

Spatiality and the Power of Simulation in Covideo games

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The 2020 COVID-pandemic has generated an unprecedented anthropological situation leaving us without any legitimate frameworks to comprehend our (maybe permanently) altered conditions. This is what Demetriz and Eyerman mean by proposing to conceptualise the pandemic as a “cultural trauma in the making” (Demertzis and Eyerman 2020, 18). Appropriating the term from memory studies, they primarily understand cultural trauma as a special occurrence, when “the taken-for-granted foundations of individual and collective identity are shattered” (2). The present paper argues that the medium of video games significantly contributed to making sense of the pandemic and to mapping out possible routes of action.

It is well-documented how the lockdown experience seems to have accelerated already ongoing phenomena and promoted the acceptance of video games as a legitimate and non-trivial cultural medium. Besides, the lockdowns drew attention to the fact that games also belong to the group of “familiar structures of meaning (narrative, iconography, genre, binary codes)” (Alexander and Smith 2020, 264). The appeal of *Animal Crossing* or *Among Us*, the most popular titles of the period, was not only the distraction, but also the commentary on the current situation that they offered: games are also involved in the economy of meaning production in critical times, but they do it differently from other media.

It is in this context that the present paper surveys the submissions for IndieCade’s 2020 *Jamming the Curve* game design competition – a platform for independent, creative and innovative game development that has the potential to explore grave topics in more depth and complexity than for example AAA titles could, or even would. The corpus of altogether 49 entries was created in a “slow jam” session, where aspiring game developer teams had two weeks to come up with a (broadly understood) serious game (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2020, 242) based on real-life epidemiologic data provided in two simulation engines. The time window implies that the games that are analysed in this paper cannot boast with elaborate graphics or complex narratives, but they are most certainly worth looking at in the context of the arguments they make about the pandemic by simulating various aspects of the COVID-crisis.

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By relying on a procedural rhetoric analysis (Bogost 2010) of selected games as simulations (Frasca 2013) from among the submissions, the paper considers spatiality (Nitsche 2008; Gazzard 2011) and agency as the most important aspects of COVID-related video game simulations in modelling the pandemic crisis. Based on a three-part system of criteria (the included games must address spatiality as a gameplay feature; they must make use of real-life data in a meaningful way; they must generate otherwise unobtainable, procedural knowledge), a set of games were selected from the corpus.

Then, the games were sorted into three groups based on how they deal with spatiality and as a result, what kind of solutions they offer to the pandemic crisis. The first category includes games that focus on characters who are in charge and who have to explore the gamespace around them. The games in this category, including the jam winner *Cat Colony Crisis* offer a considerable amount of agency, responsibility and Sid Meier's "series of interesting decisions" for the players.

The second category includes mostly physical puzzles that attempted to make sense of the pandemic by translating social distancing rules into game mechanics instead of directly commenting on the implications of certain policy measures. As opposed to the sense of agency generated by being in charge, here a sort of playfulness is present in turning the compulsory 6-foot distance into a meaningful feature of the game mechanic. There is obviously no storyline or agency springing from being in charge in these examples. Instead, in the best representatives of this category, there is a sense of confidence gathered by the skills of emerging victorious against a set of very limiting rules. *Stars Apart, Together*, for instance, renders hope tangible: it gives the player a 60-second window, which, even if it might feel very long to excel in a rather challenging puzzle, is quite doable. Once the minute passes, a cure is found, and the player does not have to hold on any longer.

The third batch consists of games where the rules allow for very limited spatial movement. The limitations on the use of spaces are closely associated with a radical loss of agency even to the extent that the simulation loses its game-like nature – a relatable realization of the lockdowns. Here the avatar of the player is no longer a hero in charge, but an everyman who must endure the consequences of top-down policies. *NonEssential* for example brings the reduction of spaces to extremes: the game interface displays a black screen, mimicking a phone call where the player can select her responses in a chat window, simulating social isolation and the compressed time-space that accompanied it. Even though there are no spaces in the game, it still deals with the problem of spatiality but simulates extreme confinement as the lack of spatial coordination. The player assumes the role of an unnamed young person and is prompted to listen to his friend Nathan. His story is very much in line with what the average young adults experienced in the spring of 2020. Already living on his own but having lost his job, Nathan worries about his rent, his parents and meanwhile suffers from a mixture of boredom and loneliness that many people got to know during the lockdown periods. Ultimately, the player is pushed towards the one social behaviour that could make an actual difference under social isolation: care and paying attention to others.

Therefore, in a period of a nascent cultural trauma, pandemic-related video games not only provide distraction and opportunities for socializing, but they can also help to envision the most positive scenarios and can promote change. Parallel to commenting on the waning of agency, they can offer the idea of care – in terms of observing the rules of social distancing to protect each other, in reaching out, in self-care just as well as in paying attention when someone is asking for help.

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