

Perceiving the Default: Navigating Choice Architecture in Video Games

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Abstract: Using Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler's concept of *nudge* (2008), this article transforms Stuart Hall's notion of *preferred reading* (1973) into the concept of *preferred playing* to create a new approach to textual analysis appropriate for video games as interactive media. Markers for preferred playing as an alternative to more traditional *close reading* are discussed together with concepts and insights from contemporary game studios and game design regarding the medium's different layers.

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Introduction

Approaches informed by *close reading* often misleadingly frame gaming as a solely individual experience. This stems from the perspective that the player's performance is, in terms of research value, more important than the actual text based on which the player is performing. This approach, however, downplays the importance of the video game as a text, which is involved in a complex interplay with the player's performance. Depending on the game, the text serves as, for example, a stage, a script, and an actor in all important roles but the player's. Diane Carr (2009, 1) claims that textual analysis of video games is valuable for research on games, but papers that suggest specific approaches to textual analysis are still rare.

In this article, I argue that textual analysis can yield important information about race, class, and gender biases hardcoded into games; however, such discussions must be based more on affordances inherent to video games, not on personal experiences. I also show that spaces in which performance and performativity are frequent can be deduced from the text itself without sacrificing objectivity. My approach combines Clara Fernández-Vara's (2015) *space of possibility* with a method that determines the most default-centred path through a game, as suggested by the game itself. For that, I transform Stuart Hall's notion of preferred reading into a mode of *preferred playing*, while also relying on/referencing the related concepts/terms *negotiated* and *oppositional playing*. To achieve this, I apply the theory of *nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) to game design to establish a more objective method of textual analysis. After discussing both approaches and the benefits of combining

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them, I define markers of preferred playing which can be used for textual analysis of games. I focus on concepts such as default options, balancing, difficulty and challenges, level design, genre and narrative design, as well as objectives and goals that can be used for gender analysis or any other field which benefits from a qualitative approach. The versatility of this approach is demonstrated by showcasing a variety of different games. By integrating tools from other disciplines into the field of game studies, I hope to contribute to the ongoing discussion on how to analyse video games as a unique form of media without assimilating game studies into literature or film studies.

Approaches to textual analysis in video games

Compared to other fields in which textual analysis is used, game studies is a young discipline that is still very much concerned with creating medium-specific methods of analysis. The word “medium-specific” plays an important role in this context, because, as Mark Wolf (2006, 78) notes, this lack of tradition in game analysis makes scholars use methodologies from other media such as film studies or literary studies. While films and video games are both visual and auditive media, and often make use of the same elements, such as characters or tropes, Wolf (2006) stresses that interactivity, i.e., user participation, sits at the heart of video games. Henry Jenkins states the same in stronger language:

The application of film theory to games can seem heavy-handed and literal-minded, often failing to recognize the profound differences between the two media. [. . .] Not all games tell stories. Games may be an abstract, expressive, and experiential form, closer to music or modern dance than to cinema. (Jenkins 2004)

The main forms of analysis performed on games are either quantitative or forms of close reading. Quantitative studies have been conducted mainly in regard to gender or violence (e.g., Beasley and Standley 2002, Downs and Smith 2010). They have often been criticised for a binary coding of an otherwise interactive medium (Shaw 2014), for disregarding factors such as cultural framing or video-game-specific aspects like gaming platform, difficulty, branching narratives, and alternative gameplay paths. Close reading, which in its early forms was formulated by John Crowe Ransom and other ‘New Critics’ in the late 1930s and early 1940s, concerns itself with the “examination, deconstruction, and analysis of media text. It is the quintessential humanist methodology, born in the study of literature, and adapted to other media forms such as cinema studies” (Bizzochi and Tanenbaum 2011, 1). Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton’s (2006) approach is very similar to that of close read-

ing but is more tailored to the needs of games by introducing four areas of analysis: Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map, and Gameplay Log. Works on texts and language by Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva have been deemed relevant for textual analysis as well (Carr 2009, 1).

Previously suggested new forms of close reading tend to share the same limits. While Jim Bizzochi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum (2011, 5) agree that the interplay of different aspects of video games is an important asset of games and has to be taken into consideration when analysing them, in their analysis, they focus on their own individual experiences of the games in question, arguing: “New media and games suffer from a certain degree of indeterminacy: one cannot guarantee that two readers will encounter the same media assets while interacting with a game, or that they will experience them in the same order” (Bizzochi and Tanenbaum 2011, 6–7).

While it is true that games, especially so-called *games of emergence* (Juul 2005, 75), in their varied replayability, seem to be perceivable only in individual instances of playing, transforming the individual playthrough into the basis for interpretation is not without its problems. For one, the personal playthrough often seems to be arbitrary and resembles a snapshot more than a holistic picture. It is always possible that the player remains oblivious to the aspects of a game that might be important for analysis but which did not emerge in the individual playthrough. When playing *Fallout 4* (2015), for example, the player is given the chance to choose between a male and a female avatar. A researcher who aims to analyse gender equality in games might think that *Fallout 4* indeed strives for equality in agency. When playing the male in an individual playthrough, however, one never notices that the companion Codsworth, who refers to the male protagonist as “Sir,” calls the female one “Mum” rather than “Ma’am.” This clearly shows that the preferred choice of the avatar’s gender is male, limiting the female one to motherly duties, unfit for a post-apocalyptic wasteland, which can easily be missed in an individual playthrough. This is also a problem I see in the notion of the *implied player* proposed by Espen Aarseth (2007), which is similar to Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the *implied reader*. However, this very much focuses on player types (Aarseth 2007, 131) and individual instances, not on the game’s rhetoric. When using Ian Bogost’s (2007) concept of *procedural rhetoric*, in which persuasion inside a game is achieved through rule-based representations and interactions, the game as a medium is approached in its entirety and not just through one individual’s lens to see which rules and processes are involved in conveying a certain ideology.

Some researchers try to solve this problem by proposing the use of multiple coders (Schmierbach, 2009) or additional document analysis (of reviews, fan discussions, or interviews with the creators) to elicit different potential readings (Malliet, 2007),

which leads to different results. However, analysing fan discussions primarily means analysing discourse, not the medium of the video game itself.

The circle and the line: From possibility spaces to preferred playing

To tackle the aforementioned challenges, I propose an approach to games that is twofold, combining the space of possibility with preferred playing. Both approaches are equally important and help draw a holistic picture of a specific game.

Fernández-Vara (2015, 252) defines the space of possibility as “[t]he potential actions and events in a game; what the player could do and the potential results of those actions, as opposed to actual specific actions that have already been carried out.” In terms of choice architecture, defining the space of possibilities usually means exploring all parts of a branching choice architecture, investigating different gameplay options, trying different approaches in different situations, and, finally, mapping these possibilities. I would add to the definition that a list of interactive items that can change and impact the game may be useful. Depending on the game, mapping the space of possibility is a time-consuming endeavour.

The space of possibility, however, says nothing about the likelihood of a player choosing a certain path. Returning to the example of gender, if there is a dominant male perspective, which unfolds because the game is narrated in a certain way, it often remains unseen. Mapping out possibilities creates a detailed yet static picture of a video game. In a way, this resembles the data from quantitative content analysis about proportional male and female representation, which, by failing to contextualise individual representations within a broader framework (Shaw 2014), does not grasp the complex interplay between genders and sexuality and risks contributing to processes of erasure (Erikson-Schroth and Mitchell 2009).

“Depending on the choices the player makes, the same game content can yield a variety of interpretations, messages and values” (Biscop et al. 2019, 25). Thus, decision-making should always be taken into account, rather than just mapping all possibilities as equally viable and likely options. The possibility of interactive gameplay strongly relies on when and where the game appeared, since “hardware, software, and cultural constraints [determine] what was possible, or at least typical, at the time when the game was made” (Wolf 2006, 79). For Wolf, interactivity consists of smaller units that he calls “choices” (80). Choices influence the replayability of a game, are often a key constituent for winning conditions, and might lead to different endings.

After mapping the space of possibility, my second approach concerns interactivity and its importance in games. Since choices are essential to video games and are often responsible for most of their entertainment value, they must be included in the

analysis. Wolf (2006, 84) concludes by asking: “What are the game’s objectives and how are they linked to the choice that the player is asked to make? And which options within choices are considered to be the correct ones, and why?” Kilian Biscop, Steven Malliet, and Alexander Dhoest also state:

In directed games, the player is usually encouraged to take an ideal path, by means of rules of reward or progression through a storyline or quest. Directed games offer varying degrees of performative freedom, such as the option to choose between multiple characters, weapons-of-choice or variable environmental paths. (Biscop, Malliet, and Dhoest 2019, 29; emphasis by me)

They contrast directed games with what they call “semi-directed games,” where players are given more freedom to find their own preferred styles and follow the narrative they desire, which results in a much stronger feeling of agency.

I agree that all games are more or less directed and, even if no ideal path exists, at least a suggested path can be deduced. For one, even in the most complex games, agency and choices are always limited. They are “constrained from below by material resources and from above by authorial formal causation from the level of plot” (Mateas 2004, 24). Players are not able to perform actions that the code did not anticipate, except when they themselves are changing the code (for example in the form of modding). Life itself, researchers like Daniel Homan and Sidney Homan (2014, 175) argue, is built upon a set of restricted choices. Likewise, many video games offer the illusion of a broad range of choices. In that regard, Aarseth’s (1997) criticism of the term “interactivity” for games is valid. Games follow prompts instead of offering real interactivity, which Aarseth (1997, 51) calls “ergodicity.” Just as in real life, however, I would argue that it is likely that a player chooses one option over another because that choice might be more rewarding or offer a better experience. This seems natural for video games as developers strive to design levels in meaningful ways that serve as narrative architecture (Jenkins 2004).

Pelle Guldborg Hansen and Andreas Maaløe Jespersen (2013, 6) state that “human decision-making and behaviour [. . .] is often influenced in systematic ways by subtle, seemingly insignificant changes in the decision-making context.” Those influences in games are embedded within the architecture of the game. Taken together, they form the basis of what I call *preferred playing*, which I coined from Stuart Hall’s *preferred reading*, a process of preferred meaning-making delimited by the position of a certain element in relation to other elements in a medium (Hall 1973, 9). While Hall clearly differentiates the dominant code and the meaning-making done by those decoding it, in video games, these practices partly coincide. In games, the act of playing is inevitably connected with meaning-making, or as Helen W. Kennedy

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and Jonathan Dovey (2006, 6) put it: “In order to study a computer game we cannot have recourse solely to its textual characteristics; we have to pay particular attention to the moment of its enactment as it is played.” A player generates a certain form of text by simultaneously reading the code presented and acting upon the framework they perceive.

Preferred playing is a hegemonic concept. Hall (1973, 17) states that the hegemonic viewpoint is that which “appear[s] coterminous with what is ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’,” therefore following the natural flow of the game. Similar to the preferred reading, which is the reading that the producer wants the audience to experience, the preferred playing is the experience the developer wants the player to experience. I would strongly argue, however, that the developer is of lesser importance than the medium, because the will of the developer and the actual message the medium conveys about the preferred playing might vastly differ. In *Fallout 4*, the introductory scene features the life of a male soldier, with male values, narrated by a male narrator. Later, those values are taken up again. I doubt, however, that a hegemonic male view was actively intended. It emerged from the sum of the parts that form the game. The fact that games are seldom developed by a single person and are more likely to be created by a team or even a whole studio only adds to the difficulty of determining authorial intent. Considering its referential value and intertextual elements, a video game is an inherently postmodern work.

Of course, there is not only one way of playing. In accordance with Hall’s (1973) concepts of *oppositional* and *negotiated meaning*, I want to propose similar concepts for games. Someone who performs the *oppositional playing* is aware of the preferred playing and consciously chooses to play differently to arrive at a different outcome, thereby generating a text that also leads to a different meaning since those two acts inevitably fall together. This can happen, considering Hall’s (1973, 18) initial concept, when the game contains controversial themes with which the player disagrees. I see a possibility here for subversive play, for *queering* in games that in their preferred playing offer no room for that kind of play. Different forms of performance are part of oppositional playing, such as the exploration of a role or the development of a roleplay character, which do not follow directed play, but instead strive for “the expression achieved through their interactions” (Nitsche 2016, 391). Playing a game like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) without following the level progression and instead focusing on acting out a certain role, embodying the “dragonborn” instead of engaging in a goal-driven fight through the storyline, is part of oppositional play because there is little to support deeper, pen-and-paper-like roleplaying endeavours in the core game. That those endeavours exist can be proven by examining

fan-made content, so-called mods, that change the code of the game, adding content for such performance.

Modes of *transgressive play*, as proposed by Aarseth (2007) and Jenny Sundén (2009), also fall into the category of oppositional play. They are partly synonymous, as they are both non-hegemonic forms of play. I would, however, use the term transgressive play, especially in the sense that Sundén (2009, 2) applied it, stressing, on one hand, play that exploits loopholes and, on the other hand, play that consciously criticises the status quo. Aarseth (2007, 132) stresses that “[t]ransgressive play is a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game.” Transgressive play is often aimed at communicating with an audience or the developers, thereby favouring acts within online games or on *Twitch* streams to deliver visible symbolic gestures. Oppositional play, however, also includes weaker forms of non-preferred playing by using an underdeveloped spectrum within the game but does not necessarily dwell on bug abuse or attack the status quo.

Negotiated playing is a compromise between *oppositional* and *preferred playing*. A part of the *preferred playing* is accepted but is still changed to the player’s own liking. *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* (2013) is an MMORPG that features a vast-but-goal-oriented world, which, via level progression, leads to a form of endgame featuring battles as the dominant form of interaction within the game world. While there are numerous ways to individualise one’s own character or its house, hinting at the possibility of roleplay, this is never explicitly stated as opposed to, for example, *World of Warcraft* (2004), where dedicated roleplay servers with separate rulesets exist. The game does not offer an eloquent concept for roleplay, but contains features that are open for use and interpretation and can therefore be used for roleplay.

Some games offer more in terms of free play and forms of *oppositional play* than others through characters and avatars. While all video game protagonists can in some way be controlled by their players (Aldred 2016, 355), avatars are “prosthetic, part-of-ourselves type of character(s)” who “embod[y] empathy, in which the player experiences a kind of physical or bodily connection to the character” (Tronstad 2008, 256), such as with the avatar of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. In contrast to avatars, “agents” are characters whose skillset and outer appearance cannot be altered (Waggoner 2009, 9). They are often recognisable icons of a franchise (Aldred 2016, 359) such as Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII* (1997). A spectrum exists ranging from agents to avatars, consisting of protagonists that are partly customisable and partly fixed in their appearance and behaviour. Avatars as predominantly empty vehicles invite the transfer of emotions, inviting players to fill them with a form of “self” and

encouraging them to act more as individuals than as the presented characters. This can lead to forms of oppositional playing in which individual freedom is exercised.

Wolf (2006, 82) argues that prior knowledge from multiple playthroughs can further alter the kind of playing a player tries to achieve. Paths that were hidden may now be more obvious, but it is also possible that the game offers paths to the player that were not there on the first playthrough, such as a new set of characters or a new difficulty setting.

Preferred playing as that which is nudged

Preferred playing can become a textual basis for analysis if it is first grasped. The game conveys the preferred playing through various means to the player, and markers can be found in all layers of the medium. To develop this theory further, I will rely on the concept of *nudge*. This concept is part of Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein's (2008) attempt to foster a different kind of economic thinking to help consumers make healthier or more thoughtful choices in life. It follows a mindset called "libertarian paternalism" (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 5). While the idea is not without criticism (Arneson 2015, Hansen and Jespersen 2013), the actual economic implications are not relevant in this context. Nudge is a form of economic manipulation, as Yasher Saghai (2013, 487) clarifies, but I would argue that every kind of medium – interactive and non-interactive – manipulates us towards a certain reading, as previously argued by Hall.

Nudge can be seen as a type of interference with the decision-making process that is "relatively weak, soft, and nonintrusive [. . .] because choices are not blocked, fenced off, or significantly burdened" (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 5). While, on the surface, a person may be presented with all options available to them, the presentation of subtle incentives portrays certain options as more rewarding than others. Game designers usually intend to design games to be entertaining. As previously discussed, options are an essential aspect of the entertainment which video games deliver, but not all choices lead to equally entertaining results. The risk of losing an allied character inside a game like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) might be part of the thrill, but the actual incident is connected to the loss of fighting strength, cutscenes, and story. Therefore, players concerned with the preferred playing try to navigate a kind of ideal gameplay path, and the game, likewise, tries to nudge them in that direction.

Decision-making is based on two systems, the automatic system, which can roughly be equated to the gut reaction, often seen in games when decisions need to be made within a limited time, and the reflective system, which is responsible for conscious thoughts (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 21). I would argue that this kind of

system is more prevalent in turn-based tactics and strategy games, such as *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (2010). The combination of both systems usually leads to a highly immersive experience, perpetuating the illusion of non-mediation between the player and the gaming context (Przybylski et al. 2010, 161–62).

Thaler and Sunstein list circumstances that alter the choice-making progress, of which a few are particularly relevant for games. Their first belief is that people make choices because of *anchoring*, which occurs when a prediction is anchored to previous knowledge, which can, depending on the similarities between the predicted occurrence and the previous knowledge, be closer to or further from the optimal prediction (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 23–25). Presentation is equally important in a situation where a person can choose. Framing an option as a loss makes it highly unattractive to customers (37). This goes hand in hand with what they call gains and losses, which essentially revolves around the fact that people hate losing (33), and which presents an inherent impetus that is consistently used in game design. For Thaler and Sunstein (72), nudges are especially important when the effects of a choice are not instantly visible, which is even more true for games with eloquent choice architectures and a lot of branching (for example, in the *Banner Saga* series (2014–2018), where early choices affect not only one individual event or even one game but carry over from the first game to the third game). They argue that feedback is one of the most important parts of nudging, as it shapes the way decisions are made in the future (77). This also holds true for video games.

I have already briefly talked about the aspect of manipulation. A nudge is a non-intrusive, soft form of manipulation, which preserves the unaltered choice set (Saghai 2013, 15). Other forms of manipulation are possible, such as that which Richard J. Arneson (2015) labels a *shove*, or a forceful intrusion. In gaming, nudges and shoves fall on a spectrum. If nudges are subtle influences in the choice-making process, building on aspects such as choice arrangement or the framing and balancing of games, then shoves are an intrusion. For example, in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, if an allied character is about to leave the group indefinitely, the game provides the player with an additional prompt asking them to confirm they actually want to make that choice. This is remarkably controlling. One example of an even more egregious shove is found in some side-scroller games where the screen scrolls forward by itself, resulting in a game over once the screen's border reaches the player's character. While it is possible to stand still, it is highly advisable to move, since standing still is penalised immediately by the character's death. Two phenomena that comprise no actual options at all would be *pseudo-choice*, which, to use Wolf's terminology, is no choice at all, where every choice made leads to the same result, and lastly *coercion*. Coercion describes the outright denial of any choice,

such as in *Evoland* (2013), where the player is asked if he or she wants to help the damsel in distress, but the option to say “No” is greyed out.

Perceiving the default: Default options and other markers of preferred play

In this section, I want to discuss a few of the markers that guide players to follow the preferred playing. Due to the multi-layered nature of video games, this list should not be seen as exhaustive but rather as a starting point for discussion about the guidance offered in certain parts of games throughout a playthrough.

Default options and visual defaults. So-called default choices form one category of markers for preferred playing, a part of nudging which manifests in a visibly different way in video games. Default choices are “an option that will obtain if the chooser does nothing” (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 83). Christina L. Brown and Aradhna Krishna (2004, 529) state that “default options affect choice by taking advantage of consumers’ processing limitations” and reduce the cognitive effort to make a choice (Brown and Krishna 2004, 530). There are numerous aspects in which default choices can nudge the player towards the preferred playing, but they are also often shaped differently than they are in economics because games mostly demand input of some kind to advance the story at all.

A phenomenon in games that semantically best matches the actual definition of “default options” is what I will call *standard actions*. Standard actions occur when a certain default action is triggered by the game if the player remains inactive. They are often accompanied by a timer that runs out and then triggers the game to choose the least-favourable option, which makes it a challenge and not a true default option. For example, in the final scene of *Half Life* (1998), the player is given the choice of stepping through a portal to receive a new mission from the employers of the mysterious G-Man. Failure to do so within 18 seconds results in the protagonist being teleported to his certain death instead.

An important form of default for the preferred reading is what I will call *visual defaults*. According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 2), “like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction.” Some structures, they argue, are subordinated to others (79). In video games, this can occur in two forms: a subordination in time (one was there before the other) and in the game arrangement. By subordinating one option to the other, one option can be defined as the visual default, sparking the *default effect*. Framing a choice as the default option drastically increases the likelihood that this option is chosen above the others (Brown and Krishna 2004, 530). Furthermore, default options serve as what Thaler and Sunstein call the anchor, with the default option becoming the point of reference for the decision-maker

(Wernerfelt 1995). They also change the player's understanding of what is the desired, the recommended, or simply the best option.

Dishonored 2 (2016) is an example of a visual default where subordination is achieved via time structure. Emily Kaldwin is presented first on the screen when the player has to choose between her or Corvo. The player must actively move the cursor to move the camera over to Corvo to choose him instead. Emily is not only presented as the default choice on a technical level, but also via the preceding tutorial and cutscene, which are played and told from Emily's perspective. Choosing Emily as the protagonist leads to a relatively fresh story about female agency in which she sets out to avenge her murdered mother and save her father. Another visual default example is in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, in which the presented default character in the character editor is always a white, male Nord, which the player must actively change. The images provided by the character creation already establish certain views and favoured playstyles. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 87) state that an object or person in a picture, or the carrier, consists of possessive attributes or parts, both of which are put in relation to each other. An initial image of a character with a weapon drawn already sets the tone for a preferred playing of the game and provides an outlook to the supposedly most important mechanic, in this case combat.

Balancing. Balancing is another manifestation of the nudges that lead to the preferred playing. It describes how a game renders a certain option or playstyle more ludically rewarding due to the calibration of its mechanics. In *Far Cry 2* (2008), the protagonist dies so quickly under enemy fire that stealth becomes necessary to survive, although the player could theoretically opt for a more aggressive approach. Instead, the overall narrative requires the protagonist to sneak around at night and actively avoid any signs of human life, like a night-prowling animal, thus becoming less "human."

The opposite occurs in *Doom* (2016) and *Doom Eternal* (2020), where killing enemies through close-up melee finishers grants bonus health, armour, and ammunition, all of which are vital for survival, making players control the Doom Marine in accordance with his narrative: as an agent of aggression and rage that does not back down but pushes forward.

In strategy games, balancing is often used to differentiate a variety of playable factions in ways that correspond with the faction's narrative theme. In *Sid Meier's Civilization V*, the Egyptians are faster at building wonders, which makes building them an effective strategy and thus makes the player reenact the behaviour associated with the game's idea of "Egyptians." Balancing that contradicts the narrative results in ludo-narrative dissonance. If a narrative goal grants unsatisfactory ludic rewards compared to alternative paths, the player is less likely to pursue it. This is

the case in *Fallout 4* where the Lone Survivor is supposed to follow the main quest to save her son, but the player is rewarded more for exploring the landscape and building settlements and thus more likely to avoid the very goal that supposedly drives the character.

Difficulty and Challenges. The notion of difficulty is closely connected to balancing. The right difficulty in games is essential to the fun it offers. “In its ideal state, then, challenge – characterized by the obstacle that attempts to impede player progress – is directly proportional to the pleasure gained through playing” (Furze 2016, 146). This ideal proportion perpetuates the so-called “flow” state, coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), in which someone becomes lost in his or her current activity. Challenge is an integral factor in motivating the player to continue playing (Furze 2016, 147). Jesper Juul (2008, 247) notes that challenge does not rise in a straight line, but that it should be “sometimes [. . .] a little easy, sometimes a little hard” to be less predictable. Games can have an emergent difficulty, such as in chess (Holland 1998, 14), or they can have a progressive difficulty curve (Furze 2016, 138). As they progress through a game, players expect challenges to become more difficult, as by that point, ideally, the player has become more proficient at the game as well. While emergent difficulty is a form of difficulty that relies on the players themselves or the game unfolding, even relatively open games still feature forms of progressive difficulty that shape the way in which someone following the preferred playing would play the game.

Conan Exiles (2018), for example, allows the player to visit every part of the map right from the onset. Every player starts in the beginners’ area in the very south of the world map. The player has the option to travel to the most challenging areas of the map right away, but those lie in the far north, which, without a mount, requires an hour to walk on foot. On this path, several challenges in the form of enemies and potential death from thirst, hunger, or sandstorms await the player, making it highly unattractive to stray from the path of preferred playing. The difficulty in *Conan Exiles* spreads in concentric circles around the area in which the player starts, and the player learns by interacting with the world to travel certain distances that lie within the strength of the character. Another example in which difficulty shapes the preferred playing is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017). This open-world game offers the player the option to face the final boss at the very beginning. The so-called “speed run” community competes to finish the game in the shortest amount of time and thus skips the majority of content to head straight to the final encounter. These 30 minutes of intensive play are widely seen as a spectacle and are part of the oppositional play, as the added time condition for winning is not part of the original game’s ruleset.

Difficulty shapes a game and the way the game is played on several levels, such as dungeons, which are structured in an equally climatic way. In games of emergence, such as *Crypt of the NecroDancer* (2015), levels of certain types are randomised, but the difficulty increases with every new stage. Challenges shape the kind of individual progression. Even in relatively open games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, where the player can choose from a variety of skills ranging from a proficiency in axe-wielding to a knack for alchemy, the player is confronted with certain challenges that will shape the way in which the player wants to progress. Enemies can only be defeated through combat and therefore some kind of violent approach has to be part of the individual progression of the player's character. In even more emergent games, the challenges shape the variety of approaches that emerge as most effective. In digital card games like *Hearthstone* (2014), for example, the game's limited options at the start of a match and the plethora of options towards the end establish certain decisions as openers or standard moves. The same phenomenon can be observed in chess where some moves have become so standardised that they are called "book moves," those most adept at dealing with situations that arise from the game's ruleset.

Another form in which difficulty makes the preferred playing visible is closely connected to the notion of default options. Nowadays, many games offer options to change the overall difficulty. In some games, players are stripped of certain options when they change the difficulty, or changing difficulties creates a ludo-narrative dissonance. *Dead in Vinland* (2018), for example, gives characters a well-balanced set of skills on normal difficulty ("story mode") that fit their personality, while higher difficulties randomise attributes, which makes for a vastly different experience. In Story Mode, Kari, the tomboyish daughter of the family, prevails in agility, stealth, and courage. This goes hand in hand with her narrative representation as a daredevil who refuses traditional feminine values. Heodening Mode, the higher difficulty, however, can lead to a ludo-narrative dissonance, picturing Kari as thriving in skills like cooking while still bemoaning them in cutscenes. Therefore, the default difficulty is the one that fits the overall design of the game, making it the preferred playing. *Dead in Vinland* and many other games, such as *Wargroove* (2019), outright tell the player which of the difficulties is the default setting, often adding that this is the way the game is meant to be played.

Level design. Game levels are often critiqued in terms of openness, for creating the illusion that the player is dropped into a vast world that offers unlimited paths. This, however, is not how games are designed. When discussing meaningful level design, Jenkins (2004) states: "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces." The gameworld is not a natural space, but both a story-

telling device and a playground. Jenkins (2004) famously compares levels to amusement parks, claiming that those levels “can paint their worlds in fairly broad outlines and count on the visitor/player to do the rest.” Jenkins continues by calling them “spatial stories,” connected to spatial exploration. The amusement park, however, might be a place that can be explored freely, but it is still full of markers that guide the visitor in certain directions so he or she does not get lost and enjoys the individual attractions to their fullest capacity. Most levels are designed in ways that are meaningful and, while technically open, in parts linear in their potential for exploration and progression. Objectives are usually close by, even in open spaces, leading the player through the terrain, thereby allowing them to visit everything that is worth seeing, except for maybe a few places meant for in-depth exploration. Returning to *World of Warcraft* as an example, when the player visits Stranglethorn, the first quests with the hunter’s lodge start in the town in which the player arrives, Booty Bay, then progress to the entrance to the Stranglethorn jungle, and eventually go deeper and deeper until the player arrives on the opposite side, having visited all important locations on the way by virtue of following the questline.

Genre and narratives. Level design is one of the narrative devices that games use. In the aftermath of the debate between ludologists and narratologists, most have settled on the fact that “some video games include a story and expend great effort to make it the most important point of the experience they offer, while others feature a very limited story (or [. . .] no story at all)” (Arsenault 2016, 479). Jenkins (2004) notes that games tell stories differently, but they often rely on the player being familiar with genre conventions and stereotypes. Games that serve as a host medium for already-existing narratives make use of so-called extrinsic narrativity (Arsenault 2016, 479). This extrinsic narrativity, I would argue, is also a form of nudge. Through internalised genre conventions, players can predict what kind of an event might lead to what effect or ending, and developers can use this knowledge to nudge players in certain directions. In Thaler and Sunstein’s terminology, players anchor to their previous knowledge about genre and base their choices on that knowledge.

Gone Home (2013), for example, instantly reminds one of a horror game, featuring an old mansion as its setting. The player arrives at night, the mansion is dark, and no music plays. A letter states that the protagonist shall not look for answers where the protagonist’s sister Sam might be. The player then has to find clues inside the house as to what happened, while a thunderstorm is roaring outside, causing the lights to flicker. Floorboards creak, doors shut, and the narrow perspective, perpetuated through the first-person camera, evokes an atmosphere of danger. Knowing and reading those signs as belonging to the horror genre will make players

explore more carefully, influencing their behaviour in a more predictable way, which is part of the preferred playing, even when the player never faces a single foe throughout the entire game. One could argue that this preferred playing only occurs when the player is familiar with the conventions and tropes, but creaking floorboards and thunderstorms draw the genre in such broad strokes that no real literacy in the horror genre is needed. Exploring the house at a fast pace, willingly ignoring all these signs, can therefore be seen as a form of oppositional playing.

Video game genres are numerous, partly contradictory, and also mostly ruled by formal features (Fernández-Vara 2015, 68). A first-person horror shooter is defined by the perspective of the player, the prevalent mode of action inside the game, and traditional narrative conventions. Genre serves as an implicit contract between the film maker and the audience (Schatz 1977) – or, in this case, the developer and the player. In a shooter, shooting will be part of the preferred playing. Trying a pacifist approach to a game that is coded around gunfights is clearly an approach to oppositional playing. Actively avoiding combat in this context means one is familiar with the conventions and rejects them.

The story itself employs similar forms of anchoring to those described for genre. Players are implicitly or explicitly familiar with narrative conventions. Roleplaying games are known for featuring complex stories, sometimes told from multiple perspectives, and it is no coincidence that many fantasy novels like *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) and *The Witcher* (1993–2013) have been adapted into roleplaying games. Even vague knowledge of the narrative and lore can be used by developers to guide the player accordingly. Combined with gameplay elements, the aspects of the story itself provide the strongest nudges for the preferred playing. Especially in roleplaying games, where players are immersed not only in the game but also in the depicted world (called “imaginary immersion” by Ermi and Mäyrä 2005), players are more likely to follow clues given by other characters. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Cullen Rutherford, an ex-addict, will tell the protagonist that he does not want to consume drugs any longer. If the player ignores multiple clues from other characters to keep him clean, the game punishes the player by making Cullen unavailable for romance. In such cases, longstanding tools of narratological analysis would be useful to analyse the preferred playing towards which the story nudges the player.

Objectives and goals. Louis-Martin Guay (2016, 191) states, “Playing a game always involves achieving some objectives.” Game designers like Tracy Fullerton (2004) argue that establishing an objective is the first step in game design. Fullerton even claims that objectives are the very thing that structures games (Fullerton 2004, 29). While Guay (2016, 192–95) mainly differentiates between three kinds of objectives – Formal Objectives, Learning Objectives and Experimental Objectives –

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preferred playing is mostly concerned with formal objectives. For example, they come in forms of "Chase: Catch X and/or elude X" (Fullerton 2004). A game rarely provides the player with only one objective (Rollins and Adams 2003, 55). Roleplaying games, for example, provide players with a variety of objectives, such as slaying foes, avoiding damage, saving damsels, gathering herbs, fleeing from danger in a limited time, etc. Mandatory objectives, however, play the most important role in mapping the preferred playing. In a roleplaying game, progressing the character's capabilities is necessary to win. It can be argued that it is highly unlikely that a player will avoid all obstacles because otherwise their character will be unfit for the final confrontation. Here, the objective – defeating the final boss – shapes the preferred playing. Similarly, in dungeons of roleplaying games, players are incentivised to explore every room and corridor rather than rushing straight to the end, as they require the rewards this yields in the form of experience and loot to progress their character.

Outside of roleplaying games, games like *Dishonored* (2012) show how goals shape the preferred playing. The game repeatedly emphasises through cutscenes, dialogue, and loading screens that an overly violent approach will lead to a worse (so-called *High Chaos*) ending. Therefore, the goal of keeping characters alive and achieving a positive ending urges the player to attempt a stealthy, nonviolent approach. In a game of emergence like *Hearthstone*, the tutorial already teaches players that they have to put cards on the field that are able to attack the opponent, but they must first overcome the cards that the opponent has on the field. The objective to "reduce enemy hitpoints to zero with skills or units" leads to the emergence of strategies. Analysing the goals will inevitably lead to the preferred playing.

Rewards are a form of objective. In games, they can be used as a marker for preferred play. As Andrew Przybylski, C. Scott Rigby, and Richard M. Ryan (2010, 155) note, (non-educational) games are usually intrinsically motivating. Rewards are a strong driving force within games, be they in the form of additional gain within the game world such as objects or in-game currency (both usually considered *loot*), additional cutscenes, lengthy talks with a favourite character, developing skills, and so on. Players will usually opt for the path they deem rewarding, and the game will usually hint to the paths that are. In *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011) a certain amount of dark/light points is needed to wield certain items. They also influence the relation between the character and their follower. Options that are beneficial in dialogues and are rewarded with dark or light points are marked with respective symbols, making them the preferred option if they coincide with the path that the character pursues. While players pursue oppositional play for a variety of reasons, such as seeing a character die or mastering a special kind of challenge, such as with *The Sims 3* (2009), for

which entire websites for alternate game modes exist, those players are usually already aware of the typical and therefore preferable way to play the game.

Conclusion

This article started by discussing the limitations of past qualitative and quantitative approaches to video game analysis, which are especially prevalent when analysing games regarding race, class, and gender. While past approaches often fall short objectively or paint the content of the inherently interactive medium of video games in binary terms, I recommended a twofold approach to game analysis. To start, I proposed mapping out the potential actions and events inside games, following Fernández-Vara's (2015) concept of the space of possibilities.

While this ensures one perceives games in their entirety, it is still not enough to grasp perspectives and ideologies oftentimes encoded within the game's preferences. For this reason, I transformed Hall's longstanding concept of preferred reading (1973), together with the notions of negotiated and oppositional reading, into the concept of preferred playing. For this, I used Thaler and Sunstein's concept of nudge (2008), which suggests that the game itself advocates an ideal way of playing it. To grasp the nudges employed by games to form the preferred playing, different aspects and layers of games have been discussed. Analysing those nudges helps those working with games to perceive the preferred playing, which can be difficult to recognise within the space of possibilities. It offers a new way to perceive games. Nudges are particularly prevalent in so-called visual defaults but are also visible in many aspects of gameplay, especially in balancing, difficulty and challenges, as well as goals and rewards. Meaningful level design and aspects of genre and narrative further shape the game's vision of an ideal path, which both players and scholars can then identify as the preferred playing of the game. Performativity can thereby mostly be found in semi-directed games which offer an especially broad space of possibilities within the space of oppositional play.

This methodology can be used to create a textual groundwork to analyse games not only from the perspective of gender but also, for example, from race. As a versatile tool for game analysis, it can be combined with other approaches. Particularly in games that pursue openness and emergence, it allows putting additional emphasis on aspects of gameplay and user participation, while games that emphasise story and character development will benefit from longstanding approaches to those subjects found in the analysis of other forms of media. The extent to which the notion of preferred playing is universal has yet to be determined since games communicate via signs, which are culturally specific. To what degree this applies to video games as a global medium may incentivise future research.

While the focus of this article is on video game studies, which currently lacks a systematic method of default choices and preferred playing, the ideas of the type of perception that orient people toward preferred playing may potentially be extended to other fields of study. Interactive media belonging to genres such as interactive film or choose-your-own-adventure books could especially benefit from this approach.

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S U M M A R Y

Vaikesätte jälgedes: valikuarhitektuuri navigeerimine videomängudes

Marie-Luise Meier

Võttesõnad: metodoloogia, tekstianalüüs, videomängud, eelistatud mängimine, vaikevalikud, ludoloogia

Käesolev artikkel loob Stuart Halli (1973) eelistatud lugemise (*preferred reading*) käsitluse alusel eelistatud mängimise (*preferred playing*) kontseptsiooni, kasutades selleks Cass Sunsteini ja Richard Thaleri (2008) nügimise (*nudge*) mõistet, et luua uus lähenemine tekstianalüüsile, mis oleks sobiv videomängude kui interaktiivse meediumi analüüsiks. Koos mõistete ja uuendustega nüüdisaegsest ludoloogiast ja mängu-disainist arutatakse eelistatud mängimise markereid kui alternatiivi levinumale lähilugemisele videomängu meediumi eri kihistuste uurimiseks.

Artikli alguses on välja toodud varasemate kvalitatiivsete ja kvantitatiivsete lähenemiste problemaatika videomänguanalüüsis, mis on eriti märgatav siis, kui käsitletakse rassi, klassi ja soo kujutamist videomängudes. Kuna varasemates lähenemistes jääb tihti puudu objektiivsusest ning tihtipeale kujutatakse videomänge, vältimatult interaktiivset meediumit, ka liiga lihtsustatult, soovitan kaheosalist lähenemist videomänguanalüüsile. Alustuseks pakun ma potentsiaalsete tegevuste ja sündmuste kaardistamise videomängudes, võttes aluseks Fernández-Vara (2015) kontseptsiooni võimalusruumist (*space of possibilities*).

Kuigi see aitab videomänge mõista terviklikena, ei piisa sellest siiski mängusiseste vaatepunktide ja ideoloogiate analüüsiks, sest need on tihti kodeeritud eelistama üht või teist valikut. Seetõttu loon ma Halli (1973) mõiste „eelistatud lugemine“ (*preferred reading*) alusel, koos selle alla kuuluvate vastanduva (*oppositional*) ja sobitava (*negotiated*) lugemise mõistetega, kontseptsiooni eelistatud mängimisest (*preferred playing*). Sel eesmärgil kasutan ma Thaleri ja Sunsteini (2008) terminit „nügimine“ (*nudge*), pakkudes välja, et videomäng ise markeerib ideaalse viisi enda mängimiseks. Eelistatud mängimine on seega domineeriv mängustiil, mis on tuletatud neist nügimistest, mida mäng mängijale esitab; vastanduv mängimine on mängustiil, mis tunneb need nügimised küll ära, kuid vastandub neile tahtlikult, näiteks lõhestava või eten-dusliku mängimise eesmärgil. Sobitav mängimine seevastu aga kaasab tihti eelistatud mängimist, kuid muudab seda vastavalt mängija soovidele. Selleks, et mõista, millised nügimised videomängudes moodus-tavad eelistatud mängimise, on vaja analüüsida videomängude erinevaid aspekte ja kihistusi. Nügimine on eriti tavapärane nn visuaalsete vaikesätete puhul, kuid esineb ka paljudes mängumehhaanika detailides, näiteks tasakaalustamises, keerukuses ja väljakutsetes, aga ka eesmärkides ja auhindades. Täendus-rikas tasemedisain ja žanri- ning narratiivielementide kasutamine kujundavad täiendavalt kujutluspilti ideaalsest teekonnast läbi videomängu sündmuste, mille põhjal saavad seega tuletada videomängu eelis-tatud mängimise nii mängijad ise kui ka ludoloogid.

Kirjeldatud metodoloogia abil saab luua lähteteksti, analüüsimaiks videomänge nii soo kui ka näiteks rassi kujutamises, kuna alaesindatuse probleem on mõlema aspekti puhul tavapärane (Williams jt 2009). Kuna tegemist on kohandatava töövahendiga videomängude analüüsiks, saab seda vastavalt vajadusele kasutada ka koos teiste teoreetiliste lähenemistega.

S U M M A R Y

Marie-Luise Meier – Tartu Ülikooli lektor ja doktorant, kelle uurimishuvides põimuvad kirjandusteadus ja meediauuringud. Tema doktoritöö eesmärgiks on luua holistlik metoodika sugude kujutamise uurimiseks videomängudes, arvestades mängude kui meediumi eripärasid. Lisaks soo- ja filmiuuringutele ning mänguteooriale on tema uurimishuvideks transmeedia, düstoopiline ja spekulatiivne kirjandus, transhumanism ning 20. ja 21. sajandi fantaasiateooriad.

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