

Big Brother Meets Joystick: Ethical Perspectives on Surveillance Imagery in Digital Games

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INTRODUCTION

Surveillance imagery plays a crucial role in shaping people's imagination and attitudes, forming the surveillance habits of entire generations. This is particularly evident in digital games as a medium with close ties to surveillance. Not only do games collect large amounts of data that can be monetized (e.g., Egliston 2020; Kröger et al. 2023), but the logics of surveillance are also encoded into the ways they encourage players to observe, predict, and control (Whitson and Simon 2014). So-called surveillance games, from *Watchdogs* (Ubisoft 2014) to the *Beholder* series (Alawar/Paintbucket

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2016–2022), paint interesting, though not necessarily accurate, pictures of dystopian surveillance societies (Albrechtslund and Dubbeld 2005; Hennig and Schellong 2020; Solberg 2022). In doing so, these games function as playgrounds in the metaphorical sense: as possibility spaces for probing ways of encountering, dealing with, and resisting surveillance. In this paper, we present the first results of a third-party funded project that analyzes surveillance imagery in digital games and evaluates it from an ethical perspective.

ETHICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF SURVEILLANCE IN DIGITAL GAMES

Importantly, digital games are neither safe spaces nor are they separate from the power structures governing real life. Representations of surveillance in the media generally raise ethical concerns regarding the normalization and habituation of specific forms of surveillance, while others are being concealed. For example, like the better-known genre of surveillance film (Kammerer 2012), games tend to draw on well-established tropes of top-down surveillance, as exemplified by the wall-mounted camera pervasive in stealth games. Since cameras in games tend to be hackable or disposable, this kind of surveillance imagery promises interactive agency, suggesting that surveillance can coincide with self-empowerment (Eichner 2014; Hennig and Schellong 2020). Eventually, this could give rise to a false sense of agency in players that trivializes real-world surveillance practices, while also masking processes of horizontal or distributed surveillance and the data-monitoring practices known as dataveillance (Clarke 1998).

Yet, the procedural dimensions of digital games make them well-suited to representing such complex, distributed surveillance processes that are notably absent from most other media (Hennig and Piegsa 2019). In this light, games could help fill the gap between conventional surveillance imagery and contemporary surveillance practices, making the latter visible and discussable. These observations call for a closer examination of what kinds of surveillance imagery can be found in digital games, and how this relates to the ethical and epistemological challenges around the cultural shift from traditional forms of surveillance to new forms based on the collection of massive amounts of data. In our paper, we propose a framework for analyzing surveillance imagery in digital games along the dimensions of their (audio)visual aesthetics, and their embedding within the game's system of rules and mechanics. We illustrate our approach through select case studies.

VISUAL AESTHETICS OF SURVEILLANCE IN DIGITAL GAMES

Images have a crucial impact on individual and collective imaginaries not least because they are comprehensible across cultures and linguistic communities, easily processed by the human brain, and associated with emotional engagement and authenticity (Tappe 2016). Surveillance images in digital games may thus contribute to the “constitutive construction” of social reality by promoting the internalization of certain values (Fricker 2007, 55–58). It is against this backdrop that we identify recurring types of surveillance imagery as expressions of specific imaginaries. Metaphors related to vertical surveillance, for instance, recur across game genres, most often in the image of a wall-mounted camera, looking down at the player character. Its close relative, the “eye in the sky” can be found in games such as *The Magic Circle* (Question 2015), where it reflexively refers to the game developer’s control over the game. As a counterpart to these types of images, many surveillance games mark the player’s own

gaze through the camera through scan lines, film grain, or glitches. Perhaps most interestingly, games are developing a metaphorical visual language for representing supposedly invisible forms of surveillance: In *Watchdogs*, *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt 2020), or *Orwell* (Osmotic 2016), overlays, links, and binary code against blue or green backgrounds serve as shorthand for the digital, while annotations attached to objects and NPCs hint at the databases from which information is drawn.

LUDIC DIMENSIONS OF SURVEILLANCE IN DIGITAL GAMES

In addition, we address the medium-specific dependencies of surveillance imagery in digital games, arguing that it cannot be properly understood without considering the ludic contexts in which it is embedded. The agency afforded by game mechanics and interfaces, in particular, leads to a qualitative shift in the reception of surveillance imagery as players learn to manipulate the game system and internalize its logics (Galloway 2006, 90). In contrast to TV or film, digital games raise ethical questions related to the possibility of “kinaesthetic training” (Lipkin 2013, 37) as they allow players to become active surveillants. Even games that are ostensibly critical of surveillance such as *Bioshock* (2K 2007), *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream 2018), or *Watchdogs* typically afford game mechanics that nudge players to adopt a pragmatic approach towards data collection and create a false sense of individual empowerment. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, players frequently hack into security cameras or retrieve useful information from watching CCTV footage or scanning the faces of passersby. “Datamining,” meanwhile, is presented as an easy minigame that remains free from negative consequences and serves as a viable strategy of resource gathering. In games like *Papers Please* (Pope 2013) or *Telling Lies* (Barlow 2019), by contrast, processes of monitoring and data collection are laborious and flawed, often yielding partial or ambiguous information. Though not quite representative of new, algorithmic processes of dataveillance, these games offer a more critical account of the limits and risks of “big data.”

CONCLUSION

In summary, analyzing surveillance imagery in digital games from a media-conscious, ethical perspective contributes to a better critical understanding of how surveillance is being represented and imagined in contemporary media. Furthermore, our results provide a starting point for practitioners to develop surveillance games that tap the transformative potential of games as playgrounds and allow for reflections and ludic renegotiations of (in)visible and fortified power structures.

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