Thanatogaming: Death, Videogames, and the Biopolitical State

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ABSTRACT
In response to the rise of the biopolitical state, which derives power from its ability to "make live" and "let die," some scholars have argued that death itself can serve as a form of resistance to biopower. As virtual worlds become increasingly intertwined with the physical world, the concept of in-game death can have rhetorical force to resist both physical and virtual biopower. This paper draws on examples of death as resistance with in the virtual worlds of *America's Army* and *World of Warcraft*.

Keywords
thanatopolitics, biopower, *meletē thanatou*, persuasive games

INTRODUCTION
Over the past decade, the focus of much of the videogame industry has been steadily shifting away from the individual and toward the collective. Famed game designer Richard Garriott has referred to the turn of the century as the end of the era of solo games and the beginning of that of the "massively multiplayer game" (Curtis, 2011). In many ways, this shift in the way that the videogame industry deals with players parallels the shift in politics that Michel Foucault calls "biopolitics" (Foucault, 2005, p. 243). Both make use of new technologies of power to move away from concerns about individual bodies, focusing instead upon the "collective bodies" of demographics, statistics and "man-as-species."

While the creation of new technologies of power creates new forms of domination, it also provides for new forms of resistance. In his analysis of the politics of the suicide bomber, Murray (2006) argues that death itself has rhetorical force capable of resisting the influence of biopower, which has as its goal the control of life. This new politics of death, which he terms thanatopolitics, is "both a response and a resistance to biopolitical power and to the Western conception of rational sovereignty with which biopolitics is allied" (p. 195). Thus, by appropriating his or her own death, the suicide bomber is able to deny the biopolitical State its most basic function, to make live or let die (Foucault, 2005, p. 247).

To Foucault, death itself can be thought of in terms of a game. This game is played out in the form of meditation on an individual's self-self relationship. The "meditation on death" or *meletē thanatou* is "not a game the subject plays with his own thoughts, but a game that thought performs on the subject himself" (Foucault, 2005, pp. 357-358). The goal of this game is the transformation of the self, but it also involves a transformation of

Proceedings of DiGRA 2014: <Verb that ends in 'ing'> the <noun> of Game <plural noun>.

the meaning of death. In the realm of biopolitics, death is a taboo, never to be spoken of (p. 247). By playing with death, it acquires new meaning and new purpose.

Like many games, the *meletē thanatou* also serves as a form of training, albeit of a spiritual nature (Murray, 2006, p. 210). It is performative. It is an exercise that allows one to confront the ultimate unmanageable risk, which lies outside the power of the State. By embracing that which lies outside the realm of power, by making death a political act, it becomes "an ultimate—and productive—act of refusal" (p. 195).

Thanatopolitics acquires its rhetorical force by going against the basic tenants of rational sovereignty. According to Foucault, as Western civilization transitioned from the old sovereign power to the new biopower, the foundation of that power became decreasingly the power to kill, through condemning enemies of the crown to death, and increasingly the power to keep people alive, through medicine, sanitation and other such social programs. Thus, in the new biopolitical State, death exists outside the power relationship (Foucault, 2005, p. 248). The act of embracing death, then, is to embrace that which is outside the reach of biopower and all of the medical and political technologies that sustain it. Indeed, such an act not only exceeds the reach of biopower, but also exceeds rational understanding (Murray, 2006, p. 202).

If thanatopolitics cannot be understood in the context of rational sovereignty, how are we to understand it? To do so requires a reexamination of a society's core values. In the biopolitical State, the object of regulation and source of power is life itself. Life is, therefore, that principle which is most highly valued. In order to understand thanatopolitical resistance as anything but madness, it is necessary to construct a system of values in which there is a principle higher than life. Murray does so by invoking the Kantian notion of "personhood."

> Humanity in our own person is an object of the highest esteem and is inviolable in us; rather than dishonour it, or allow it to be dishonoured, man ought to sacrifice his life. (quoted in Murray, 2006, p. 200)

Personhood, then, provides us with a principle higher than that of life itself, allowing for situations in which death is not only a justifiable decision, but a moral decision. Personhood can also be seen as being in direct opposition to dehumanization. Death in the name of preserving one's personhood or the personhood of another from the dehumanizing effects of biopower then becomes essential to the meaning of "life as ethical life" (Murray, 2006, pg 211).

This rethinking of life and death, prerequisite to thanatopolitical action, involves the restructuring of one's self-self relationship. In this sense, death is a game focused on the relationship between one's self and an unmanageable risk. This game, the *meletē thanatou*, allows the subject to redefine the relationship with this risk, thereby reconfiguring and transforming his or her self (Murray, 2006, p. 210). The term "*meletē thanatou*," alternatively translated as the "exercise of death," the "care taken with death," or the "practicing for death," implicitly invokes Plato's *Phaedo*, in which Socrates, who awaits execution by self-poisoning, states that any true disciple of philosophy is "always practicing how to die without complaint" (Derrida, 1992/1995, pp. 12-14). The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka expands upon this concept, tying it to a sense of responsibility for others and for nature, which he characterizes as a rejection of consumerism and "techno-science's drive to exploit the resources of the world" (Učník, 2011, pp. 199-200).

We can therefore conceptualize *meletē thanatou* as a self-reflexive, performative practice through which the subject is able to appropriate his or her own death for purposes beyond mere consumption and other biopolitical goals.

Although we could attempt to connect this form of constructive play to a number of different types of games, there is perhaps already a natural connection between thanatopolitics and videogames. Indeed, death is already a common element in many videogames, an element with which the player must define her relationship in order to effectively play. As death is designed differently between games, this relationship must be questioned throughout the game if the player is to progress. Thus, videogames become experimental spaces for both the performance of death and the performance of the appropriation of death. By applying the concept of thanotopolitics to videogames, we create a new space for understanding and creating resistance to biopower.

The significance of using videogames as a tool of resistance lies in the fact that videogames are already a tool of biopower. In addition to having its origins in the military-industrial complex, with which it still maintains ties, the videogame industry actively taps into the State's capacity for violence and coercion in order to maintain its dominance and discipline its own members (O'Donnell, 2008, p. 181). These relationships make the videogame industry a space saturated with ideology, which manifests itself procedurally in the games that it produces (Bogost, 2006).

While the videogame industry is deeply connected with many traditional sites of biopower, it has also begun to create new virtual spaces for biopolitical control. The recent growth of these virtual worlds has made them influential not only culturally, but economically and politically as well. Virtual goods are bought and sold both within the games themselves and in the real world, on sites like eBay. This flow of money in and out of these games impacts real-world economies as if they were small countries. At one point, economist Edward Castronova estimated that the virtual world of Norrath (where the game *EverQuest* takes place) had a Gross National Product approximately equal to that of Bulgaria, and its currency exchange rate was higher than that of the Japanese yen (Castronova, 2005, p. 19).

Paralleling many real-world events, the economic prosperity in these virtual worlds has created a mass migration of a virtual nature. As displaced populations turn toward urban centers for the possibility of a better life, many now turn toward virtual worlds and the questionably legal practice of “gold farming” in order provide for themselves. This places them between the real-world biopower of states like China and the virtual biopower of videogame companies like Blizzard (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

Although videogames have been and are currently being used as tools of biopolitical control, I argue that through the use of thanatopolitics, they can also be used as tools of resistance. Just as virtual life now has tangible value in the eyes of the State (Castronova, 2005, p. 157), virtual death is a disruption of that value system. Of course, videogames are far from being a homogeneous medium. What it means to “die” in a videogame varies greatly from game to game. The process of understanding this meaning can be thought of as a virtual *meletē thanatou*, through which the player can appropriate her own death as a form of resistance.

To illustrate this process, I will focus primarily on two games. The first is *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), which is currently the largest persistent virtual world in terms

of subscribers. By virtue of the sheer size of its player base, it is one of the most culturally and economically significant games being played today. The second game is *America's Army* (U.S. Army, 2002), a free, multiplayer first-person shooter. Like *World of Warcraft*, it has a significant player base. More significant, however, is the fact that *America's Army* was created not as a commercial title, but as a recruitment tool for the U.S. Army, making it perhaps the most visible facet of the emerging military-entertainment complex. In both cases, I will be looking at the way in which biopower operates within the game worlds, as well as at protests that took place within these worlds themselves and how thanatopolitics can help us understand this kind of protest.

THE BIOPOLITICS OF VIDEOGAMES

In order to understand the significance of videogames as a potential location of resistance, it is important to understand how their rhetorical nature allows them to embody biopolitical structures. Like many other forms of media, videogames have both verbal and visual rhetorical aspects. Videogames also embody rhetoric on an algorithmic or procedural level. Procedural rhetoric is the way in which ideology is embodied by the very rules that make up a game, or indeed, any piece of software (Bogost et al., 2005). When the player enters the game, she accepts the rules of the game as being natural. Thus, the ability to run at a certain speed, the importance of acquiring wealth or the necessity of killing certain characters in order to progress are accepted as parts of the reality of the in-game world. In order to play the game, the player steps into this worldview, whether or not it conforms with her actual worldview (Bogost, 2006, p. 170). Of course, the rules of this virtual world are not natural, but carefully designed by programmers and game designers. As such, these rules are a product of the culture and ideology of their creators.

Some games are created with a specific agenda in mind, such as advergames, activist games, and other persuasive games. To truly make effective use of videogames as a medium for persuasion, these games must present a procedural rhetoric that supports the intended message of the game. Such deliberate rhetorics are often easily identifiable. Commercial games, however, rarely display their ideological biases so plainly. This, of course, is not to say that such games are free from the ideology of their creators, but simply that these ideological frames are not made explicit. As Ian Bogost (2006) notes, the massive popularity that many of these games have built both increases the scope of their influence and obscures their ideological frames. Thus, commercial games are often those in greatest need of critique (p. 175).

If these commercial games embody the ideologies of their creators at a procedural level, what exactly are these ideologies? As pieces of software, games already inherit a certain amount of rhetorical baggage from the field of computer science, both on a textual level and a procedural level. As Turkle (1995) notes, violent computing metaphors such as programs being “killed” and instructions being “aborted” contribute to a general discomfort for women about the language of computer science and the ways of thinking that went along with it (p. 62). Chun (2011) also acknowledges the gendered nature of computers, suggesting that the very logic underlying many fundamental aspects of the machines is often to blame, citing the command line as a simulation of how military officers would order around the female “computers” who operated early machines like the ENIAC (pp. 29-30).

While videogames share many ideological tenets with the broader field of computer science, they also have their own layers of ideology unique to the medium itself. Not

surprisingly, the videogame industry is noted for being extremely conservative (O'Donnell, 2008, p. 160), dominated by a few large, multinational corporations (Fron et al, 2007, p. 1). Videogame workers themselves are predominantly young, white males (Everett & Watkins, 2008, p. 160), with core development tasks such as programming, design and art remaining almost exclusively male professions (Deuze Martin & Allen, 2007, p. 346; Fullerton et al., 2008, p. 164). Thus, the ideologies often expressed in videogames include male patriarchy, hegemonic whiteness and western capitalism.

Such Western ideologies are deeply ingrained in many commercial videogames. Since "bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism" (Foucault, 1978, p. 141), we see that videogames and biopolitics are already intertwined. Just as videogames ask us to step inside worlds where capitalism is a fundamental condition of reality, they also ask us to step inside worlds where biopolitics are ubiquitous.

While it is necessary for videogame rhetoric to be understood on a procedural level, it is also significant that biopolitics can be understood as being procedural in nature. Just as concepts such as strength, health and street-cred can only be operationalized in a videogame by reducing them to data and statistics, the biopolitical State must do the same in order to govern the masses. Abstract concepts like "health" must be quantified and formulas must be developed to predict and regulate them. Indeed, computers themselves were originally tools created to facilitate such processes. Such was the association between computers and governmentality that in 1964, free speech protesters at the University of California at Berkeley hung computer cards around their necks in order to protest the same reductionist practices that biopower demands (Turner, 2006, pp. 1-2).

Although computers today have become consumer products and shed the stigma of being tools of oppression, they remain a technology of power, providing the ability to gather and process the vast amounts of information needed to maintain the biopolitical State. If anything, their role in biopower has expanded. Code is now not only used to process information, but to enforce the law itself. Technologies now come packaged with built-in code to enforce laws such as copyright (Lessig, 2005, p. 148). As code begins to take on the responsibilities of law enforcement, the significance of understanding procedural rhetoric becomes even more apparent. Whereas the interpretation of the law has traditionally been the realm of police officers, lawyers and judges, the use of code-as-law-enforcement or code-as-legislation places the burden of interpretation upon programmers and the corporate interests they work for. It should come as no surprise that among the first companies to mobilize code for the purposes of law enforcement was Nintendo (O'Donnell, 2008, p. 188).

The relationship between the videogame industry and the State is not a recent development, but one deeply rooted in the history of the industry. Nearly all of the early videogame pioneers had close ties to the post-war military-industrial complex. Indeed, the same faceless machines that were the target of the Berkeley students' protest were the same ones that early hackers would use to create games like *Spacewar!* and *Colossal Cave Adventure*. Entrepreneurs like Nolan Bushnell would later take these early experiments and turn them into a booming entertainment industry, but their roots in military labs would continue to shape the medium for years to come. While this can be seen in the overt militaristic nature of many games, especially first-person shooters, many other types of games have been influenced in much more subtle ways. Although the idea of virtual objects moving in accordance to accurate models of physics seems almost

synonymous with videogames now, it was no coincidence that most of these early games, such as *Tennis for Two, Spacewar!* and *Pong* involved bouncing balls and flying projectiles. They were built on computer systems that were designed for tracking Soviet missiles and other projectiles (Halter, 2006, p. 86). The very rules on which most games are built are a product of Cold War necessity. Through the spread of these early influences, we can see ways in which technology can indeed embody specific forms of power and authority (Winner, 1986, p. 19).

This procedural legacy would not be the last time that the videogame industry and the military would cross paths. The military has commissioned military versions of innovative commercial games such as *Military Battlezone*, a tank simulator (Kent, 2001, p. 153) and *Marine Doom*, a game designed to improve decision-making skills in a team setting (Van der Graff & Nieborg, 2003). It would eventually go so far as to commission an original game for use as a recruitment tool, *America's Army* (Halter, 2006, p. 204). This has lead to what some have called the emergence of a military-entertainment complex. This convergence also has broader implications of a more pervasive and generalized fusion of the digital realm with the real world (Lenoir, 2000, pp. 327-328).

While the videogame industry continues to have ties to the military, it also maintains a significant relationship with the State through the use of complex networked structures consisting of legal, political and technical elements. By maintaining these networks, the videogame industry is able to harness the violent capacity of the State to maintain dominance (O'Donnell, 2008, p. 181).

From the beginning, the legal action became a significant element of the videogame industry. In fact, the first widely successful commercial game, Atari's *Pong* (Atari Inc, 1972), was also the subject of the industry's first lawsuit (Kent, 2001, pp. 46-48). Atari would be involved in many other lawsuits, including a number against Activision, a company formed by former Atari employees that made competing cartridges for the Atari VCS. Despite their numerous attempts to shut down Activision via legal action, Atari was ultimately unsuccessful (pp. 192-194). In the end, Activision would live on, while Atari collapsed due to corporate mismanagement and a string of poor quality games (p. 234). So great was the fall of Atari, that it took most of the North American videogame industry with it (pp. 252-255).

When Nintendo ventured back into the North American market, it protected its interests through the creation of a number of technological, legal and economic systems. The outward manifestation of these systems was the Nintendo Seal of Quality, which appeared on every Nintendo-approved game. The seal sought to dispel any fear of the kind of low-quality games that had plagued Atari. To get this seal, however, developers had to enter into a licensing agreement with Nintendo, abiding by their rules and giving them a significant share of the profits from their games (O'Donnell, 2008, pp. 151-153). Unlicensed games were almost non-existent and retailers who attempted to sell them were often threatened with legal action by Nintendo unless they removed the games from their shelves (Kent, 2001, p. 375; Sheff, 1993, pp. 289-291; Bogost, 2007, p. 287).

In order to prevent developers from creating games without licensing agreements, Nintendo developed a technological means of locking out their competition – the 10NES chip. This chip was built into every officially licensed NES cartridge, with a corresponding component located inside the NES itself. Upon powering up, the console would look for a specific code from the chip on the cartridge. If the code was received,

the console would function normally. If the cartridge did not transmit the correct code, the console would not play the game (O'Donnell, 2008, pp. 189-190). This forced any developer who wanted to create games for the NES to become an official Nintendo licensee. This also meant that all cartridges for the NES had to be manufactured by Nintendo, giving additional control over third-party developers by dictating manufacturing prices and production numbers (Kent, 2001, p. 308).

The 10NES chip provided a technological system for ensuring market dominance. Perhaps not surprisingly, Nintendo kept the nature of the chip a closely guarded secret. So close, in fact, that the only official record of its existence is the patent that Nintendo filed to protect it (O'Donnell, 2008, p. 188). This patent would connect Nintendo's technological system to the State's legal system, allowing Nintendo to invoke the coercive power of the State. When Tengen, a company created from the remnants of Atari, created their own chip to bypass the 10NES, Nintendo sued them, claiming patent infringement, breach of contract and several other accusations. In the end, Nintendo would prevail against Tengen, cementing their dominance of the videogame industry (Kent, 2001, pp. 375-377). The ruling would set a precedent for console manufacturers to maintain almost total control over their systems, as well as a precedent for the State to enforce this control. This corporatization of the State allows videogame companies to mobilize the State's coercive power into their own networks of control (O'Donnell, 2008, p. 215). Thus, the sovereignty of the State is swallowed up in the hegemonic "network power" of the videogame industry (Grewel, 2008).

While videogames are intimately connected with traditional forms of biopower, they also create spaces for new forms of biopower. In their book, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) discuss the way biopower operates within massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), looking specifically at *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and the persistent virtual world of Azeroth in which the game takes place. It may come as no surprise that a game that had, at its peak, approximately 12 million registered players (Ziebart, 2011) would require a complex system of governance in order to maintain itself. Unlike the real-world, however, this virtual world exists entirely on Blizzard's servers, allowing for surveillance and control on an unprecedented level. This form of in-game biopower surpasses the reach of traditional forms of biopower in other ways as well. Whereas in real life, the socio-technical networks of the videogame industry are able to tap into the sovereign power of the State for their own benefit, in the virtual world, videogame companies wield sovereign power themselves, becoming, in effect, Virtual States:

> There is a conceptual match between biopower and MMOs. In these virtual domains, corporations really do rule the world: game publishers are at once the creators, owners, and governors of such digital realms. Managing an MMO is an exercise in administering 'life itself' – or at least a "second life" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 126)

It may seem unproblematic, or at least unremarkable, for a company to maintain strict control over a virtual world that it created, especially given the videogame industry's cultural tendencies toward secrecy and closed networks of access (O'Donnell, 2008, p. 6). However, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter note that the creation of corporate-controlled MMOs was a transformation of earlier MUDs (Multiuser Domains), which were created by volunteer labor and were free to play (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 25). They refer to the transition from the free culture of MUDs to the profit driven culture of

MMOs as part of the enclosure of the digital frontier or "futuristic accumulation" (pp. 125-126). Indeed it can and has been argued that like other online spaces such as YouTube and Facebook, *World of Warcraft* is compelling not simply because of the world created by Blizzard, but because of the contributions of the millions of players who populate the game and make it a living, breathing world (Ruch, 2009). This perspective further problematizes the legitimacy of Blizzard's absolute sovereignty over their virtual world.

While "neomedieval" MMOs such as *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online* are generally an amalgam of different cultures, time periods, and fantastic elements, they tend to all have one particular anachronism as a central element, namely, modern market capitalism (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 137). This is a dramatic departure from traditional MUDs, which operated on a "gift economy" (Nakamura, 2009, p. 132). In MMOs, however, gold (virtual currency goes by different names in other games) is central to the experience of playing the game. It is both an incentive for progression and the means of acquiring the improved equipment necessary to succeed later in the game. Entrepreneurial gamers soon discovered that virtual gold and other goods could be sold for real money in the real world. Although this practice violates the terms of service (TOS) or end-user license agreement (EULA) of most such games, it was so profitable that it eventually evolved into a thriving black market industry of "gold farmers," players who are paid to play the game simply to amass gold for sale to other players. Many of these gold farming businesses operate out of China, Mexico and other countries with cheap labor, though they are sometimes owned in the United States or Western Europe (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 138).

Gold Farming is a highly contentious issue among both players and publishers. Buying gold and other in-game items is generally considered a form of cheating, as it gives an advantage over players who have to "work" for their gold. It also disrupts the game in other ways, as when farmers "camp" in strategic areas in order to harvest the maximum amount of loot, keeping these resources from other players (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 203; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 139). This has led to a great deal of resentment toward gold farmers from other players. This hatred also tends to be highly racialized, as discourse about "Chinese Gold Farmers" in online forums, in-game chat and other media often reproduces historical anti-Asian discourse (Nakamura, 2009, p. 134). This is, perhaps, not insignificant, as Foucault notes that racism plays several important functions in the workings of biopolitics, particularly in the ability of the biopolitical State to justify the sovereign right to kill (Foucault, 2005, pp. 254-256)

Blizzard Entertainment, which owns and operates *World of Warcraft*, is economically motivated to combat gold farming. In addition to potentially losing players who find their experience disrupted by gold farming activities, those players who buy farmed gold are able to play through the game at an accelerated rate, which means they don't need to subscribe to the game as long. Accordingly, much of Blizzard's panoptic surveillance is directed toward detecting gold farming. These measures include monitoring suspicious activity, dispatching company agents (known as game masters or simply GMs) to interrogate potential farmers, and even installing spyware on players' computers (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, pp. 140-141). Code is again used to enforce the law. Upon identifying accounts presumed to be "farming," Blizzard simply deletes the accounts. During major crackdowns, tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of accounts have been closed, demonstrating Blizzard's sovereign power to "disallow virtual life" (p. 141).

Ironically, the gold farmers that Blizzard tries to keep out of Azeroth are often actual Chinese farmers, displaced by their government. As hundreds of millions of people migrate from rural China to its cities, many are recruited to work in gold farms (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 145). Thus we see a mass migration from rural areas to cities, and from cities to the online worlds of commercial MMOs. Here we also see the intersection between the real-world biopower of the Chinese State and the virtual-world biopower of Blizzard and other videogame companies, both of which have a very real effect on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

GAMES OF DEATH

New forms of power necessitate new forms of resistance. The relatively recent appearance of in-game or virtual biopower is no exception. I argue that one such method of resisting virtual biopower is through what might be termed thanatogaming, or the application of thanatopolitics to the virtual worlds of videogames.

Just as there is a conceptual match between biopolitics and MMOs , there is also a conceptual match between thanatopolitics and videogames in general. Indeed, death is a fundamental procedural concept in videogames. Even in non-violent games like *Guitar Hero*, or abstract games such as *Tetris*, which lacks any kind of player avatar, the act of losing the game is often referred to as "dying." Loss conditions, along with win conditions (or the lack thereof) are perhaps the most salient rules of any game. Correspondingly, they are imbued with a great deal of procedural rhetorical force. Indeed, many political and persuasive games have used this principle to great effect as social critique. Bogost notes several examples of games that mount a "rhetoric of failure," including *Kabul Kaboom* (Frasca, 2001), a critique of US policy in Afghanistan, *New York Defender* (Steph & Phil, 2002), in which the player shoots down airplanes headed toward the Twin Towers, and *September 12* (Powerful Robot Games, 2003), a commentary on the effectiveness of surgical missile strikes (Bogost, 2007, pp. 84-88). While *September 12* takes the form of an ongoing simulation, the other two games draw their rhetorical force from their end-of-game conditions. In both cases, the games follow the common arcade format of the unwinnable game, much like *Space Invaders* or *Missile Command*. The game simply continues until the difficulty level becomes too much for the player.

While win-conditions generally tend to be very explicit goals for the player, not all games have win-conditions or even loss-conditions. As noted game designer Greg Costikyan (2002) notes, some games have no explicit goals whatsoever. Although these games may have implicit goals, such as character advancement, the primary goals of the game are determined by the player. Costikyan gives the example of *SimCity*. Although the game has the implicit goal of improving your city as much as possible, the player has to determine what that means, for example, making a city free of slums (pp. 12-14).

This approach allows us to look more closely at the previously mentioned game *September 12*. The player, who controls missiles targeted at a nameless middle-eastern town, has the implicit goal of trying to eliminate the terrorists who live there. As the player soon learns, however, every missile strike leaves not only terrorists, but civilians dead. Other civilians will stop to mourn by their bodies and then take up arms to become terrorists themselves. The game's rhetoric of failure is produced through the subversion of the game's implied goals through the its own mechanics. As the player realizes that the game's implied goal is unattainable, she must reexamine her strategy and define new

goals. In the end, the best that one can hope for is simply to maintain the lowest number of terrorists possible, which is best achieved by not doing anything at all.

While the subversive nature of *September 12's* mechanics emphasizes this need for player reevaluation, the same process occurs to a certain extent in every game. Julian Kücklich (2003) has argued that games can be conceptualized as a series of signs that resist the player's understanding and must be interpreted through the process of playing. In order to effectively play the game, the player must make sense of its virtual world and the rules that govern it, coming to an understanding of what it means to live, and to die, in such a place. Thus, a certain form of *meletē thanatou* is already inherent in videogame play.

Although death is a common element in videogames, the meaning of death varies greatly from game to game. In his analysis of action games, independent developer Joakim Sandberg notes that "the idea of death is there to make the player want to avoid it - not part of the gameplay itself" (Sandberg, 2011). Although this attitude is quite common among game developers, other games, particularly more experimental games like *I Wanna Be the Guy*, make death common and treat it more as a narrative technique (Anthropy, 2008). Due to this vast discrepancy between game design philosophies, achieving an understanding of death in the context of an individual game is essential to playing it effectively.

One potential method for categorizing the portrayal of death in videogames is by the severity in-game consequences related to it. In some games, such as Playdead's *Limbo* (2010), death has relatively minor consequences. If the protagonist of the game is ever killed, he simply restarts at the beginning of the room in which he died. Considering the game's Bangsian fantasy theme, this kind of mechanic is quite appropriate. Since death is a relatively minor setback, the player is encouraged to take risks, often learning of a deadly trap only after being killed by it first. This "trial and error" style of game design goes back to games like *King's Quest* (Sierra On-Line, 1984), which often played player's frequent deaths for comic effect. In these games, the player was not invited to identify with the main character so much as see him as a character in a film. Although *Limbo* has a more melancholy tone, the player is invited to adopt a similar filmic view of the main character, who never receives so much as a name.

Other games invite the player to identify with, or at least feel more invested in, the protagonists. This is especially true of games that allow the player to customize and develop her avatar, such as MMOs (Filiciak, 2003, pp. 89-90). An example of this kind of game is the *X-COM* series (Mythos Games Ltd., 1994), in which the player controls a small team of soldiers who protect the earth from extraterrestrial threats. As the game progresses, each team member will advance and grow more skilled in accordance to the way in which the player uses them. If a team member is killed on a mission, however, that team member is lost for the remainder of the game. Although new team new team members can be recruited to fill the positions of those who have died, dead team members can never be brought back. This encourages a much more cautious form of play, compared to games like *Limbo*. The player's only real form of recourse when a character dies is to simply reload a saved game.

Perhaps the most extreme example of in-game consequences for death is the concept of permanent death, or "permadeath." With permadeath, any character that dies is removed from the game permanently (Bartle, 2003, p. 416). There are no extra lives, no saved games to reload. Few games adopt this design philosophy, and those that do, such as

Diablo II (Blizzard Entertainment, 2000), often make permadeath optional. Though uncommon, this form of in-game death most closely resembles Foucault's notion of "unmanageable risk."

Coming to understand where a game fits in this spectrum can be thought of as a version of the *meletē thanatou*. A player who plays *X-COM* for the first time may not fully realize the consequences of charging into an unexplored forest until one of her team members is killed in the process. By reexamining the way she conceptualizes death, the player can alter her play style to better suit the constraints of the game world. There are, however, greater implications of this in-game *meletē thanatou* than simply playing so as to "die without complaint." Just as real-world biopolitics cross over into the virtual world, so too can thanatopolitics. In this way, virtual death can be appropriated as a form of resistance to biopower.

One of the clearest examples of thanatopolitics in a virtual space occurred, perhaps not surprisingly, in *World of Warcraft*. In 2005, many players were angry about changes that Blizzard was making to the game, particularly in regards to the Warrior class. Feeling that this class of character was being disproportionately weakened, players flocked to Blizzard's forums, complaining about this perceived flaw in the game's design. Receiving no answer to their complaint, players began organizing an in-game protest. They called for a "Gnome March" to take place on Argent Dawn, one of Blizzard's servers. The protest would be non-violent, in stark contrast to the combat-oriented nature of the game. The protesters' goal was to force Blizzard to take their concerns, which had been ignored in all official channels, seriously.

Blizzard's response to the protest was swift. Even before the protest had begun, Blizzard began warning the protest organizers that any disruption to the game would be punished. Blizzard also deleted forum threads recruiting for the protest in an attempt to keep news of the event from spreading (Sherman, 2011). Despite their efforts, news of the protest spread beyond the official Blizzard forums to other sites and blogs across the Internet.

When the day of the protest arrived, hundreds of players arrived on Argent Dawn, each one playing as an semi-naked gnome (the game adds underwear to prevent any character from actually appearing naked). They then marched to the nearby Ironforge Bridge, a major thoroughfare for players in that city. The protesting gnomes then took up position in the center of the bridge, effectively blocking all traffic through the city during one of the busiest times on the server. Other players who were online at the time met the protesters with taunts, verbal abuse and general outrage at the interruption of their normal in-game activities. Blizzard again responded with force, sending a GM to deal with the protestors (Foton, 2005). After issuing a warning to the protesters, he began kicking people off the server, suspending many accounts and possibly banning others (Abalieno, 2005; Sherman, 2011).

In *World of Warcraft*, having one's account banned is perhaps the most severe form of punishment possible. Much like "permadeath," a ban means that all of a player's characters are erased and lost forever, along with any progress those characters had achieved. Unlike permadeath, which players can often opt out of, bans are handed down from the GMs, the company agents tasked with policing the game world. Thus, those players who stood their ground on the bridge did so knowing that they were subjecting themselves to death. This was not death as it was typically constructed in *World of*

Warcraft, but a permanent death that meant the loss of all their characters and virtual property.

The gnome protest demonstrates one way in which disempowered players can resist the corporate interests of videogame companies. Since there are no weapons or items in the game that are capable of significantly affecting Blizzard or its employees, the protesters used the only resource they had, their own "naked" bodies, as weapons to bring the Argent Dawn server to a halt, sacrificing their virtual lives in the process. In this way, the protesters were able to appropriate their own banning as a form of protest.

While thanatogaming can be seen as a method for resisting in-game biopower, like that of Blizzard, it can also be used as a form of resistance against real-world biopower. As shown in the previously mentioned example of Blizzard and the Chinese Government, these two forms of biopower are beginning to overlap more and more frequently. One of the most significant examples of this phenomenon is the game *America's Army* (U.S. Army, 2002). Although not the first game financed by the military (technically, most early videogames were in one form or another), *America's Army* was developed not for internal use as a training simulator, but as a recruiting tool, destined for distribution to the public, making it the first state-produced videogame designed as a strategic communication tool (Li, 2004, p. 5). As a game, it was wildly successful, boasting nearly two million registered players in 2003 (p. 7). As a recruiting tool, it had the advantage of being much more cost-effective than other recruiting methods, despite having a budget comparable to many high-end commercial videogames (p. 9).

The game itself was built using the Unreal Engine 2, with the most recent version now using the Unreal Engine 3, the same game engine used in games such as *BioShock* and *Gears of War* (Allen, 2011, p. 47). By sharing a common engine with these commercial games, *America's Army* automatically adopts many of their conventions, as well as a good deal of their low-level procedural logic. These familiar elements are then merged with the institutional disciplinary logics of the military, creating an often uncomfortable blurring between the civilian and military spheres. The end result is a game in which players participate in the well-established experience of the first-person shooter within the framework of biopower (p. 46).

In March of 2006, roughly three years after the start of the Iraq conflict, Joseph DeLappe, an art professor at the University of Nevada, began the "Dead-in-Iraq" project. In this work, he logs into *America's Army* using the user name "dead-in-iraq" and begins typing in the names of service people killed in Iraq until he is killed by another player. He then continues typing in names while hovering over his corpse until he respawns for the next round. DeLappe describes the work as both "a fleeting, online memorial to those military personnel who have been killed" and a "cautionary gesture" (DeLappe, n.d.).

As with the *World of Warcraft* gnome protests, DeLappe's actions are generally met with irritation and hostility. This is not surprising, particularly given that other scholars have noted that players of *America's Army* often attempt to distance the game from the actual war occurring in the Middle East (Li, 2003, p. 5). Although this attitude may seem paradoxical, given that the game intentionally conflates the in-game experience with the experience of actual military service, it demonstrates the careful design of the game. *America's Army* was designed not only to be a realistic simulation, but to provoke an emotional response in the player. For example, the sound of weapons fire in the game was not achieved by merely recording actual guns, but was carefully crafted by mixing

those sounds with those of other explosions to give a more satisfying sound (Shilling, Zyda, & Wardynski, 2002). The juxtaposition of the game, in which "fun is central" (Halter, 2006, p. 204), with the real-life consequences of war expands the meaning of the game beyond the carefully crafted message of its designers.

In order to make *America's Army* an effective tool for both recruitment and general public relations, the game's creators went to great lengths to provide realism on a number of different levels. The game achieves visual realism through techniques such as the use of motion capture on actual soldiers. It achieves audio realism through their careful sound design process. The game even achieves a great deal of procedural realism through the simulation of small details such as clearing weapon jams (Shilling, Zyda, & Wardynski, 2002). Notably unrealistic, however, is the game's death mechanic. Much more akin to *Limbo* than *X-COM*, death in *America's Army* is a minor setback, forcing the player to wait until the next round to respawn. Although such a mechanic is fairly standard among first-person shooters, many of which have even more lenient death mechanics, this form of death does not make the same conceptual link to real casualties of war in the way that the game's other elements attempt to link the virtual and the real.

DeLappe's "Dead-in-Iraq" project can be viewed as thanatopolitical action. The space he has chosen for his protest is not insignificant, as it places him on the battlefield in the midst of virtual soldiers who are dying all around him. His actions not only disrupt the flow of the game, thereby interfering with the designers' intended emotional response, but link the concept of in-game death with the deaths of actual soldiers. While it could certainly be said that DeLappe has appropriated his own virtual death in order to critique the war in Iraq, I think that the more interesting form of *meletē thanatou* is that which is experienced by the other players who encounter him. Although most players respond to DeLappe negatively, his protest can be seen as an invitation to other players to engage in *meletē thanatou* and think of the implications of their virtual deaths not simply in terms of the game, but in terms of the wider military-entertainment complex.

CONCLUSION

As a medium, videogames can be more effective at communicating certain rhetorical concepts due to their procedural nature. Procedural rhetoric allows us to make effective rhetorical claims about how things work (Bogost, 2007, p. 29). In a biopolitical state, the complex mechanisms of control are often abstracted away, making a critique of "how things work" useful, if not essential to the critique of biopower. Thus, I believe that the use of videogames as both a means and a place of protest will only grow as videogames become more ubiquitous as a medium and as new technologies lower the barriers to entry into the field of game development.

At the same time, the biopolitical nature of the videogame industry makes games that it produces problematic. As previously mentioned, even games that were created with no specific political agenda are steeped in ideology. If players are able to ignore the unabashed political rhetoric of a government funded and produced game like *America's Army*, how much less likely are they to notice much more subtle forms of ideology in mainstream commercial games?

The biopolitical landscape of virtual worlds is also changing. In August of 2011, Blizzard announced that their next major game, *Diablo III*, would support the buying and selling of in-game items for real money (Francis, 2011). This move allowed Blizzard to take the long-standing black market of gold farming and legitimize it as a standard

function of the game. Such a move also allowed them to control and regulate what was once beyond the reach of their panoptic systems of in-game governance. Although Blizzard ultimately removed this feature (Hutchinson, 2014), the requirement that the game maintain a constant Internet connection to Blizzard's servers was not lifted (Grayson, 2013). Thus, while Blizzard failed to subsume the various rogue economic elements into their own socio-technical system, they still created new ways to police cheating and piracy, even among those players who choose not to play in an online setting. As Blizzard and other developers continue to experiment with new forms of control, these new measures will likewise demand new forms of critique.

While thanatogaming provides a new lens through which to view biopower, there are many other ways in which biopolitics and thanatopolitics intersect with videogames than those that I have mentioned. In this paper, I have focused on the use of player death as a form of resistance. Death also operates in other ways within videogames. Just as player characters are frequently killed, they are also frequently killers of both other player characters and computer-controlled non-player characters. In some genres of games, such as real-time strategy games, players are even forced to order friendly characters into potentially deadly situations. Just like the death of the player character, these forms of death can also provoke meditation. Eddo Stern, artist and former Israeli solder, notes such a realization that he experienced while playing *Command and Conquer* online:

> Someone sent me a message saying "I heard you lost six commandos yesterday." […] I realized they were talking about the news, not the game. They were talking about six Israeli commandos who got killed in Lebanon that day. I kind of freaked out for a second. I saw myself playing with these little commandos, it seemed a ridiculous investment in fantasy. (Quoted in Halter, 2006, p. 328)

In such games, the player interacts with biopower from the perspective of the State. The difference between winning and losing often comes down to the player's judgment on whether it is a better use of resources to build a few powerful, but durable tanks or to build an endless stream of infantry, who almost certainly march to their deaths. Although the rhetorical implications of such game mechanics may warrant analysis, I will not attempt to do so in this paper.

Thanatopolitics may also be a useful tool for critiquing the biopower of the videogame industry in online spaces. The potential of players to earn a legitimate living by playing games like *Diablo III* further blurs the lines between player and worker, customer and subject. As companies like Blizzard exert more and more control over their players and the virtual worlds they inhabit, the question of how death operates in the Virtual State also becomes increasingly relevant.

One of the advantages of videogames as a medium of expression is the ability that they give us to experience things that would be impossible to do in real life. This same quality that makes games compelling as entertainment also makes them useful in our understanding of death as a political act. By making a game out of the game of death, we are no longer dealing with our self-self relationship, but with our self-virtual self relationship. If death really is the ultimate unmanageable risk, perhaps videogames provide a more manageable way of approaching the subject rhetorically.

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