

Aesthetics of Prohibition: Moral Transgression, Control, and Pleasure in Political Games

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Keywords

juridical play, aesthetic pleasure, ethical gameplay, affect, political games

ABSTRACT

The contemporary turn towards dystopian pleasure in game studies foregrounds the affective and ethical ambivalence of play under conditions of constraint (Frost 2016; Farca 2018; Boland 2024; Legatt 2025). Rather than framing pleasure as mastery or escape, in games, it often emerges from discomfort, hesitation, and moral implication (Schott 2016; Anable 2018; Keogh 2018; Bódi 2023). Within this affective economy, political and historical games such as *Through the Darkest of Times* (Paintbucket Games 2020) and *Attentat 1942* (Charles Games 2017) operate as complex moral laboratories that undermine the seemingly trivialising mechanisms of games (Chapman and Linderoth 2015, 137): they invite players to experience control, complicity, and resistance as embodied ethical practices and not as narrative tropes. These works construct historical dystopias that are epistemological reconstructions as sites where legality, representation, pleasure, and affect converge.

Central to this convergence is the juridical infrastructure of representation itself. §86a of the German Strafgesetzbuch (StGB), which criminalises the use of unconstitutional symbols such as swastikas in entertainment media, long excluded digital games from the 'social adequacy clause' granted to art, science, and education (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2022; Pfister 2022). Until its reinterpretation by the USK in 2018, the StGB thus functioned as an extradiegetic rule system governing the permissible horizons of historical representation in games (Puppe 2018; Pfister 2019). Developers of politically sensitive titles had to negotiate the internal mechanics of simulation and an external legal framework that codified the limits of what could be shown if they wanted their games to be published in Germany. While the politics of memory in digital games is inseparable from the politics of mediation, in the German context, mediation was also juridically enforced (Pötzsch 2017; Pfister & Postert 2022; Chapman 2016; Šisler 2016).

This paper situates *Through the Darkest of Times* and *Attentat 1942* within what I term juridical play: a mode of ludic engagement structured by the negotiation of legal and

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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moral boundaries. Building on Sicart's (2009) theorisation of ethical gameplay and Galloway's (2006, 85–106) notion of "allegories of control," I argue that these games transform regulatory and ideological constraint into aesthetic and affective intensity. The pleasures they produce are juridical in form: they arise from the player's – conscious or unconscious – situatedness within overlapping systems of rule (legal, procedural, and ethical) and from the recursive tension between obedience and resistance. The player's awareness of the limits imposed by the game's internal logic and the state's external prohibitions becomes a constitutive element of their moral and sensory experience.

Attentat 1942, developed before the 2018 reinterpretation and thus initially banned in Germany, exemplifies this logic of constraint. Its hybrid documentary structure, interweaving live-action interviews, archival footage, and interactive sequences, performs a form of testimonial realism. The game's affective power derives from its mediation of silence as the gaps where history cannot be represented pictorially become affective triggers for reflection and empathy. In contrast, *Through the Darkest of Times*, released after the reinterpretation, deliberately incorporates Nazi symbols to anchor its representation in historical affect (Friedrich 2020). Its stylised expressionist aesthetic converts the horror of recognition into a moral sensorium, compelling the player to navigate between resistance and survival. The game developers also felt a sense of pleasure by creating a distinct art that renders the creations of many artists banned by the Nazis (Friedrich 2018). Both titles deploy procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) to model the bureaucratic violence of totalitarian systems, yet they do so within different legal and cultural parameters, rendering law itself a designer of affect.

The juxtaposition of these two games illustrates the transformation of prohibition into aesthetic potential. The 2018 legal shift reclassified games as *Kunst* (art) but also reconfigured their ethical affordances. Where earlier developers performed a kind of 'self-censorship-as-design,' contemporary creators can now instrumentalise legality as a theme rather than a limitation. Following Esposito's (2011) and Foucault's (1977) reflections on biopolitical control, the StGB can be understood as a disciplinary apparatus that produces subjects of obedience, both within society and within play. In these historical dystopias, the player's procedural navigation of fear, surveillance, and complicity mirrors the civic negotiation of state authority. Pleasure thus emerges as an internalisation rather than a transgression of control: the affective satisfaction of playing within, and against, the limits of law and morality.

In aligning affect theory (Massumi 2002; Anable 2018) with legal-cultural analysis, this paper extends the study of political games beyond their didactic or representational value. It proposes that *Through the Darkest of Times* and *Attentat 1942* exemplify a broader epistemological condition in which historical remembrance, legal regulation, and ludic agency intersect. Their dystopian pleasures are neither cathartic nor escapist: they are reflexive, juridical, and epistemic. To play these games is to engage in an ethics of constraint, where every decision is shadowed by legality, and every act of remembrance is haunted by the possibility of prohibition. These works thereby transform the apparatus of control itself into a site of play, revealing that within digital culture, prohibition can become not merely a boundary of representation but a productive condition for moral and affective reflection.

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