.g. they are depicted as a young or naive person). This is usually the character the player controls throughout the course of the game, but who has not yet acquired the skills the player will need to excel in combat – many games use the opening level as a training ground where the basic skill set needed for combat is taught. In the opening of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog,

2013), the player takes control of Sarah, a young American teenager and the daughter of the game's protagonist. She is home alone during the outbreak of spores that turn people into crazed zombie-like enemies. The player only takes control of her dad, Joel, when Sarah's leg is broken in their escape. Neither Sarah nor Joel is given any recourse to action if confronted by an enemy (beyond a few scripted quick-time events when playing as Joel). When carrying Sarah, if the player is too slow and Joel is caught by an enemy, he dies and the game forces a reload. At the end of the prologue, Sarah is shot by a member of the US army acting on official orders, and dies in Joel's arms (fig. 4).



Figure 3: Vancouver under attack in the opening to Mass Effect 3 (BioWare 2012)



Figure 4: Sarah's death in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013)

These prologues clearly induce a feeling of vulnerability in several ways. Vulnerability and spectacle are, in one sense, a narrative-affective device intended to create a sense of confusion, panic and horror. However, they are also notably deployed before the player has fully internalised the controls, become familiar with the interface, and thus developed the specific gaming habitus (Kirkpatrick 2012) needed for success; in this sense, this vulnerability and spectacle also operates beyond the game's narrative content alone. As with other representations of trauma (Farrell, 1998), the different modes of spectacles deployed within AAA games' openings act as 'enabling fictions'. In a medium and genre in which the primary mechanic is one of combat (few AAA titles do not involve violent combat), these early instances of spectacular traumas enable the player to 'buy into' the moral rules of the combat-oriented mechanics of the game. They act as cues of 'moral disengagement'—the detachment of moral judgements from ethical actions, due to various cues embedded within the narrative and mechanics. When moral disengagement occurs, in-game violence does not lead to self-sanctions³ (Bandura 1990). "Although systematic content-analyses of moral disengagement cues in

3. Self-sanctions refer to the process by which people regulate their ethical actions. They are developed through the internalising of moral standards via socialisation. As the name

violent video games are lacking to date, justification of violence and a distorted portrayal of consequences seem to be among the more common cues embedded in violent games” (Hartmann 2013, 118). Albert Bandura, Claudio Barbaranelli, Gian Vittorio Caprara and Concetta Pastorelli (1996) termed such cues ‘moral justification’ (364) whereby immoral acts can be justified and reframed as moral. It is through the witnessing and ethical provocation of such prologues that the violence demanded by such events is seen as ‘righteous’. This can be taken further by questioning whether such prologues do not only act as cues for moral disengagement (legitimizing the use of violent action in seeking retribution) but also function to demand an ethical response from the player.

PROVOKING AN ETHICAL RESPONSE

As can be seen in the previous example drawn from *The Last of Us*, the three narrative devices discussed (personal narrative, world narrative, and combat vulnerability) are often employed in conjunction with each other. The thread tying these devices together is that they place the player character in positions where they are not yet powerful enough to do anything about the situations in which they find themselves—the death and destruction is inevitable. It takes place before the player has created their skillful gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) and when the player character has not yet been furnished with the abilities or weapons that endow them with particular capabilities within the game’s combat system. Considering the ‘preferred playings’ and the ‘grain’ of a game’s narrative and mechanics, it is possible to see how these instances of spectacle—read in a ‘preferred’ manner—can function to make the player feel impotent. Of course, these modes of spectacle are often present throughout the game, or at least punctuate the game experience, providing a rise and fall of dramatic intensity. But it is how these devices function at a point in the game when the player has not yet internalised

suggests, self-sanctions are internally imposed and can be disengaged through various mechanisms (Bandura, 1990).

the controls and does not yet ‘inhabit’ their character that make the examination of traumatic and spectacular prologues key in this discussion.

In the immersive research journal that was coded and analysed as part of this study, several entries highlight the potential for emotional affect to be created as part of these narrative and mechanical devices. This is not something I expected to experience, since the devices in question were present at points in the game (usually very early on) before I developed a connection to the characters, the world, or the story. They occurred before I had internalised the control system such that I began to relate to the player character as my character—as an extension of myself and under my control:

Putting me inside her young, inexperienced, small body made me feel more vulnerable as a player – surely, if I was playing as Joel, I would have a chance to outrun the infected or could potentially fight my way out or have access to weaponry – but why would the game force me to face the infected when I was not physically capable of doing so...? I feel very isolated in this world. At first, because I am Sarah, I feel isolated because my father is not there to protect me. Then, in the car, the radio is dead.... The isolation, heightened by the dark and the chaos, is furthered by the feeling of vulnerability in playing Sarah, and then by playing Joel who cannot fight because he is carrying Sarah. The vulnerability is heightened by the panicked people.... The chaos and panic all around you is infectious. It sucks you in (Immersive Research Journal: *The Last of Us*).

Although this journal entry was recorded within the first thirty minutes of gameplay in a story which takes many hours to be told, it highlights the emotionally affective use of the previously discussed early narrative and mechanical devices. Tracing my reaction to these early instances of violent spectacle in my immersion journal, several feelings were strongly elicited. I not only felt vulnerability, fear and shock when playing through these openings, I also felt anger.

The game hits you with the assassination of the Empress – the woman whose life it is your duty to protect. You are thrown into a dungeon and have no weapon and no clue as to how to use the controls. There is an immediate feeling of danger and helplessness. At that initial assassination,

I had floundered with the controls because I had not been taught to use them.... I did feel like I had somehow failed the Empress – even though I know her death was an inevitability in the narrative – I still felt like I'd failed from being useless with the controller (Immersive Research Journal: *Dishonored*).

At this stage of *Dishonored*, as with the opening level of most games, the player is given no control over the direction or outcome of the narrative. Yet, even with an awareness of its scripted and unalterable quality, the lack of control over both the player character and their inability to prevent the events can lead to feelings of impotence and failure. My experiences so far seem to indicate that both Berger's theorization of ethical responses to witnessing trauma, and Debord's notion spectacle are correct—I felt vulnerable and somewhat impotent in the face of such devices. Yet, the affectivity, feelings of complicity and impotence when playing these prologues also functioned to motivate me to continue playing:

When the soldier shot at Joel, I gasped. Realising that it had been Sarah who was caught horrified me. Joel's reaction was so moving. The worst thing was the noise Sarah made as he tried to move her. I was actually crying from the upsetting nature of the scene. Not ten minutes in, and I already feel emotionally drained by this game. That was it; from that point on I had been drawn in to such an extent that there was no going back, no stopping play. I had to complete the story (Immersive Research Journal: *The Last of Us*).

In these openings, gameplay is usually interactive, but not yet *interreactive*. That is, the player has no control over the outcome of the prologues. Empress Jessamine Kauldwin will always die in *Dishonored*, as will Sarah in *The Last of Us*. The tragic outcomes of the prologue are not the player's fault, irrespective of their playing skills, style of play, or narrative decisions (should any be offered by the game). The player has no control over the outcome (yet). So why—as my immersive research journal entries attest—did I find these prologues so affective? More importantly, why did they compel me to complete the game? In

‘Playing with trauma: interactivity, empathy, and complicity’, Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps (2015) have already made the connection between the unique gameness of games and their ability to position the player within traumatic events, such that emotional reactions can be elicited and the player can be made to feel somehow complicit. They argue that “games work with the concept of psychological trauma in ways that are unprecedented in other media” (ibid.: 271). In their examination of trauma and non-player character deaths in *The Walking Dead: Season One* (2012), Smethurst and Craps (2015) note the ability of the video game’s form to make the player feel complicit, irrespective of whether it was their decisions/actions which led to the death. Their argument can be extended by positing that the interactivity of gaming, which can indeed lead to players feeling complicit within traumatic game events, also functions to provoke an ethical response, and affectively ties the player to the outcome of the game.

OVERCOMING TRAUMA; BEATING THE GAME

In the melodramatic universe of trauma culture, perpetrator and victim are understood as dichotomous subject positions and, cast as the embodiment of the absolute innocent and good, victims are ascribed the status of ultimate moral authority based on the notion that physical pain purifies the soul and sanctifies the sufferer (Rothe 2016, 57).

A trope common to most of the AAA titles analysed as part of this research was their presentation of the player character as ‘special’. The playable protagonist is often depicted as a heroic, capable survivor. When the option arises to choose the path of the anti-hero, this trope is still present in how the game places the player character as being above and apart from the NPCs of the gameworld. The player character’s influence is great and their contribution is marked. They endure physical violence and hardships in pursuit of their prize (fig. 5):

You are more than a queen. *You are a hero.* You are Albion’s champion. Its protector... *Only you* can defeat the creature that dwells in the shadow (*Fable III*, Lionhead Studios, 2010).

And *because of you* we found Halo. Unlocked its secrets. Shattered our enemy's resolve. Our victory – your victory – was so close. I wish you could have lived to see it. But you belong to Reach. Your body, your armor – all burned and turned to glass. Everything, except your courage. That, you gave to us (*Halo: Reach*, Bungie, 2010).

Your own species can be destroyed with a single thought. But *you are different*. We have witnessed your actions in this cycle; the destruction of Sovereign, the fall of the Collectors. The Reapers perceive you as a threat, and I must understand why [...]. Your confidence is singular [...]. *Your victories are more than a product of chance* (*Mass Effect 3*, BioWare, 2012).



Figure 5: Commander Shepard as the bloodied hero of *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare 2012)

Roger Luckhurst (2008) argues that we are living in a ‘trauma culture’ in which ‘extremity and survival are privileged markers of identity’ (2); they are part of our cultural consciousness, pervade the personal, political, and economic spheres, and can even be the sole reason for fame. The player character’s ‘specialness’ and their survival of tragic experiences become the player’s impetus for action.

Moreover, many of these games offer a world which the player can master. The narrative and mechanical goal is to achieve, conquer, control and win. They are a space designed to challenge and test the player,

but ultimately, to be overcome. Krzywinska and Brown (2015) recognise how the player's sense of mattering and achievement is pivotal in gaming, arguing that "game designers actively want to convince players that they have achieved something: this endeavour was not time wasted but yielded achievement and progress, confirming therefore a sense of existence" (201). Video games are organised such that attempts to 'win' are iterative; in most AAA games, failure is impassable. Losing in combat is often accompanied by the death of the player character; a black screen or message of failure; and a menu appears, allowing the player to load from a previously saved file or autosave. In most video game combat scenarios, therefore, failure is not a valid option. The player must repeatedly attempt challenges in order to finally master them:

Each has a core gameplay dynamic on which much of the pleasure it offers is based, a particular kind of activity at which the successful player has to become proficient, largely through a process of extended temporal engagement; playing again and again – and again – until further progress is made, the player coming to a closer understanding of the underlying logic of the game (King & Krzywinska, 2006: 3).

It is necessary to consider the mobilisation of trauma within gaming, vis-à-vis the interactivity and mastery of games. If John Berger (1980) is correct that mediated representation of real traumas function to make the viewer feel impotent in their response due to the inability of the individual to enact political change, then what about the interactive medium of videogames? Guy Debord (1995) asserts that the spectacle of mass media, in its function as a tool of depoliticisation and pacification, is a "permanent opium war" (30). This differs from the spectacles of gaming in which the traumatic spectacles of video game openings can be seen to act antithetically to mediated representations of 'real' trauma on account of video games' ability to furnish the observer with agency and give them the tools to enact not only violent revenge, but also other ethical judgements and actions. Due to the interactivity, reactivity, and agency afforded by video games (as well as their iterative temporality), there is potential for the player to respond to such displays. Unlike Debord's viewers, they are not depoliticised subjects merely passively

witnessing the spectacular imagery—they can dynamically respond to it. In some games, furthermore, the player is also able to enact an overtly moral response (e.g. through choosing to take a distinct moral ‘path’ in titles such as *Fable III* [Lionhead Studios 2010] or *Dishonored* [Arkane Studios 2012]). In her discussion of futurist dystopian films, E. Ann Kaplan (2016) argues that they do not inspire the viewer to “take the position of responsibility and ethics that witnessing in its true sense involves. The fictions may well prepare viewers for ethical responsibility, but the genre as such cannot provide that position” (119). However, as I have demonstrated, in their interactivity, videogames go beyond film in that the player does indeed have the responsibility to respond to the traumas they have witnessed. As previously discussed, Kaplan (2016) recognises witnessing is an active process produced through the techniques of the art (14). In gaming, these techniques mean that it is only through player intervention and activity that changes to the gameworld can be made.

Through the interactivity of gaming, therefore, the player can experience direct ethical agency in response to these spectacular prologues. In some games, there may be various avenues through which this response may occur, and the player may be furnished with several options for narrative progression. For instance, in some AAA titles this might take the explicit form of permitting the player to overtly make ethical decisions about the gameworld and its inhabitants, such as in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2010), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011) or *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios 2010). Whilst all games played for this research project required the player character to defeat (kill or otherwise) those responsible for their initial trauma, that does not mean the player will choose to act ‘morally’—that is, according to a specific set of societal norms. Rather, even with games such as *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012) where few ethical ‘options’ are available to the player (in terms of branching narrative or combat decisions), the gameplay itself can be an *ethical project* in the way the response provoked by such prologues provokes the player to action. By following gameplay through to its conclusion—requiring skill, time

and effort—the player is given the chance to right the wrongs of the prologue; to bring justice or vengeance on those that caused the initial traumas.

CONCLUSION

Smethurst and Craps (2015) have already identified that traumatic game content (such as NPC deaths), when coupled with a game's interactivity, can function to elicit feelings of responsibility and empathy in the player. In this paper, I sought to consider the issue of traumatic game content and affective player responses by examining AAA games' prologues and their provocation of ethical responses. Exploring the spectacular traumas of game prologues, I argued that they function to make the player feel vulnerable, both within the narrative and the game mechanics. I argued that the emotional reaction to the witnessing of suffering in videogames produces an active and ethical response in the player; the player witnesses the traumatic images and is then given the ability (which they can utilise if they have the time and skill) to respond.

While Berger recognised that photographs of suffering were depoliticised in the way they produced feelings of impotence in the viewer, and Debord asserted that spectacular mediatised imagery depoliticised and alienated the viewer, videogames are necessarily interactive. While it is not the player's ineffectiveness that led to the initial trauma and victimisation, the player is the antidote to that trauma; it is through their effort and skill that the player character enacts vengeance on those who perpetrated the violence. Therefore, unlike Berger's viewer-witnesses and Debord's passive viewer, during these spectacular and traumatic prologues, videogame players can witness and experience the player characters', NPCs', and gameworld's trauma, and they can ethically respond to it—a response which can only be enacted through the performance of legitimate violence in the name of retribution and 'winning'.

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