

Playing or Being Played? Choice and Agency in Videogames: Reflecting on *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates how the videogame medium produces an engrossing and complex spectatorial experience, consistently challenging the user's dimension of engagement. A reflexive analysis of *the Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2016) encompasses a principal methodology; considering how play, spectatorship, and engagement merge into one. This paper homes in on how narrative directions and choices manipulate the will of the player, facilitated by preconceived and ongoing spectatorial influences. Semiotics, narratology, cinematography, ludology, and focalization theories fortify a conclusion that deconstructs the inherent fallacy present in narrative-based ludic choices, uncovering that their presence is a more an upholding of an inherent hegemonic structure and its boundaries.

Keywords

play, spectatorship, agency, semiotics, engagement.

INTRODUCTION

During a long and isolating Covid-19-plagued winter break, I set myself to watching gameplay of the recently released triple-A videogame, *CyberPunk 2077* (2020).¹ Any premonition that walkthrough-watching is a niche sport are tarnished upon acknowledging that this video was viewed 8.2 million times. Rather than enumerate various proofs of the videogame industry's colossal and expanding value (approximately 138.4 \$bn in 2021), what catalyzes the heart of this paper is its practice of spectatorship.² What processes occur when watching play? And, to what extent, if at all, does spectating appeal more to filmic viewership rather than a remote engagement with play?

A method comes into view upon scrutiny of former game studies literature on the relationship between game and narrative. In 2002, Krzywinska and King regarded narrative as partial to gameplay, offering only a 'general context within which gameplay is conducted'. Narrative, therefore, plays a subordinate role against 'more active or frenetic gameplay'.³ Re-evaluating this literature offers two important insights. First, that modern videogames are embodied contestations of such assertions given their consistent and incessant technological advancements. More recent publications prove a paradigmatic progression (see Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* or Weimin Toh's *a Multimodal Approach to Video Games and the Player Experience*) now deeply concerned with the analysis of videogame narrative. Via a combination of alternative industry models, audience tastes, and, crucially, superior technology, developers pay an inordinate amount of attention to narrative as they do gameplay— if not more.

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Writings of a mere 19 years later demonstrate how substantially game studies literature is subject to the period of its origin and the products of its study. Uniquely so, the videogame medium is one where incessant growth and innovation demand frequent and re-evaluated iterations of academic reflections. Consider, for instance, Howell's argument below, that

If anything, narrative videogames adhere even more rigidly to the classical formula [forging motivation and causal connection] than film; more than just giving characters believable motivation for their subsequent actions, as in film, cut-scenes often directly give the player/spectator his or her objectives: shoot X, steal Y, jump to Z.⁴

Howell's view that indiscrete instructions and one-dimensional character motivation are one of the videogame's sole narrative mechanics resonates far less now than it did two decades ago. A modern ludic trope that grants players an assumed, embodied freedom invites narrative variation and champions individual player identity and autonomy through the act of choice.

Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012-2014) is one that excelled at the visual novel, proving that storytelling had the ability to outshine traditional action gameplay, or, at the very least do without it. *Fahrenheit* (2005), *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Life is Strange* (2015), and more, spearheaded a contemporary wave of choice-based narrative videogames.

On-screen textual commentaries act as a kind of ludic feedback—rewarding, acknowledging, or reproaching a player's decisions and subsequent effects on a storyline and its characters. These intra-game messages recall one of Salen and Zimmerman's fundamentals of 'meaningful play' as such feedback provides an imbued weight to players' decisions.⁵



Figure 1: "Clementine will remember that." (left)

Figure 2: Rocket is furious that you let Drax throw him." (right)

The screenshots above compare *The Walking Dead's* use of the function (top left) with a contemporary imitation featured in a trailer for *Guardians of the Galaxy* videogame (top left).⁶ Such is one of the many examples discussed in the paper that present how design mechanics may support a game's narrative, reflecting the trend that honors both disciplines equally, and in tandem.

The long-standing discourse between narrative and ludic disciplines is relevant to this discussion as it echoes the fundamental interrogation of how a videogame poses a spectatorial experience somewhat transcendental of film's known capabilities. I aim

to resolve this dispute via a reflexive analysis of my own play that honors both filmic and ludic qualities; actively engaging with the dichotomy that rouses a certain tension across both disciplines.

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt (2016) is my key reference.⁷ *The Witcher* is a third-person action-adventure game set in a fictional, medieval fantasy world ripe with monsters, magic, and war. It is a game that excels at translating these rich themes, providing a base for an equally engaging game that triumphantly weaves game and narrative.

INTRODUCING THE PLAYER-VIEWER

Defining who or what the player-viewer is means to appreciate how they are both divergent and overlapping at once. Where play typically appeals to one's sensory, physical, and mental engagement with ludic mechanics, narrative pulls the viewer into a story that recalls the experience of a filmic spectator. This dichotomy draws back to game studies' age-old debate between narratologists and ludologists, as this investigation attempts to reconcile the disciplinary tensions between the intersective activity of watching and playing.⁸ A thorough breakdown of elements, with clear labelling and dissection, should minimize confusion where overlapping terminology, theories, and methodologies of the two media arise.

This paper concentrates on how the spectatorial spectrum can be exemplified in the ludic tensions between choice and rule. The freedom to choose one's actions, reactions, and engage in dialogue allow the player to reflect their individuality upon the game. The supposed freedom of choice, however, is bound by rules and mechanics that nudge the player into choosing certain paths over others. Coaxing a player to expect agency whilst intentionally swaying them is yet another juxtaposing feature of the tether between player and viewer. A videogame's inherent mechanical and coded structure is thereby argued as an essentialization of this hypocrisy—relegating the player-viewer to spectator—brought on by game law's own endorsement of agency and individuality.

My aim here is two-fold. First, I want to explore the hegemonic construction proposed by the inherent subalternity—silenced through lack of real agency—of the player as choice-maker. Second, such an exercise draws back to this discussion's earliest catalyst: can videogames be consumed solely via watching? If choice truly is a fallible ludic mechanic, am I in on the game's play, or does the game's control on my agency render me a spectator? With any luck, a reflexive examination of *the Witcher's* choice mechanics may exemplify a contemporary analytical model that embraces the dual perceiver, shaking the foundations upon which game studies is partly constructed.

A SEMIOTICIAN'S TASK – UNRAVELLING CHOICE

A game might fail in its aim to immerse its players, but the pursuit itself centers, or focalizes the spectator because it appeals to a productive process that engages the dichotomy of playing and watching. In games where making substantial choices is a central feature, dismantling how icons signal certain choices is part of the formulation of meaning: a player's interpretation of signs may well condition the spectatorial experience and foster a spectatorial identity. Tabulating the circular chronology that links the game's signs and the formation of player identity can clue us in to locating and designating weight to the peripheral, yet significant, circumstances that occur during spectatorial engagement.

The absorption of information and its conditions provide another dimension of mobility to the user's position on the player-viewer spectrum. We can look to the mechanism of *the Witcher's* social economy in its maintenance of both ludic and narrative dilemmas.

FROM IDEOLOGY TO MEANING: DECONSTRUCTING THE PROCESS

Games of narrative substance can be said to represent a certain set of values and beliefs, which can be concretized by the all-too contested notion of ideology.

In travelling along semiotic lines, we may conceive ideology as the product of one's profound engagement with play. Meaning is therefore its mediator, and language is its measure. Signs are therefore the icons that become interpreted by its user. Although I see ideology as an embodiment of engagement, some, like Sicart, view ludic ideology as deterministic, as a set of 'rules that determine our relation to the representation of the world.'⁹ I favour the idea that ideology is borne out of an engagement with play and can therefore be determined by circumstance and context over the substance of signs themselves. Giving weight to circumstance and peripheries, however, summons the great need to reflect upon the place and space which field meaning.

We have evidence of a developer's appreciation of choice in game design. Working from the widely adopted industry standard that consequential decisions equate to a respective quality of emotional substance, shows how contestable such thinking is. Although it has grounds within game design, it fundamentally ignores how reception comes into play. Summoning semiotics means equating sign deconstruction with caution: meaning is an arbitrary—rather than deducible—production of the merge between signifier and signified.¹⁰ The videogame medium renders the signifier and signified more relevant and layered, because its creators have more dimensions to manipulate meaning than with other media, such as film or text.

Moreover, secondary factors such as preconceptions also interfere with reception. Consider, for instance, how although choice is a major component in the production of meaning, a videogame's ideology is no less defined by games with more freedom. This is because the set of choices provided, in and of themselves, offer an ideology via their contestation of antonymic and alternative counterparts. In fact, alternatives may situate meaning further, because they are intimately framed by ideological boundaries that permit glimpses into purpose, consequence, and intention.

CHOICES BOUND BY A LACK OF AGENCY

Despite the medium's vested engagement with deepening experience through choice, videogames cannot pretend to grant freedom and be equally bound by a finite and calculated set of options. Luke Kelly, discussing the ambitions of the ideal game, coins "ideality" as an achievement of the prioritization of narrative choice: he claims that such games 'often provide the most compelling experiences' because they embrace the narrative of the videogame 'as unstable and vulnerable.'¹¹ Consider the visual model below that attempts to breakdown and chronologize how choices stem from a desire to address the ideology at the heart of a videogame:

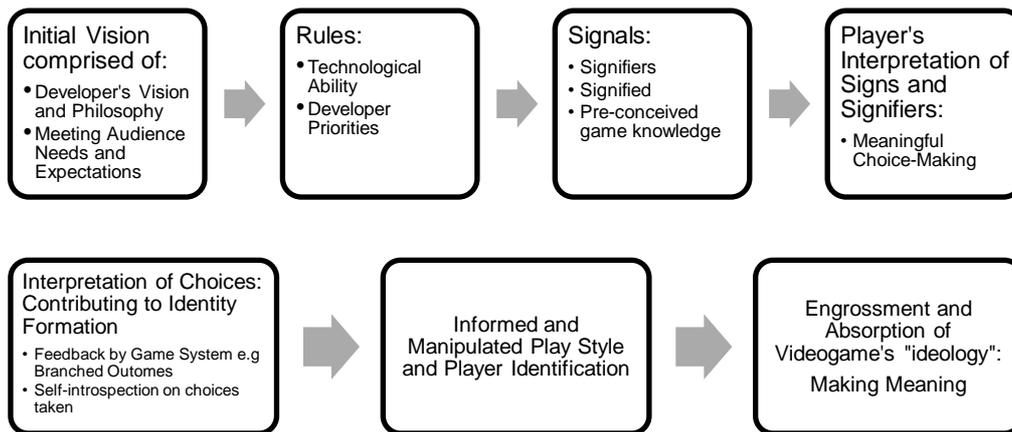


Chart 1: Meaningful Process Chart

The trickiest and most noteworthy aspect of this chart is what follows from players making choices: such play is informed and manipulated circularly by an amalgamation of the factors that surround gameplay. The affectation of play style that emerges from engagement will enable the player to assume a certain position or identity with respect to the narrative.

The consequences of individual choice, according to Salen and Zimmerman, ‘speak to the outcome of a player action, identifying how a single choice impacts larger events within the game world.’¹² As we exemplify the process of meaning we can come to a stronger vision on the meaning of process. Looking at *the Witcher’s* economy is one of many sets of spaces where choice makes its narrative mark.

GREEDY OR NEEDY? GERALT’S URGENCY FOR COIN:

Money or currency is a common feature among RPG games, which allows the player to buy items. Buyable items may aid the player in combat, looting (gaining more powerful items) and personalizing the Geralt’s avatar.

Crucially, *the Witcher* keenly positions money as a central concern via a balance of certain mechanics. For instance, its purchasing power felt weak to me: saving for a certain item was necessary were I to want or need one. Moreover, when money stood as a reward for completing a quest, it was seldom a generous sum.

Additionally, outside of quests and side missions, there were little to no opportunities for money-making, and missions that would reward most handsomely would be both time-consuming and challenging. Finally, the abundance of slots that can enhance Geralt’s primacy resulted in the fact there was always something to upgrade: two different swords, a crossbow, arrows, a whole set of armour, runestones, and more. Some upgradable slots, like skill points, cannot even be purchased with money. For all these reasons and more, *the Witcher’s* currency felt to me a sparse, yet powerful resource, and often a primary concern.

Beyond audio-visual cues, the game’s ludic mechanics contributed to the overwhelming purpose of in-game wealth. This, therefore, contributes to part of the game’s ideology. Attempting to resist the signals that made up Geralt’s financial urgency conveys how discourse is produced by the relationship between the game’s hegemonic mechanics and the player’s reluctance or submission to rebel against them.

HEGEMONIC GAME STRUCTURES

I felt at odds with the force of money and how necessary it was for me to earn it. My reception of the game's signs and signifiers had coerced me into worshipping the economy's hegemonic structure. This is not the first time a game has been accused of abusive or controlling mechanics. With regards to the industrial phenomenon of Pokémon, Buckingham and Sefton-Green consider the relationship between the consumer and producer in terms of structure and agency engaged 'in a deliberate—even cynical—form of manipulation.'¹³ They claim that the provision of the Pokémon world aimed to resolve satisfaction through consumption prevents other forms of children's culture from ever existing.¹⁴ The relationship between the user and hegemonic mechanics is mirrored through choices promising agency which are more manipulative than they are emancipating.

GERALT: WITCHER FOR HIRE

One of the ways such a boundary was drawn was in Geralt's avatar. Geralt as the player's vessel is significant because the repetitious and evocative narrative force of Geralt's oppression permeated my play style. The stereotype that Witchers have an inherent and insatiable love of money is feed for their public hatred and inferior social standing. Financial negotiations almost always arise when Geralt accepts quests from characters, allowing the player to barter via a slider that accommodates the NPCs (non-playable characters) "annoyance level." NPCs were sensitive towards Geralt's negotiations and did not hesitate to comment on the social significance of the transactions with tongue-in-cheek comments, like: "I know Witchers don't work for free." Other times, the player can choose to insist on a reward or offer gratuitous services, a decision seemingly free and up to the player's discretion. If engrossment is active, every previous encounter goes on to shape the next one. Times where I was treated crudely provoked aggression, whilst graceful encounters brought on more sympathy.



Figure 3: Geralt's responses to the man's plight: "Where should I search for your son?"; "Let's talk about my reward" (initiate negotiation); "Sorry, busy at the moment".

Figure 4: The man's response to a high barter: "It's a lot... I'll need to borrow from kin. But you have it. Won't spare no coin for me boy."



Although I can select between those options, narrative ultimately dictates my choice. If one of my options is to barter, and the other is to scoff and exit aggressively, an underlying feeling is suggested: Geralt deserves to be paid. Here is where the freedom of choice loses any weight. Gramsci, whose revolutionary writings on cultural hegemony are interpreted by T.J Jackson Lears, reflects on bounded thinking typical of hegemonic structures, asserting that

“...every language contains the elements of a conception of the world”. The available vocabulary helps mark the boundaries of permissible discourse, discourages the clarification of social alternatives, and makes it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it.¹⁵

I realized that the limitation in choice and the way in which certain options were presented to me as a player geared me towards an identity more dictated by the framing of language than the freedom of discourse. Freedom via choice is more deceiving than initially conceptualized, because, amongst other things, the absence of my own responses forces one to think solely on the game’s terms. Individualizing narrative through options—if truly the developer’s goal— is hereby undermined. Although options are available to the player, they are bound to the hegemony of the game and emerge from the developer’s design rather than from a player’s true capability to pick outside of the prescribed set.

Appreciating the game’s ability to affect me, however, may result in something I do not support, that I had no defense against the game’s hegemonic design. The game clearly leverages the fact that engrossed players feel responsible for the outcome of the narrative. But, the choices that are available are finite and pre-set by those in charge of the narrative itself, meaning I will inevitably fail to freely determine my own behavior. Ultimately, I am trapped by these limits, and manipulated into picking certain choices over others. Choosing to contest the game’s direction outright, recalls Mukherjee’s remedial revolt of the ‘subaltern: concerned with writing “history from below” and engaging a ‘self-conscious effort to correct social history’s bias for the perspective of the elite classes.’¹⁶ On the other hand, evoking Spivak’s subaltern proposes that the game’s inherent representation of my interests is not only false but also unethical: despite any attempts to render the subject a voice, power ultimately resides with those who produce the collective narrative. Let us attempt to perceive this reception from the player’s view and contest what results from an indulgence—a disobedience if you will—in responding sovereignly to ludic narrative decisions.

Engaging with the problem of currency pushed me to play the game in several ways. What remained constant was the sensation that I am both responsible and affected by how Geralt behaves. I related to him, and were I to err in a certain act, I sensed regret; the game had me immersed in its world, narrative, lore, and politics. Further, this immersion ensued from the oft-attacked marriage of ludology and narrative. Once again, the videogame format is remarkably well-equipped to sustain the tether between player and avatar through an infinite feedback loop of inputted and outputted information. I am always in control of Geralt and am constantly tracking my input and the game’s response to it. Whether it is as significant as slaying a village or as innocent as drawing a sword; when it comes to choosing, we always know what their outcomes will bring in a game.

IDENTIFYING THROUGH GERALT

It's necessary to remind the reader of the subjectivity of these findings. Comparing my views to those of Majkowski's proves that preconceived engagements with the game's production context may affect one's reading and relation to choices posed throughout the game. My aim was to encounter *the Witcher III* in isolation, to respond intuitively and as unbiasedly as possible—as impossible as that is—as fundamental to an autoethnography. Majkowski, however, who not only has written extensively on the *Witcher* saga but has also worked with CDProjekt on the development of its first installment, has deep knowledge of the series and its cultural contexts. This comparison can therefore explain how someone with a limited preconception like myself finds themselves at odds in being embodied by Geralt, whom Majkowski views as a significant influence in choice-making: 'Sometimes, his [Geralt] considerate attitude is presented as a dilemma for the player, when it is up to her to decide whether Geralt will take pity on a monster and let it go, or slay it...'.¹⁷ Majkowski correctly identifies that 'on other occasions, the game decides for the player'.¹⁸ It might therefore be Majkowski's proximity with identification that therefore impedes them to acknowledge that the very construction of this binary is a factor of influence that blankets over any contextual sentiments. Given that I saw myself as the embodiment of Geralt via the one medium, and not as an accompaniment to the grander series and Polish context, it is perhaps plainer to see how the binary of a duality of options with opposing or adjacent valences, therefore, feels like a bind, and suffocation on one's objective ability to clearly conceive the level of agency they hold in this ludic dimension.

Nevertheless, the accusations of corruption toward Geralt fortified identification through sympathy. Such an observation shows how my identification, which determined my choices as I played, informed my experience because it drew on my subjectivity rather than a strictly universal one. This is what separates a game driven by narrative like *the Witcher* from a game motivated principally by the completion of set goals, as in the installments of the first-person shooter franchise *Call of Duty*.¹⁹

However, it is a useful insight because it opens the floor to the ontological question it teases: If manipulations are there to make choice harder and therefore more meaningful, does this make choice and rule autonomous, or antonymic? That is, is choice there to balance the rules that bind them? To what extent, then, is choice in videogame illusory or fallacious if the game's design can intentionally re-route your opinion so succinctly?

Such hypocrisy has been observed in other games. In a review of first-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), the author laments the duplicity in promoting choice and simultaneously removing one's ability to act upon it. He writes: 'being presented with no choice is more "emotionally real" because while it guarantees the player can only make the singular choice, it is also more manipulative.'²⁰ Players are initially given the ability to reject violent acts that preserve the user's moral integrity. The game then progressively revokes the privilege of choice in its most provocative moments, igniting the moralistic player's frustration. This shows how even though choice may be an implementable feature it will always be in the hands of those who dictate what those choices are. We may say that those in control of the paper may be in a better position to influence the pen.

DECONSTRUCTING THE SEMIOTICS OF IDENTIFICATION

Manipulation is present in both valences as deceit and encouragement. Videogames traditionally equip signals to prompt players to act or play in certain ways. Most games with linear storylines typically suggest clear tasks and goals by providing guides that track mission progress such as via *the Witcher's* HUD. On the other hand,

videogames that deliver an immersive experience may exercise your instinct and highlight a multitude of interactive options available to the player. Videogames that urge the player to select between many possible avenues of narrative or ludic interactivity have a high naturalistic modality because they allow the player to think as they might do if their relationship with the videogame world and avatar were unified with their own self.

The term modality and its use in videogame discourses merit unpacking. With roots in semiotics, modality draws upon a text's ability or quality to make claims conducive to its credibility, even within fictional dimensions.²¹ A preoccupation with videogame modality is considered in Andrew Burn's work, who claims that certain categories are valuable markers of videogame modality.²² A reworking of media modalities is necessary because videogames offer more pluralist sensations than a written text and undergo technical manipulations that film does not. Modality can also be perceived as a spectrum, with a high level of modality indicative of a confident or assured claim to a certain truth. A high naturalistic modality, therefore, refers to a high claim of truth presented via the lens of a *naturalist* image, adapted for human sensibility in its appeal to perceptible cultural or social markers.

A study published in 2018 witnessing how two 14-year-old boys set about designing a videogame observed how the subjects intended on priming players into interacting with certain objects they felt a player would otherwise ignore: 'By giving rewards on the kind of places you'd have to click' ... 'We made it so you're supposed to click a barrel, but no person will click a barrel at random.'²³ The subjects aimed at 'creating a coherent experience', and even though they viewed the barrel interaction as an obscure novelty, it served as both 'proxy for a computational conception' and 'in conjunction with narrative events.'²⁴ This is a relevant insight because the inexperienced subjects of the study emulated what they assumed to be a professional design process based on their own engagement with videogaming. The urge to implement this into their game proves that the interaction between ludology and narrative is as perceptible to developers as it is for its players.

We may consider that a high naturalistic modality is linked to a wider range and relevance of interactions and choices available. They simultaneously entice the player to comport themselves as naturally as they might in the game world as in real life, allowing them to act based on their individuality, despite following the rules of a fictional world in a digital medium. It may increase the player's sensation of presence because they interact with ludic elements that draw more upon the user's individualities. Consider how *the Witcher* forces one to reassess how a player orients themselves against the frequent moral impasse of rejecting and accepting monetary compensation. It's both a relevant and impactful imperative because it coaxes the user to dually reconcile narrative and ludology.

These thoughts are enriched by Frederic Seraphine's coinage of the ludophrase: a rebellion to the alleged simplistic view of videogame mechanics. Seraphine sees the ludophrase as a richer treatment of choice in videogames because it considers a process more complex than sole causation: 'we can create ludophrases that don't necessarily occur according to rules and may occur just once. It becomes then possible to create gameplay interactions that may change or even disappear during play, creating infinite possibilities of meaning through contrast.'²⁵ This promotes meaningful choices not only due to a consideration of more factors but also because appeals to individuality and confrontations with atypical scenarios have an ability to influence judgement too.

A high naturalistic modality is therefore achieved because the appeals made to videogame users and their lives outside of the videogame world lean on both foreign and relatable concepts. Although not all users are faced with Geralt's moralistic

dilemma of attaining wealth, most players relate to a financial anxiety brought on by existing within a capitalistic and hierarchical societal structure. Even the game can only reinforce the hegemony. Even if we rebel against the rules, laws and design of the game. That's because, by default, any engagement with a system coded to manipulate and conform your agency will disable how to see the options laid out before you with any clarity. Even rebellions take place among a microcosm of a closed-circuit system created to accommodate our worldview. This in turn proves why choice is so idealized in design and unconquerable. The struggle of choice reflects our society's anxieties borne from the familiar ideal—and fallacy—of meritocracy: any goal, aim or position in life is within reach if the right choices are made to attain it. By being made to think hard about the choices laid out for us we are likely to dismiss the fact that the choices we are represented by fail to represent and speak for our true needs.

This is the key to locating a player's identity. Immersing oneself in such a context requires both the faculties exercised when watching and playing because they are the very same ones employed in choice-making. Although interactivity isn't nearly as participatory in film as it is in videogame, most appeals are housed in a narrative engagement that calls for active viewership. Again, this points to the illusion of freedom despite having choice, because it still depends on a subjectivity extrapolated from an engagement with a foreign world, its transcendental laws, and therefore a sense of limited agency.

To convey the achievement of a high naturalistic modality, an overstimulation of governing factors may make one's experience of action, control, and embodiment richer. Perhaps this enveloping, complementary notion of spectatorship thrives because the modality of choice articulates the impression that decisions made in the fictional, digital world feel more consequential than they are. As both player and viewer, I have come to conclude that it is within the developer's power to construct convincing modalities that are able to override the sensation that I am always in control. It purposefully and triumphantly draws upon the familiar experience of living in a meritocratic, capitalistic society, and the complexity of judgment that still, infallibly, inhabits it.

CONCLUSION

This paper finds a review of certain previously held game studies notions as meriting their own ontology. Videogames are a challenging and multi-faceted discipline because they commit their users to an inordinate amount of time, content, aesthetics, and ludic stimulation.

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt, although a phenomenal and impressive piece of work, is only one of many that triumphantly binds narratology and ludology together so harmoniously that it resolves, at least in my view, what was once thought to be an irreconcilable dichotomy in the field of game studies. This paper sought to collapse the mirage behind which the concept of ludic choice stands behind. Most often, freedom of choice is employed in videogames to diversify experience and therefore foster a unique spectatorial identity between product and consumer. Locating this discussion in semiotic terms, and, consequently, through those of agency and hegemony, found that games cannot possibly offer the choice they seem to promote when their construction so transparently lies in the hands of those who govern the rules and laws of the game world. It's suffocating because although we are tempted to fall into the 'willing suspension of disbelief' we are aware, thanks to the comfort of our leather-lined chair, that we are not inside the game.²⁶ And yet, choices are appealing, visceral, and meaningful because they draw upon a participatory spectatorial experience that only the interactive quality of videogames can offer.

The spectator is tricked into thinking that because choices made draw on how one may naturally—or modally—think in real life, choices truly do matter in the digital

world. Choosing to impress oneself with the power of choice can convincingly conceal the reality that such a power structure inherently removes any agency, mobility, and individuality a narrative-based game promises to deliver.

The real crux of the videogame's spectatorial experience is therefore the odd sensation that although I am holding a controller, I am not really in control; that although I am myself, I am really Geralt; and that although I am a tourist of the digital world, that world recalls mine.

This paper has described the simultaneous embodiment of an incorporeal world that operates on the most contrasting and converging identifiable experience, which is that of presenting an ontologically challenging account of the encounter between play and viewership found in modern videogames. Honoring the reflexive analysis can therefore encourage the deep exploration that videogames of this caliber merit and require.

Of note, the conditions through my playthrough of *the Witcher* and the writing of this paper were written are located deep in that isolating valley of the pandemic—oscillating between a bitter winter and a hope-ridden spring. It would be audacious to exclude the influence of the Coronavirus age's constrained contact and mobility and view them as only merely peripheral to the repressive undertones relayed above.

Now more than ever, I urge our current and future academics of this discipline to question gameplay from the outset and to scrutinize mechanics that can unobtrusively accommodate users in a position of subservience or subjection, and the rich well of findings that may emerge from the indulgence of reflexive and proximal readings.

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