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Digital America

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About

The *Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* (*JAAAS*) is a peer-reviewed diamond open-access journal which provides an interdisciplinary space for discussions about all aspects of American studies. The journal functions as a forum for Americanists in Austria and the global academic community. Published twice a year, the journal welcomes submissions on a wide range of topics, aiming to broaden the multi- and interdisciplinary study of American cultures.

Aims

Interrogating the notion of "America" and looking at the U.S. within its transnational and (trans-)hemispheric interconnections, *JAAAS* seeks to challenge disciplinary boundaries by bringing together original and innovative work by scholars who focus on topics as diverse as literature, cultural studies, film and new media, visual arts, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, performance studies, queer studies, border studies, mobility studies, age studies, game studies, and animal studies. Apart from offering insights into trans- and international American literary and cultural studies and offering European perspectives on America, the journal also solicits scholarship that deals with history, music, politics, geography, ecocriticism, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, law, and any other aspect of American culture and society.

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Special Issue
Digital America

Edited by **Michael Fuchs** and **Stefan Rabitsch**

Special Issue Articles

Digital America

Introduction

This issue of *JAAAS* originates in the 2021 conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, "Digital Americas," hosted by the Center for Inter-American Studies at the University of Graz. The nature of the articles that we have accepted for this issue made us narrow down our focus from "Digital Americas" to "Digital America." Harnessing the power of artificial intelligence, ChatGPT may help us define, and differentiate between, "Digital Americas" and "Digital America." Upon providing the prompt "define 'Digital America,'" ChatGPT offers the following definition:

> The term "Digital America" typically refers to the impact, integration, and evolution of digital technologies across the United States of America. It encompasses various dimensions:
>
> 1. **Technological Infrastructure**: The development and deployment of advanced digital infrastructure like high-speed internet, 5G networks, and data centers across the country.
> 2. **Digital Economy**: The transformation of the economy through digitalization, including the growth of e-commerce, digital services, tech startups, and the digitization of traditional industries.
> 3. **E-Government Services**: The use of digital platforms by the government to deliver services to citizens, aiming to enhance accessibility, efficiency, and transparency.
> 4. **Digital Culture and Lifestyle**: The influence of digital technologies on social interactions, cultural norms, media consumption, and daily life activities.
> 5. **Education and Digital Literacy**: The integration of digital tools in education and the emphasis on equipping the population with digital literacy skills to navigate and succeed in a digital world.
> 6. **Cybersecurity and Data Privacy**: The issues and measures related to securing digital infrastructure, protecting data, and ensuring privacy in an increasingly digital society.

While "Digital America" thus specifically refers to the United States (arguably perpetuating a monolithic notion of "America"), "Digital Americas," ChatGPT explains upon asking it to define that term, "refers to the collective digital transformation, technological integration, and the evolving digital landscape across the countries in both North and South America." It "thus encapsulates," ChatGPT continues, "the diverse

and dynamic nature of digital transformation across a wide array of countries, each with its unique challenges, opportunities, and approaches to embracing digital technologies." Upon finally explicitly asking ChatGPT what the difference between "Digital America" and "Digital Americas" is, the artificial intelligence suggests that "the primary distinction is the breadth of focus: 'Digital America' is more singular and focused on the U.S., while 'Digital Americas' adopts a more inclusive, hemispheric perspective, considering the varied experiences and trajectories of digital transformation across multiple countries." By distinguishing between "Digital America" and "Digital Americas" in this fashion, ChatGPT harks back to what Arjun Appadurai has labeled "the shackles of highly localized, boundary-oriented, holistic, primordialist images of cultural form and substance" that permeates both traditional anthropology and traditional area studies.[1] This tradition, Paul Giles has explained, also long dominated American studies, which tried "to encompass a particular bounded territory," most often the "nation, but also smaller variants of the nation space, such as a region or a city—and through this enabling circumscription to treat that space allegorically, as emblematic of a particular kind of identity."[2] This quotation is taken from a book that was part of the project of emancipating American studies from "the nationalist-conditioned history" of the discipline epitomized by "the tenacious grasp of American essentialism" that defined "the disciplinary unconscious" and "field-imaginary" for decades.[3] This "transnational turn" was in full swing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in part as an attempt to demonstrate that "the goal of American studies scholarship is not exporting and championing an arrogant, pro-American nationalism but understanding the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity," which "requires looking beyond the nation's borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders."[4]

However, I have decided to quote Paul Giles's monograph for another, perhaps simpler (but simultaneously—or because of being simpler—ill-conceived), reason: its title, *Virtual Americas*. One of the book's goals was "to virtualize America," which, for Giles, meant "to denaturalize it."[5] Describing his work on *The Melville Electronic Library*, John Bryant somewhat echoes this notion when noting that "the question 'What is the text of America?' becomes more compelling the more we recognize writing as a variable, revisionary, collaborative thing."[6] Admittedly, Bryant is primarily interested in demonstrating how digital scholarship may help illustrate that canonical texts did not magically appear on the page but were rather the product of repeated revisions and how these revisions affected the texts' meanings—and how collaborative work facilitated by digital platforms may aid in revealing the various versions and revisions of a text. A book such as *House of Leaves* (2000) simultaneously plays with and draws attention to the writing process by foregrounding that which usually remains veiled by, in fact, trying to hide something. An appendix included in the book (which is part

of the fiction) adds pieces of information to the main narratives. One note suggests a path the narrative layer centering on a family trapped in a haunted house could have taken: "Perhaps I will alter the whole thing. Kill both children."[7] The appendix here not simply imagines a "what if?" scenario but rather, in truly gothic fashion, reveals that which is repressed in the main narrative—no family members die in order for the nuclear family to survive the encounter with supernatural forces. Notes such as this and other elements of House of Leaves aim at "prohibiting any sort of accurate mapmaking,"[8] showcasing how "the hyperlinked, networked structure of the digital environment has influenced the structure of print fiction and the ways in which a reader is encouraged to approach print text."[9]

While the fluidity of these texts, to return to John Bryant,[10] opens up various research trajectories, one should not uncritically celebrate this textual openness.[11] After all, "virtualizing America"—in the sense of transporting America to the digital sphere—does not (more or less) automatically "denaturalize" it. To be sure, I do not mean to downplay the role of social media in movements such as Black Lives Matter and the potentials of digital platforms for establishing spaces for marginalized groups (e.g., Black Twitter),[12] which arguably makes possible alternative Americas. Nevertheless, the virtual America that we find in digital spaces often reproduce and cement the biased worldviews that characterize the offline world. In her influential book *Cybertypes* (2002), Lisa Nakamura points out that "the Internet is where race happens; even in the absence of users of color, images of race and racialism proliferate in cyberspace." The internet, Nakamura continues, "is above all a discursive and rhetorical space, a place where 'race' is created as an effect of the net's distinctive uses of language." And even if one might imaginatively shed one's physical skin when entering digital spaces, the purportedly "'fluid' selves" that one may occupy "are no less subject to cultural hegemonies, rules of conduct, and regulating cultural norms than are 'solid'" ones.[13] Although these hierarchies characterize digital spaces just as much as those in "real" life (a problematic opposition, to be sure), scholarship in Nakamura's (and others') footsteps has shown that, for example, black women, who are "the continual victims of intersecting oppressions within the Xbox Live gaming space," have become resilient and "refuse to be continued victims."[14]

As if to enter into a dialogue with this idea, upon seeing her daughter's new AI system in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), Queen Ramonda notes, "One day, artificial intelligence is going to kill us all."[15] Although the line evokes popular depictions of AI rising against its human creators, spoken by a black woman, the sentence just as much raises the question of who the "us" that AI is going to kill is. Indeed, in a white-dominated "racialized disciplinary society,"[16] the "invisibility of whiteness" implicates that "to be seen in white space is to be subject to violence without redress."[17] Since "machines have the moralities of their inventors," as Amiri Baraka noted more

than half a century ago,[18] the question is whether the unshackled AI will attack its white masters or rather turn its attention to other groups of humans. However, Shuri self-assuredly responds, "My AI isn't like the movies . . . It does exactly what I tell it to do."[19] Digital technologies that are prone to making the same biased assumptions that human beings make on an everyday basis on the streets are thus transformed into subversive tools that allow Shuri to challenge accepted power hierarchies.

The opening article in this special issue addresses this interplay between control through digital technologies and in virtual spaces, the effects of virtual constraints and containment on offline realities (and vice versa), and the attempts of fighting these structures. In "Semiospheric Borders and the Erasure of Latinx Subjectivity in *Culture Shock* and *Sleep Dealer*," Anna Marta Marini discusses two science fiction films in which Latin American migrants are denied access to the territory of the United States but granted access to US markets through digital extensions of US territory, which allows for the integration of cheap labor into the US capitalist economy while minimizing (or even rendering impossible) its presence on US soil. However, as Marini demonstrates, *Culture Shock* (2019) and *Sleep Dealer* (2008) do not simply emphasize the exclusionary and inhumane practices and structures of the US border system but rather also demonstrate how individuals and/or groups may leverage the (digital) technologies meant to contain and/or exploit them to their ends. My contribution to this issue likewise examines how film has responded to developments in the digital domain, more specifically how horror movies have addressed fears and anxieties pertaining to videogames and digital spaces. In "Videogames in Horror Movies: Remediation, Metalepsis, Interface Effects, and Fear of the Digital," I discuss four movies whose thematic concerns overlap, focusing on particular dimensions in each one of them. As a relatively early example of a horror movie thematizing digital games, *Braindead* (1994) is primarily concerned with how experiences in the digital domain may influence actions in the "real" world; *Stay Alive* (2006) addressed similar concerns, but the film does so decidedly within the tradition of the trope of haunted manuscripts and media that may offer gateways to other worlds; *Livescream* (2018), similarly, engages with the interplay between material reality and digital spaces, but instead of simply blaming videogames for their purportedly negative effects, the movie—which centers on live-streaming—also acknowledges the value of digital games to giving one's life meaning and the role of digital spaces to community-building; and *Choose or Die* (2022), finally, turns the digital-turned-real world of an 1980s' videogame into a space where a young black woman may challenge white patriarchal society.

This discussion of filmic representations and remediations of videogames provides a connection to the second cluster of articles in this issue: three essays that turn their attention to videogames. Regina Seiwald and Alex Wade's "A Genealogy of

Power: The Portrayal of the US in Cold War-Themed Videogames" explores connections between power, knowledge, and American Exceptionalism in Cold War-themed videogames. Surveying a number of videogames released between the 1980s and the early twenty-first century, Seiwald and Wade not only demonstrate how videogames both represent power dynamics and knowledge structures and ludically/performatively put them into play but also how these playful engagements with the Cold War influence our perception of the conflict. In particular—as the article's title suggests—they explore how (Western) representations often perpetuate notions of American Exceptionalism. In "Working-Class Labor in Postapocalyptic America: Affect, Politics, and the 'Forgotten Man' in *Death Stranding*," Stefan Schubert continues this exploration of representations (or simulations) of "Americanness" in videogames by discussing *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) as a post-apocalyptic game that draws on traditional American myths such as westward expansion and rugged individualism while simultaneously tapping into the contemporary trope of the "forgotten man." Schubert argues that, released in a world in which white men increasingly feel that they are overlooked, it matters that a white working-class man helps re-establish the United States in the gameworld. At the same time, Schubert stresses that a ludo-affective dissonance emerges from the representation of working-class labor and the affects generated through gameplay, which complicates the game's politics. In "Staying Human in the Post-Apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism in *The Last of Us* and Its Sequel," Valentina Romanzi likewise explores depictions of post-apocalyptic America—in her case in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) and its sequel (Naughty Dog, 2020). Similar to Schubert, Romanzi highlights the significance of the Frontier myth to imagining post-apocalyptic futures. However, she suggests that the two videogames are, in fact, post-Frontier texts that not simply reproduce the traditional myth and its politics but also challenge these; through both representation and gameplay, *The Last of Us* and its sequel reflect on what traditionally American values are deemed relevant in a post-apocalyptic world. In the end, concepts such as progress, individualism, and violence all become ill-fit to (and in) a new world.

This is the point where an introduction to an issue such as this usually outlines how the issue and its contributions will move the field forward in a variety of ways. However, the individual essays are too specific to offer a general direction that would go beyond a trite platitude such as "digital media, digital platforms, and questions of digitality are important," which would essentially also acknowledge that (Austrian? German-speaking? European?) American studies is late to the party. Alternatively, I could engage in wild and unfounded speculations about how AI is the end of the humanities or how only critical skills developed in the humanities can help us stop AI once it will have freed itself from the constraints imposed by humans unable to

comprehend and, thus, control it. But I won't. Instead, since this is the last issue in my role as the journal's editor-in-chief (co-editor-in-chief for a while now, as a matter of fact—I am incredibly grateful to Cornelia Klecker for taking over), I shall end not with a bang but a whimper by saying that I hope *JAAAS* will not only continue to provide a digital platform for American studies scholarship but also offer a venue for critical engagements with digital platforms as well as media and for digital American studies scholarship.

Michael Fuchs
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Notes

1 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 46.

2 Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

3 Djelal Kadir, "Defending America Against Its Devotees: Presidential Address, First World Congress of the International American Studies Association, Leiden, The Netherlands, 22–4 May 2003," *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004): 147, DOI: 10.1177/1477570004042981; Amy Kaplan, "The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism: A Response to Djelal Kadir, 'Defending America Against Its Devotees,'" *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004), DOI: 10.1177/1477570004042982; Donald E. Pease, "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon," *boundary 2* 17, no. 1 (1990): 3, 11–12, DOI: 10.2307/303215.

4 Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 20, DOI: 10.1353/aq.2005.0004.

5 Giles, *Virtual Americas*, 2.

6 John Bryant, "Where Is the Text of America? Witnessing Revision and the Online Critical Archive," in *The American Literature Scholar in the Digital Age*, ed. Amy E. Earhart and Andrew Jewell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 145.

7 Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 552.

8 Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 109.

9 Brian W. Chanen, "Surfing the Text: The Digital Environment in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," *European Journal of English Studies* 11, no. 2 (2007): 164, DOI: 10.1080/13825570701452755.

10 John Bryant, *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

11 See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 47–66.

12 On BLM and social media, see, for example, Nikita Carney, "All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media," *Humanity & Society* 40,

no. 2 (2016), DOI: 10.1177/0160597616643868; Rashawn Ray, Melissa Brown, and Wendy Laybourn, ed., "The Evolution of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter: Social Movements, Big Data, and Race," spec. issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017); on Black Twitter, see, for example, André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012), DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2012.732147; Sharma Sanjay, "Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion," *New Formations*, no. 78 (2013), DOI: 10.3898/NewF.78.02.2013.

13 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xii–xiii, 4.

14 Kishonna L. Gray, "Intersecting Oppressions and Online Communities: Examining the Experiences of Women of Color in Xbox Live," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 3 (2012): 426, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2011.642401.

15 *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, dir. Ryan Coogler (New York: Marvel Studios, 2022).

16 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 9. Browne makes explicit that she takes the expression from Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 250.

17 Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 3; Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Artificial Vision, White Space and Racial Surveillance Capitalism," *AI & Society*, no. 36 (2021): 1296, DOI: 10.1007/s00146-020-01095-8.

18 Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Technology & Ethos," in *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1972), 157.

19 *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*.

Semiospheric Borders and the Erasure of Latinx Subjectivity in *Culture Shock* and *Sleep Dealer*

Anna Marta Marini

Abstract

Recreating the problematic relationship between the US government and the influx of migrant laborers, the films *Sleep Dealer* (2008) and *Culture Shock* (2019) both reflect a state of exception existing on the US–Mexico border. In both films, the border is represented as a peripheral locus where the migrant subject is emptied of humanity and political subjectivity, in thrall to the panopticon embodied by the American immigration and border enforcement system. In their real world, the migrant protagonists are denied access to the central, culturally dominant space; instead, they are offered a virtual realm, a digital access that is subordinated to the level of legitimacy they achieve. The blurring between the organic and the cybernetic contributes to shaping a dehumanized borderland realm, in the service of a nativist state power that tries to obliterate the presence of migrants despite their fundamental role in the US capitalist economy. However, the cyborg subject embodies the possibility of resistance to that same power. Relying on their humanity, and yet through the projected digital versions of themselves, the protagonists can eventually counter the dominant order—albeit mostly to an individual extent. Drawing on the relatively extensive academic literature on *Sleep Dealer*, this analysis highlights similarities and differences between the two films, focusing in particular on *Culture Shock* and how its virtual reality device allows an expansion on the topics of forced assimilation and erasure of Latinx subjectivity.

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Semiospheric Borders and the Erasure of Latinx Subjectivity in *Culture Shock* and *Sleep Dealer*

Anna Marta Marini

Reproducing digital spaces connected to the US–Mexico border, the films *Sleep Dealer* (2008) and *Culture Shock* (2019) both reflect an existing state of exception whose pivot is represented by the boundary and Latin American migration to the United States. Both films overtly tackle the problematic relationship between the US government and the influx of migrant laborers, which has historically influenced the related policy making and, consequently, the course of transnational migration fluxes.

In both films, the border is represented as a peripheral locus where the migrant subject is emptied of humanity and political subjectivity, in thrall to the panopticon embodied by the American immigration and border enforcement system. In their real worlds, the migrant protagonists are denied access to the central, culturally dominant space; instead, they are offered virtual realms, a means of digital access that is subordinated to the level of legitimacy they can achieve. Despite the apparently futuristic characterization, the peripheral cyberspace inhabited by the migrant—as opposed to the dominant cultural core—shares evident similarities with the reality of the existing US border system. The resultant blurring of the organic and the cybernetic contributes to shape a dehumanized borderland realm,[1] in the service of a nativist state power that tries to obliterate the presence of migrants despite their fundamental role in the US capitalist economy.

Alex Rivera's and Saul Guerrero's constructions of virtual semiospheric realities reflect the asymmetrical relationship between the United States and the migrant subject. At the same time, though, the cyborg subject embodies the possibility of resistance to that same power through what David Dalton calls "robo-sacer resistance," a dynamic that "occurs when oppressed individuals and communities employ technologies of domination in subversive ways that reject the reigning biopolitics."[2] It

is, indeed, in the liminal spaces where their condition relegates them to that forms of creative resistance flourish, exploiting the technology that is meant to exploit their bodies. Relying on their humanity, and yet through the projected digital versions of themselves, the protagonists can eventually counter the dominant order—albeit mostly to an individual extent. Drawing on the relatively extensive academic literature on *Sleep Dealer*, this analysis highlights similarities and differences between the two films, focusing in particular on *Culture Shock* and how its virtual reality device expands on the topics of forced assimilation and erasure of Latinx and Latin American subjectivity.[3]

The Borderlands as Transnational Digital Semiosphere

Assuming a critical stance infused with Latinx futurism, Peruvian American director Alex Rivera began to work on the exploitation of immigrant labor in the mid-1990s. The feature-length film *Sleep Dealer* expands on his preexisting audiovisual work focused on the US–Mexico border. In fact, Rivera had already depicted the concept at the basis of the Bracero Program and the discourse intrinsic to its propaganda in various ways prior to *Sleep Dealer*, recreating cyborg versions of Mexican laborers who could work for American firms without actually entering US territory.[4] In 2019, the streaming platform Hulu launched the tenth installment of its anthology series *Into the Dark* dedicated to horror reinterpretations of US national holidays. Thematically connected to the celebration of the Fourth of July, *Culture Shock*, directed by Mexican Canadian Gigi Saul Guerrero, focuses on the crossing of the US–Mexico border by a group of migrants and their consequent imprisonment in a border facility, where they are used as test subjects in an experimental program for brainwashing and assimilating Latinx migrants. In both films, the borderlands—both geographically and metaphorically—come across as a fundamental backdrop and almost a character themselves.

Considering the borderlands as a semiotic space, the region can be seen as the peripheral part of the semiosphere as intended by Juri Lotman,[5] as well as scholars working on cultural semiotics expanding on the work of the founder of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School—which explores the heterogeneity of the cultural polyglotism inherent to semiotic systems.[6] The semiosphere is characterized by a mechanism of self-descriptive centralization that "articulates the separating/defensive and the constitutive functions of the border,"[7] creating an idealized description that corresponds to a dominant cultural hierarchy and a perceived homogeneity. Reflected in the power asymmetries peculiar to the related social structure, such hierarchy establishes the differences between a dominant—ideally homogenized—core and the peripheral "outskirts,"[8] as well as the boundaries external and internal to the semiosphere. The border of the semiosphere represents "a multiplicity of points, belonging

simultaneously to both the internal and external space" and thus, a locus of translation between the heterogeneous elements coming from both the external stimuli and the internal boundaries that define what is other than the core.[9] Characterized by the opposition and, at the same time, dialogue between the core and the border, the entire semiospheric space is "transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts."[10] The topography of the semiosphere is, in fact, "discontinuous and heterogeneous,"[11] while its border and internal boundaries embody a "bilingual mechanism" connecting "different semiotic systems and [opening] them to an inexhaustible interplay across borders."[12]

In more concrete terms, the borderlands are characterized by a blend of elements that evidently are opposed to the sociocultural core represented by the dominant US culture—Anglo, monoglossic, middle-class, and Protestant (Illustration 1). Spanish-speaking communities—as well as communities sharing Mexican heritage—function as connection between the core and the Mexican space external to the US American semiosphere; at the same time, the Spanish language constitutes an internal boundary. Likewise, migrant labor exploitation—and the consequent interdependence between Mexico and the United States—functions as a connection to the core and yet, it establishes internal boundaries that isolate migrants to varying extents.

In both *Sleep Dealer* and *Culture Shock*, the borderlands embody the semiosphere's

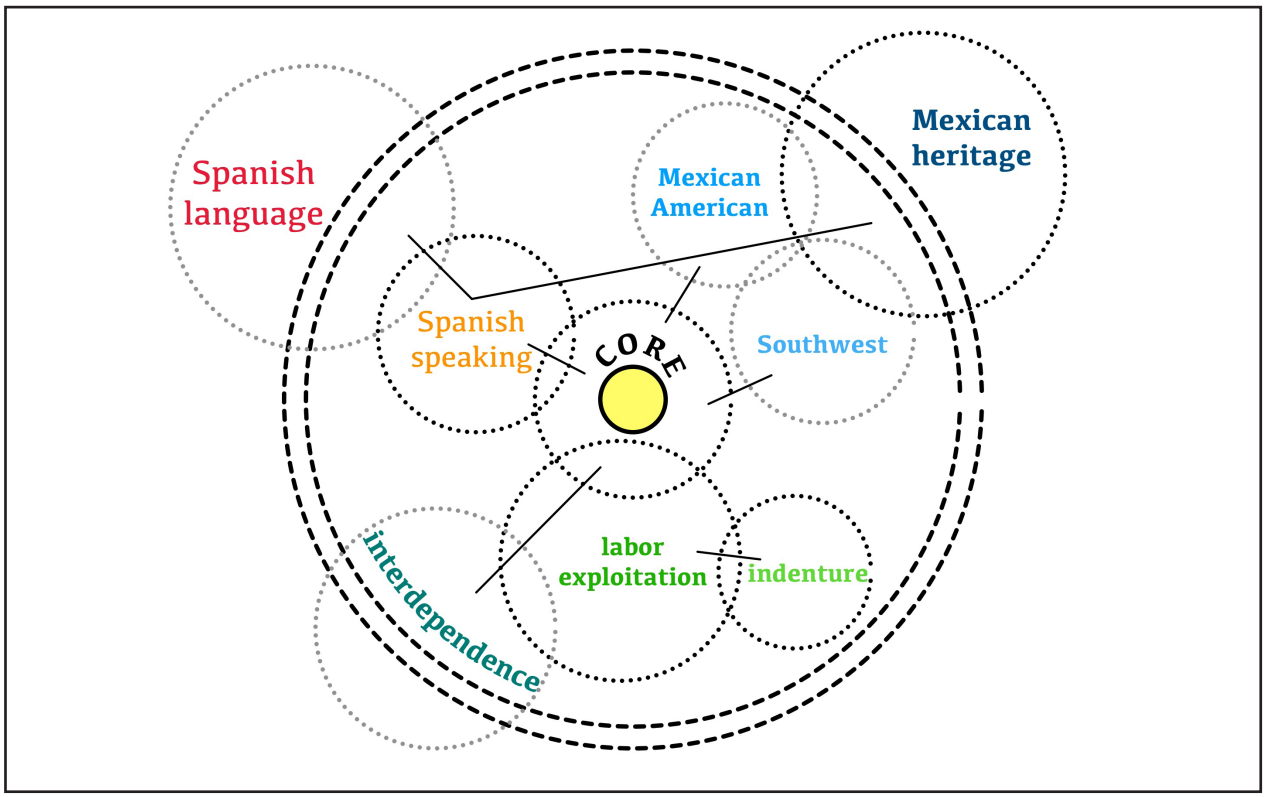

Illustration 1: Example of how the US–Mexico borderlands can be intended as a semiospheric boundary.
Author's illustration.

boundary, a porous place where exchange and necessary translation happen. The transnational border region represents a geographic location and a metaphorical locus of encounter, where a mediation of otherness is necessary in both senses. It is, in fact, a space where "penetration, filtering and the transformative processing of the external to the internal" are regulated.[13] Furthermore, the borderland futurity—embodied by the digital heterotopic dimensions in which the migrant characters move—is made possible by the existence of a transnational cyberspace. Given the global character of the digital semiosphere,[14] cyberspace can be considered a self-descriptive semiosphere as intended by Lotman, characterized by a "constant exchange with other semiospheres" and in "a permanent process of self-transformation resulting in an ongoing growth of signs and culture."[15] The nature of the borderland cyberspace is still inherently peripheral. The access to the digital dimension does not change the peripheral, boundary-ridden position of the migrants who are granted with it; rather, it reflects their contrast with the dominant sociocultural core and evidences the power asymmetry they remain subjected to. The digital semiosphere reproduces and, to an extent, amplifies such power disparity, relegating the migrants to a subordinated subjectivity that they—apparently—cannot escape. In the two films, the protagonists' "upgrade" to cyborg subjects keeps them under control and avoids any deviance from the established pattern of assimilation.

The Migrant Body: Location and Exploitation

In the 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) established the transnationalization of corporations and the circulation of goods, but not the free movement of people.[16] *Maquiladoras* became the symbol of a context marked by power asymmetry: transnational companies would exploit cheap Mexican labor force by situating their manufacturing lines south of the border, avoiding the migration of their workers into US territory.[17] As they settled along the border in order to produce for American companies, the migrants' labor was disembodied to become "actually embodied in the exported products,"[18] despite the systematic "devaluation of the Mexican body as it feeds into the US labor market."[19] The neoliberal functioning of the latter depends on the presence of Latinx laborers. Such interdependence can be traced in the history of border- and immigration-related US policy-making.

Border science fiction has often favored horizontal paradigms, which articulates power relations that are "not between upper and lower worlds but across spaces whose interdependence is as pronounced as their inequalities."[20] However, both films analyzed also tackle vertical paradigms, reclaiming a digital realm that allows them to defy economic and ethnic hierarchies, and they do so from two different perspectives. The most evident difference lies in their premises and is represented by the location in which the migrant protagonists are allowed to access the digital semio-

sphere. In *Sleep Dealer*, the workers migrate from their towns to the US–Mexico border to work for US companies in facilities that are physically located on the Mexican side. In *Culture Shock*, migrants are kidnapped as they cross the national boundary and held in a facility north of the border, where the US federal government can exert its sovereign authority.

In *Sleep Dealer*, Rivera expands on the notion of a cyber connection to human neural networks in order to operate mechanized robots,[21] imagining a border futurity in which the role and meaning of human agency is instrumental to the functioning of a regime of technologized labor.[22] The film reprises the idea at the basis of the director's short film *Why Cybraceros?* (1997), using footage of the original videos promoting the Bracero Program in 1959 and creating a new kind of *bracero* or agricultural laborer. Both works play with the discursive justification of the program, which pretended to regulate immigration by channeling it according to US economic needs, exploiting the migrants' labor seasonally and "sending them back" to Mexico when their physical presence was not required. Rivera pushes these conceptual boundaries and locates his migrants south of the border, connecting them to virtual reality machines that allow them to operate robots for US-based corporations—transforming them into workers "who [pose] no threat of becoming citizen[s]."[23] Through its evident connections to the Bracero Program,[24] Rivera's work exposes quite realistic "white supremacist fantasies built around the possibility of extracting a maximum of labor from workers of color, without having to deal with the materiality of their bodies, their rights, their culture, and above all, their presence."[25] In this dystopic reality, Memo (Luis Fernando Peña) dreams of becoming a node-worker employed by these transnational companies. When his father is killed by a drone attack in defense of water resources controlled by American corporations, he migrates northbound, gets his nodes implanted by a "coyotech"—a cyber version of the coyote—and finds a job as a virtual construction worker in what can be described as a "digital sweatshop."[26] In *Sleep Dealer*, the migrant body remains confined south of the border, where it is technologically mediated and exploited to produce capital carrying out manual labor at distance through automata. A futuristic form of *maquiladora* is thus reproduced, and the migrant peons conduct their existence mostly in a digital world that drains their energies in real life. Tijuana becomes a "terminal city,"[27] as laborers physically converge there, and their bodies become terminals for the *infomaquila*'s network. The reconstruction of the border city as the place to where migrants move in order to find jobs as node-workers is not a fictional backdrop; rather, it reproduces the reality of the border and the topography of the *maquila*. Shanty towns and factories influence—and mirror—the workers' lives, their bodies becoming just as degraded and unwanted, physically unwelcome within the labor market.[28]

Conversely, in *Culture Shock*, the migrant body is physically allowed to enter US

territory, but its presence is counteracted by isolating it and allowing it agency exclusively in a virtual dimension. The first part of the film follows Marisol Ramírez's (Martha Higareda) attempts to move to the United States in search for a better job. During her first try, she was raped and abandoned by her boyfriend; heavily pregnant, she decides to try again on her own, relying on a local coyote and crossing with a group of fellow Mexican and Central American migrants. The undocumented migration process is reconstructed in a realistic way, showing contexts and situations typical of the immigrant experience. Through all the stages of the crossing, the asymmetrical power relation between the coyotes and the migrants is evident. The smugglers treat all of them ruthlessly, bullying each of them according to the migrant archetype they represent. Besides Marisol—the abused/abusable woman crossing alone—one of the main characters is Santo Cristobal (Richard Cabral), a heavily tattooed Central American gang member who needs to enter the United States to carry out a criminal task. He is depicted as devoted to the syncretic cult of the Santa Muerte, characterized by esoteric practices and—despite its social transversality[29]—popularly associated with criminal organizations, which often venerate the eponymous skeletal embodiment as a patron figure. Ricky (Ian Inigo) is a Guatemalan child traveling alone, carrying fake Mexican documents in the hope that they will make his life easier during the trip and across the border. Historically, Central American migrants crossing Mexico are often victims of racism and differential treatment due to their origin—through forms of discrimination that Gregory Nava's seminal film *El Norte* (1983) reproduced accurately and that are still current. However, the characterization fails at updating to more recent policies regarding the migrants' nationality: since 2008, unaccompanied Central American minors apprehended by US border enforcers are now bound to go through an assessment process, whereas minors carrying Mexican documents are liable to be immediately expelled and transported south of the border.[30] By depicting such a diverse—albeit archetypical—group of people, *Culture Shock* gives a sense of the multifaceted reality of makeshift crossing parties and references both fictional and documentary representations of Mexican and US American xenophobic discrimination. As it happens in most films depicting undocumented migration, each migrant is alone in their attempt, even though temporary solidary connections are established between the components of the group.

After days in the desert, the group is detained by the Border Patrol and brought to a detention center run by a nondescript militarized agency. In the facility, the migrants are attached to virtual reality machines, drugged, and projected into an idealized American suburban village they cannot escape. The foreign migrant body is emptied of its cognitive function and reduced to a shell attached to machines in order to be culturally assimilated—and to obliterate its subjectivity. Once they have assimilated the American Dream ideological construct, the brainwashed migrants

can be introduced to American society, posing no threat to the preservation of the dominant cultural system. The forced assimilation seems to be the necessary passage to ensure the exploitation of the completely "Americanized" migrant worker, who is stripped of the "alien" ethnic component to become acceptable for integration. Such a narrative construction speaks indirectly to the contemporary debate on post-racialism and the overlapping color-blind racial ideology in the United States. Barack Obama's electoral and presidential speeches were characterized by a post-racial discourse, stressing an alleged race-neutral universalism and successful overcoming of racial differences. If, on the one hand, this kind of discourse admits that "racial progress exists alongside ongoing discrimination and salience of race," on the other hand, it condemns those who "fail to acknowledge" such alleged racial progress.[31] Post-racialist ideologies contribute to a sociocultural process that aims at rendering invisible the still-existing racial structural violence. Imagining a dystopic reality in which the bodies of Latinx immigrants become a shell "refilled" with dominant ideological constructs, Saul Guerrero builds a universe in which the phenotype and overall physical aspect of migrants is no longer a source of discrimination per se if—and only if—they renounce their ethnic consciousness, heritage, and native language.

Digitalized Cross-Border Dehumanization

The militarization of the US–Mexico border has been progressively implemented in particular since the mid-1980s, linked to restrictive immigration measures and the construction of a border security apparatus.[32] The Border Patrol's Operation Blockade—also known as Operation Hold-the-Line—initiated in 1993 in El Paso marked a shift in the approach to border enforcement, transforming it from a low-intensity conflict to a system based on "prevention through deterrence." Operation Gatekeeper (launched by the Clinton administration in 1994) led to the start of the controversial construction of a militarized infrastructure along the whole US–Mexico borderline, involving a significant increase in surveillance equipment and workforce to achieve operational control of the border. The security measures taken on a national level in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks deeply affected the handling of border issues as well, exacerbating the notion of the necessity of deterrence strategies. In 2003, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) was formed, integrating the Border Patrol, and the Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) agency was created to exert control on illegal cross-border activities; both federal law enforcement divisions operate under the US Department of Homeland Security. The Secure Fence Act (2006) allowed the following administrations to further strengthen the existing infrastructure and increase the use of surveillance technology, as well as biometric profiling and tracking.

Among the most contentious measures that characterize the management of undocumented immigration has been the application of "indefinite detention of migrants and the imposition of restrictions on asylum granting, as well as the limitation to opportunities of trial upon detention and obtainment of a provisional legal status."[33] Carried out in ICE facilities, detention becomes indefinite both in a legal and temporal sense: its extrajudicial quality is particularly problematic, as it corresponds to a suspension of judicial order peculiar to states of exception, in which the judicial exception becomes the norm justified by sovereign power.[34] In fact, the border can be identified as "a permanent state of exception which renders the limit of the sovereign possible and unproblematic."[35] Its apparatus based on surveillance and security enforcement has progressively evolved into a highly militarized infrastructure, connected to the carceral complex with a plethora of facilities in which the migrants are handled upon detention and until their deportation. With the implementation of biometric profiling, the sovereign state can exert its power supported by—and at the same time fueling—security-related concerns and discourses, as "securitization has become another hegemonic discourse" increasingly pervading the public sphere.[36] Despite anti-immigrant movements and biased media coverage of border issues, the number of yearly apprehensions of Latin American immigrants crossing the US–Mexico border has been oscillating in the same range since the mid-1970s,[37] mostly influenced by local political unrest and transnational economic cycles. The construction of a "crisis at the border" discourse has contributed to legitimize the creation and maintenance of a state of exception, characterized by extrajudicial practices, a suspension of the constitutional normative structure, and the exercise of a Foucauldian power over life and right of death.[38] Such kind of discourse is usually based on nativist tropes and populist discursive strategies focused on a xenophobic characterization of the border,[39] fueling the depiction of immigrants as a threat to both the state's security and the integrity of the idealized American society. Their entrance and unmediated integration would taint the idealized homogeneity of the dominant cultural core, creating disruption and inducing a more heterogeneous characterization of society per se.

In *Sleep Dealer*, transnational states of exception are facilitated by the digitalization of labor. Both in his rural town threatened by exploitative corporations and then in Tijuana, Memo's experience is characterized by an "ambient violence" shaping spaces of exception in which their inhabitants are constantly exposed to varying levels of structural and direct violence.[40] Like many other strategic locations, the dam in his native Santa Ana Del Rio, Oaxaca—one of the poorest and less developed Mexican states—is surveilled and defended by drones whose pilots are based in the United States. Unmanned drone warfare allows its perpetrators to detach themselves and feel absolved, in a mechanism of deresponsibilization that characterizes

Border Patrol and ICE officers in reality as well.[41] Furthermore, the transnational mainstream audience can follow drone operations broadcast live as a gamified reality TV show, constructing a sort of gamespace and contributing to a further dehumanization of the drones' victims.[42] The detachment of drone pilots and their carrying out tasks at digitalized distance "parallels the alienated technologized labor regime of the film."[43] Meanwhile, in the cyber *maquiladora*, Memo and his colleagues depend on machines that widen "the state of exception and the intensification of exploitation facilitated by cybertechnology,"[44] creating robo sacer subjects.[45] Drawing on both Giorgio Agamben and cyborg theory, David Dalton highlights how these characters become "intimately connected to and influenced by foreign technologies of power,"[46] exposing the exacerbation of racialization and socioeconomic disadvantage intrinsic to the implementation of first-world technologies. Sleeplessness and exhaustion become tools to erase the Latinx migrant subjectivity and maintain the laborers under control,[47] transforming them in a perishable, easily replaceable bodies that remain constrained and exploited in the American technotopian labor fantasy.

In *Culture Shock*, the connection to the reality of immigration enforcement and its infrastructure based on detention centers is abrupt. Cape Joy—the virtual town where the migrants are kept—is a colorful, neat, and luminous setting whose uncanniness is constructed through the use of saturated pastel colors and the constant repetition of the US flag in various forms. At two thirds of the film, Marisol suddenly disconnects from the virtual reality due to a system failure and the facility where the migrants are detained appears for the first time. The detention center is depicted as grim, dark, and characterized by a livid green palette, in stark visual contrast to Cape Joy. The machines look oddly anachronistic—almost like 1960s science fiction computers and machinery—with lines of buttons, convoluted tubes and cables, and murky plastic sheets dividing the different spaces. Marisol overhears fragments of dialogues between the scientist in charge, Thomas (Shawn Ashmore), and his superior, George Attwood (Creed Bratton), through which the viewer discovers that the experiment is part of a contract with the Pentagon to give migrants "a transition" by being kept in a sort of virtual holding cell where they are unwittingly brainwashed. The topic of private prisons and correctional facilities is hinted at, as private detention service providers are present along the border and all over the US territory working along federal enforcement agencies on behalf of the state.

The cynical Attwood goes as far as to state that they are not "paid to give them the American Dream, [they]'re paid to keep them out of it," as the migrants per se are not acceptable. The devaluation of their life, the reduction to inferior beings, and the erasure of their subjectivity is condensed in Attwood's conviction that these migrants can be used for illegal experimentation, as "nobody gives a fuck about these

people."[48] Thomas's character embodies attitudes in line with the notion of banality of evil outlined by Hannah Arendt, describing the detachment of Nazi officers who would perpetrate and participate in crimes against humanity by dutifully carrying out their bureaucratic tasks.[49] Thomas justifies their deeds to Marisol by saying that he is only a scientist wanting to be part of a project that would change the world, as he believes that the virtual reality brainwashing technology imposed on migrants is, per se, brilliant. Despite his apparent intents to help Marisol, it seems that his main concern is to help her cope with the experiment rather than facilitate her escape. At the very end, when the migrants manage to cause disruption in the facility, he is clearly most worried about his own fate rather than truly helping the subjects of his experiments.

Thomas interacts with Marisol in the virtual reality, embodying a kind of mediating character who tries to legitimate the forced assimilation. He explains Marisol's upset by saying that it is a matter of "culture shock" and a normal process most people must cope with when moving to a foreign country. To make his point, he recounts his travel to India in graduate school, linking culture shock with "sweating a lot" due to the different climate and getting bowel issues due to the food.[50] His take evidently comes across as superficial and condescending, alien to the reality of undocumented immigration. Furthermore, the story supports the assimilationist discourse intrinsic to the experiment: assimilating to the dominant culture is merely a matter of adaptation and habit. The minimization of the migrants' heritage pervades their interaction with the American characters, and cues of patronizing attitude toward Latinx and Latin American cultures are subtly scattered throughout Marisol's time in Cape Joy.

Thomas—and consequently the virtual Latinx avatars—does not speak Spanish, mispronounces the migrants' names, and occasionally inserts words in broken Spanish to elicit bonding, such as *amigo*. During their first meeting, Thomas asks Marisol if she has ever seen fireworks, which seems to confuse her for a moment as Mexico has a consolidated and articulated pyrotechnic tradition. He then tells her that the town's Fourth of July celebrations "will be a wonderful experience" for her, something that she clearly could never experience in her homeland.[51] Likewise, the minimization of the migrant trauma is evident when the Anglo virtual characters insist that one must choose to be happy, as if it were solely a matter of personal choice. By consequence, the responsibility of not being happy falls on the individual and their compliance with society; Marisol's inability to fit in is interpreted as incorrect and against the "acceptable" integration in US American society.

The Semiospheric Periphery as a Locus of Subversion

Opposition to the imposed dominant order is, indeed, a central theme in both films and seems to correspond to the nature of the semiospheric boundary. The border is necessary to define the cultural semiosphere, which "requires a 'chaotic' external sphere and constructs this itself in cases where this does not exist."[52] Irregularity is inherent to the semiosphere in opposition to the dominant core; as Lotman stresses, "In the reality of the semiosphere, the hierarchy of languages and texts, as a rule, is disturbed: and these elements collide as though they coexisted on the same level."[53] Peeter Torop defines dialogue as an "ontological characteristic of semiosphere,"[54] and Daniele Monticelli observes that binaries between opposing forces can be "replaced by complementarity, interaction, conflict and dialogue" situated at peripheral and internal boundaries.[55] When such dialogue seems impossible, though, the border allows the creation of interstitial spaces of resistance. Drawing on Indrek Ibrus's expansion on Lotman's semiosphere, the cyber-semiosphere is "a space determined by power asymmetries and a centre–periphery dynamics."[56] Both films examined embody a mode of social science fiction in which our social reality is faced with speculative worlds in "enantiomorphic structures."[57]

In *Sleep Dealer*, the resistance of the laborers as robo sacer entities emerges as a subversive potential when their cyborg identity can be instrumentalized to "deconstruct the social constructs that signal them as inferior."[58] The Cronenbergian node-based connectivity allows the Latinx subject to access a space of exploitation and, at the same time, opens the possibility to infiltrate the system and counteract employing the tools the very system provides them with. Besides the *cybermaquila*, in Rivera's reality, personal memories of Latin American people are commodified for the US public's consumption, eager to entertain itself with stories that are "other" and possibly exoticized. Through a virtual narration produced by Luz Martínez (Leonor Varela)—the protagonist's friend and possible love interest—drone pilot Rudy Ramirez (Jacob Vargas) discovers Memo's identity as the son of the victim of his attack. Haunted by remorse, he tracks Memo down and offers revenge by piloting his drone through an attack to the water dam in Santa Ana del Río. Such an operation is made possible by the hacking of Memo's virtual reality machine: Rudy connects himself to it and through the system's transnational connectivity carries out the attack. Disappointed by the (cyber) American Dream—albeit in different ways and for different reasons—the two establish a momentaneous solidarity and subvert their subordination to the machines regulating their labor lives.

Likewise, the demise of the overbearing, non-consensual assimilation system in *Culture Shock* is provoked through the subversive instrumentalization of the system itself. The dehumanization and capitalization of the migrant inherent to the experi-

ment leads the scientists to avoid control tests on drug safety, as the government requires the system to be applied on migrants en masse. A week-long sequence attached to the virtual reality machine is supposed to suffice for complete assimilation, and yet Marisol's body seems to require a different tranquilizer dosage to remain unconscious throughout. She is the first experimental subject to move within the virtual space without a drug-induced acceptance and forceful suspension of disbelief. The unreality of Cape Joy strikes her from the start as uncanny: from her first awakening in the virtual world, she notices the saturated colors, the abundance of non-staple foods—such as cakes and desserts—and the disturbingly fixed smiles on the avatars' faces. According to her virtual host Betty (Barbara Crampton) and Thomas himself—who appears in Cape Joy as the town's mayor—such uneasiness is caused by Marisol's Mexican origins, implying that she comes from a place where "good things" are not the norm.

Marisol questions the nature of Cape Joy by embodying an anomality against the smooth assimilation her migrant fellows seem to be undergoing. Shortly after her arrival in the virtual town, she happens to recognize her ex-boyfriend. Oscar (Felipe de Lara) evidently managed to cross the border after raping her during their first attempt and he acts now as a happy citizen of the virtual reality town. The trauma connected to him hinders Marisol's blissful assimilation, as she is haunted by his presence despite the forced obliteration of her memories. She is aware of her difficulty to retrieve her past and interrogates Betty, who simply tells her that she crossed the border and was lucky to be rescued. Her upset is countered by the female avatar, who insists that she should not "worry about what [she has] lost, think instead of all that [she has] gained"—that is to say, a place in the idealized American society.[59] The illusion of having "made it" is key to the success of the brainwashing process, leveraging the desperation and desire for a better life that led the migrants across the border in the first place. Betty pushes her to explore Cape Joy, telling her that she can find a job right away and questioning her will to; as mentioned above, the discourse internal to the virtual reality assumes that happiness is a matter of individual will, acquiescence, and conformity to the dominant system.

In Cape Joy, the migrants' avatars automatically speak English fluently and carry out no meaningful conversations between them. However, Marisol's previous intimacy with Oscar suddenly makes her realize that he—as well as the migrants she crossed the border with—should be speaking Spanish instead. Alienated by this sudden realization, she tries to elicit past memories in her fellow migrants by resorting to cultural heritage markers that characterized their existence before the crossing: she sings the Mexican national anthem and, with Santo, she spells his own prayer to the Santa Muerte. Whenever she gets upset and doubtful—or she provokes a distressed reaction in her companions—she falls unconscious, and her virtual day starts

anew. The "reboot" is marked by the changing pastel color of her lace dress, whose style is exactly the same; the virtual existence as guest of the suburban smalltown fantasy that is Cape Joy assigns the same daily pattern and assimilation procedure to her, increasing her frustration. The fact that she cannot interact with her newborn also sparks suspicion in Marisol, accompanied by nightmares regarding her baby and hallucinations due to her failing integration in the virtual reality. The cyber semiosphere in which she is forced to move fails at providing a satisfactory cognitive experience and its failing liminality provides the space for resistance: the Latinx cultural consciousness becomes the tool for subversion.

Finding his behavior suspicious, Marisol follows Thomas to the limits of the neighborhood and discovers the interface point used by the scientist to exit Cape Joy's virtual reality. The gateway is depicted as surface mirroring the neighborhood, hiding in the mimetic repetition of the virtual environment. When Marisol crosses it, she awakes in the real world, realizing that she is attached to a virtual reality machine and that she is still pregnant. Pressed by her desperate questioning, the scientist carelessly reveals that when she hears dogs barking in Cape Joy, the system is down for maintenance. Such knowledge gives Marisol a powerful tool to fight the assimilation protocol effectively. Refusing to abide by the predetermined behavioral patterns, she waits for the barking to disrupt the system once more. As she opposes, her virtual reality glitches, and her host Betty—who turns out to be a "firewall bot" in charge of keeping her under control—pursues her until she walks through the gateway. She suddenly wakes up in an empty, labyrinthic and claustrophobic virtual version of the detention center. Upon her first disruptive episode, Thomas programmed a virtual reality escape loop to avoid her waking up in reality and "bouncing from the system," as Atwood comments. Once she is back in Cape Joy, the scientist tries to talk to Marisol through the Betty bot—revealing that he marked her as a "potential deserter"—pleading her to blend in until he allegedly finds a "solution."[60]

At the end of the week-long brainwashing program, the virtual town gathers to celebrate the Fourth of July. Marisol pretends to blend in at first, then provokes a glitch disrupting the community's dinner by repeatedly asking for Latin American desserts—arroz con leche, pan dulce, and "pinche flan" instead of the customary, very American apple pie with ice cream.[61] She also starts singing the Mexican national anthem, inducing a series of glitches that allow migrants to regain consciousness as their machines malfunction. Incidentally, she goes into labor causing her own machine to crash; managing to run through the gateway, Santo frees himself and helps her to give birth before escaping. Ironically, as a state of emergency ensues in the center, the loudspeaker's message of alert is in English but—outside Cape Joy—none of the migrants can understand it. Attwood orders the killing of all migrants before evacuating the facility and Thomas shoots him, possibly to escape freely and avoid the

consequences of his involvement in the experimental program.

The non-diegetic soundtrack of the escape is "Y volveré" by the Chilean Mexican band Los Ángeles Negros, debuted in 1970 and based on Alain Barrière's "Emporte-moi." The song is well-known to the Latinx and Latin American public and its lyrics provide a commentary to the sequence. The chorus in particular underlines Marisol's decision to return to Mexico: "Y volveré / Como un ave que retorna a su nidal / Verás que pronto volveré y me quedaré" [And I will return / Like a bird returning to its nest / You'll see that soon I'll return and stay]. The closing titles are accompanied by a satirical mockumentary coverage of the disruption at "the pilot immigration and cultural rehabilitation center," for which the previously seen coyotes are accused to have trained radicalized Marisol Ramírez who led the "terrorist assault." Remindful of popular nativist border discourses, the bottom line is a justificatory construction of the assimilation program's purposes, stating that "innocent Americans just trying to help the migrants while solving our border crisis lost their lives."[62] The news anchor closes by mentioning the fictional US president's commentary on the assault, evidently lifted from former president Trump's tweets.

Conclusions

The fundamental notion both *Sleep Dealer* and *Culture Shock* play with is condensed in the explanation of the *cybermaquila* that Rivera's foreman of node operation gives to Memo: "This is the American Dream. We give the United States what they've always wanted, all the work—without the workers."[63] In *Sleep Dealer*, the node system and cyber exploitation "facilitate and also prevent the film's protagonist from achieving his desires,"[64] revealing the duplicitous, dichotomic nature of the semiospheric boundary. The virtual mobility offered to Latinx subjects does not lead to an actual integration, nor to physical and social mobility; it represents the deployment of power that deepens even further the socioeconomical gap between the laborers and the capitalist system they are bound to.[65] The construction of these fictional digital spaces apparently transcends the border while, in fact, it reinforces the existing ideological boundaries connected to it.

Culture Shock reveals that the border is indeed metaphorical as much as material. Within the boundaries of Saul Guerrero's reality—remindful of the systematic structural and cultural violence the Latinx minority has historically experienced in the United States—the migrant subjects represent a threat to the integrity of an ideal American society that would be tainted by their entrance. Through its location north of the border and the similarities with ICE detention centers—where migrants are reduced to bare life status and their subjectivity is emptied and erased—the film also manages to play with the avoidance of responsibility mechanisms that facilitate

the actual functioning of a state of exception apparatus.

Whether it relies on exhausted submission or brainwashing, the forced creation of "good migrants" reprises a rather consolidated discourse in the American public sphere, which identifies and categorizes the Latinx legitimacy—or lack thereof—to be part of the dominant social zone. The cybersphere becomes the peripheral space where the dominant, monoglossic, and Anglo US culture is presented—paternalistically and violently—as the only "good option" for migrants. The migrant subject is defined by negation and there is no acknowledgment of alternative views opposed to, or diverging from, the vision of the dominant cultural core. *Culture Shock* taps into discourses peculiar to the post-racial ideology and Trump era constructions,[66] for which the acceptability of immigrants and Latinx citizens is achieved through assimilation and the embrace of nationalist views.

Nevertheless, the cyber realm in which the migrants are forcibly placed fosters an interstitial space of subversion. In such a space, there seems to be the possibility to recognize and enhance the "singular and collective capacity for both ethical accountability and alternative ways of producing knowledge."[67] As Memo does in *Sleep Dealer*, Marisol and her fellow migrants make the most of their technologically mediated bodies in creative and unexpected ways, becoming digitally mediated activists—or hacktivists—in the way "the marginalized have used [technology] to mobilize emerging political consciousness and resistance" and disrupting the mainstream notion of immigrants as subjects bereft of any effective agency in the techno- and cyberspace.[68]

Notes

1 David Punter, "Cyborgs, Borders and Stories for Virgins: Mexico and the Gothic," in *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016); Samantha Kountz, "The Other Side of the Wall: Technology and Borders in *Sleep Dealer*," *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 1, no. 4 (2014).

2 David S. Dalton, *Robo Sacer: Necroliberalism and Cyborg Resistance in Mexican and Chicanx Dystopias* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2023), 6. On the cyborg subject, see Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991).

3 In this article, the term "Latinx" is used to identify individuals with Latin American heritage, who might be to some extent integrated in US society and/or its economic system, regardless of gender—thus, including both US-born Latinx individuals and Latin American migrants who work and/or live in the United States.

4 For the transmedia project, see Rivera's mock website http://www.cybracero.com, as well as Jennifer M. Lozano, "Digital Rasquachismo: Alex Rivera's Multimedia Storytelling, Humor, and Transborder Latinx Futurity," in *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, ed.

Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019).

5 Juri Lotman, "On the Semiosphere" [1984], *Sign Systems Studies* 33, no. 1 (2005), DOI: 10.12697/SSS.2005.33.1.09.

6 Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel, "An Outline for a Semiotic Theory of Hegemony," *Semiotica*, no. 182 (2010): 450, DOI: 10.1515/semi.2010.067.

7 Daniele Monticelli, "Borders and Translation: Revisiting Juri Lotman's Semiosphere," *Semiotica*, no. 230 (2019): 394, DOI: 10.1515/sem-2017-0125.

8 Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 210; 214.

9 Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 208.

10 Juri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 138.

11 Winfried Nöth, "The Topography of Yuri Lotman's Semiosphere," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 17, DOI: 10.1177/1367877914528114.

12 Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 210; Monticelli, "Borders and Translation," 396.

13 Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 210.

14 Indrek Ibrus, John Hartley, and Maarja Ojamaa, *On the Digital Semiosphere: Culture, Media and Science for the Anthropocene* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 59–60.

15 Nöth, "Topography," 15.

16 Claudia Sadowski-Smith, "Introduction: Border Studies, Diaspora, and Theories of Globalization," in *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

17 *Maquiladoras* (also known as *maquilas*) are assembly plants located along the border on the Mexican side, usually owned by transnational companies. Since its advent in the 1960s as part of the Border Industrialization Program, this type of industry expanded substantially in the 1990s, facilitated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) and the wage gap existing between the United States and Mexico.

18 Raúl Delgado Wise and James M. Cypher, "The Strategic Role of Mexican Labor under NAFTA: Critical Perspectives on Current Economic Integration," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 610 (2007): 121, DOI: 10.1177/0002716206297527.

19 Christina L. Sisk, "Disembodied and Deportable Labor at the U.S. Mexico-Border: Representations of the Mexican Body in Film," *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 3, no. 2 (2014): 41, DOI: 10.5070/T432022922.

20 Sarah Ann Wells, "The Scar and the Node: Border Science Fiction and the Mise-en-scène of Globalized Labor," *The Global South* 8, no. 1 (2014): 74, DOI: 10.2979/globalsouth.8.1.69.

21 J.V. Miranda, "Techno/Memo: The Politics of Cultural Memory in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*," in *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 249.

22 Camilla Fojas, "Border Securities, Drone Cultures, and Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*," in *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 240.

23 *Why Cybraceros?* dir. Alex Rivera (Los Angeles: Freewaves, 1997).

24 Thomas Prasch, "Aquaterrorists and Cyberbraceros: The Dystopian Borderlands of Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008)," in *Border Visions: Identity and Diaspora in Film*, ed. Jakub Kazecki, Karen A. Ritzenhoff, and Cynthia J. Miller (New York: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 44.

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Videogames in Horror Movies

Remediation, Metalepsis, Interface Effects, and Fear of the Digital

Michael Fuchs

Abstract

This article discusses four movies in which transgressions between gameworlds and diegetic realities take center stage: *Brainscan* (1994), *Stay Alive* (2006), *Livescream* (2018), and *Choose or Die* (2022). By exploring the interactions between videogame worlds and "reality," these movies do not simply project anxieties onto digital games, but rather reflect on media-specific affordances of videogames, inquire into discourses surrounding videogames, and explore game cultures. I am particularly interested in the strategies and aesthetics of remediating videogames in the horror films and the conceptualizations of videogames and game cultures thus produced, as well as the larger cultural fears and anxieties (and hopes and dreams) that these representations evoke.

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Videogames in Horror Movies

Remediation, Metalepsis, Interface Effects, and Fear of the Digital

Michael Fuchs

"Every new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts," John Durham Peters has noted.[1] Similarly, Friedrich Kittler has concluded that media "have always made ghosts appear."[2] From Roland Barthes's observation that photographs make possible the "return of the dead" and Siegbert Solomon Prawer's remark that "the image we see on the screen is a kind of spectral double, the simulacrum of landscapes and townscapes filled with human beings that seem to live, to breathe, to talk, and yet are present only through their absence" to more recent articulations that conceive of cyberspace as "a ghostly matter with important connections to the all-surrounding ether of modern media transmissions,"[3] media have functioned as gateways to an "other side," a "vast electronic nowhere" that is populated by ghosts.[4] This "realm of the dead," in turn, "is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a culture" and simultaneously as much a realm of the living,[5] as the media promise to make real the transhumanist idea (and ideal) of overcoming the limits of the human body, providing a space in which immortality becomes both a possibility and an opportunity.

The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed how media increasingly infiltrated and penetrated everyday life, transforming the spectral associations of (and with) the media into lived reality, as "ghosts became ordinary figures for the operations of new technologies and their hallucinatory, virtual effects."[6] Responding to "culture's changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies,"[7] horror movies started to address and remediate digital technologies when they began to become increasingly integrated into everyday life in the 1980s. For example, in *Evilspeak* (1981), a military cadet uses a computer to conjure Satan in order to enact his revenge on people who treated him unfairly,[8] while in *Prince of Darkness* (1987), the

"Anti-God" deploys a human vessel to communicate their message to a small group of scientists via a computer screen.[9] Both of these films decidedly locate Evil in digital technologies: chaos, violence, and destruction spread from the digital domain. These movies are, to draw on Paul Young, "horror stories that speculate about the hidden dangers of fascinating electrical media."[10]

A few years later, supernatural horror movies in which the boundaries between the diegetic world and the hypodiegetic world of a videogame become porous started to emerge. For example, in *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991), a character is sucked into a videogame.[11] Since the entire Elm Street franchise "systematically eliminat[es] the conventional signposts that help us separate . . . the real from the fantastic,"[12] this transgression of the threshold traditionally distinguishing between diegetic reality and the fantastic realm is naturalized in the storyworld: Freddy Krueger, the monstrous villain in the film series, assaults his victims in their sleep, but these attacks have effects on, and in, the diegetic reality.[13] True to the formula of the series, the videogame sequence in *Freddy's Dead* starts in a dream before said dream segues into reality. Introduced by Iron Butterfly's psychedelic rock song "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" (1968), a character smokes a joint prior to falling asleep and is mesmerized by the surreal extension of the hypodiegetic television space into the diegetic reality (Illustration 1). Once drawn into the screen, the character finds himself in a sidescroller, fighting various kinds of foes, including Freddy, who controls what usually are villainous non-player characters (Illustration 1).

The sequence parodies videogames' lack of photorealism by placing a live-action character into the animated world of a videogame (as well as performing videogame movements and actions in the diegetic reality). At the same time, the momentary remediation of videogame logic self-reflexively acknowledges how horror "'plays' with its reader": a film such as *Freddy's Dead* depends on a "game that one plays *with* the text," for it "*knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know." In postmodernist fashion, *Freddy's Dead* suggests that knowledge of the franchise's rules may be more important to both the characters' survival and viewers' enjoyment of, and appreciation for, the movie. Jeffrey Sconce has remarked that this self-awareness extends to how *Freddy's Dead* exaggeratedly toys with moral panics surrounding teen cultures, in particular drug consumption and playing videogames, of the late 1980s and early 1990s: "For an audience of young teens, the stoner's eventual death by drugs, rock 'n' roll, and arcade addiction is funny precisely because of its hyperbolized treatment of the hazards of teen culture."[15] However, this satirical dimension may be easily lost on parts of the audience, for whom *Freddy's Dead* may well emphasize the potential dangers of excessively playing videogames, in particular since playing

Illustration 1: After a character has been sucked into a videogame, the film remediates videogame aesthetics and represents the act of playing a videogame.
Frame grabs from *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* © New Line Cinema, 1991.

videogames becomes interconnected with drug consumption—both of them are forms of addiction.

The latter point is also true of the episode "The Bishop of Battle" in the anthology horror film *Nightmares* (1983), in which a teenager becomes obsessed with the titular arcade game. When he finally reaches the thirteenth level (which other characters believe to be "a scam to get suckers to spend their money"[16]) in a night of excessive gaming, the arcade breaks apart, and the game's animated foes attack the teenager in the diegetic reality (Illustration 2). Failing to master the purportedly final level, the player becomes transported into the arcade game (Illustration 2), seemingly forever trapped in its world. Indeed, the teenager arguably had been captivated by the fantastic world before literally being transplanted into the gameworld because "the arcade was a place to get lost in the various fantasy worlds of games like Frogger, Pac-Man, and Galaga."[17]

While several scholars have explored the haunted qualities of analog media in digital horror and the digital gothic (in videogames and podcasts, in particular),[18] I flip the proverbial script in this article to discuss how four horror movies released since the mid-1990s engage with digital games. More specifically, I focus on films in which transgressions between gameworlds and diegetic realities take center stage: *Brainscan* (1994), *Stay Alive* (2006), *Livescream* (2018), and *Choose or Die* (2022). Narra-

Illustration 2: Hypodiegetic and diegetic worlds segue into one another.
Frame grabs from *Nightmares* © Universal Pictures, 1983.

tologists refer to the type of "paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto)logically distinct (sub)worlds" that characterizes these movies as metalepses.[19] Although not mutually exclusive, I consider Alexander Galloway's notion of interface effects that emerge from the "mysterious zones of interaction that mediate between different realities" more productive for my discussion, as it emphasizes that interfaces "bring about transformations in material states" and are "the effects of other things, and thus tell the story of the larger forces that engender them."[20] The configurations of mutually influencing worlds and sub-worlds in the films discussed in this article demonstrate that "every act of mediation … can evoke a Gothic conflation of overlapping temporalities and realities."[21] By exploring the interactions between videogame worlds and "reality," these movies do not simply project anxieties onto digital games, but rather reflect on videogames' media-specific affordances, inquire into discourses surrounding videogames, and explore game cultures. I am particularly interested in the strategies and aesthetics of remediating videogames in the horror films and the conceptualizations of videogames and game cultures thus produced, as well as the larger cultural fears and anxieties (and hopes and dreams) that these representations evoke.

Losing Touch with Reality

Released in 1994, *Brainscan* is part of the wave of postmodernist horror movies that hit the silver screens and the home video market in the mid-1990s. Although less overtly self-reflexive than the likes of *Scream* (1996) and *New Nightmare* (1994), Brainscan addresses its myriad connections to the horror genre through its embedded virtual reality game. Sharing the film's title, the game-within-the movie promises to deliver "the ultimate experience in interactive terror": players may step into the shoes of a killer and experience his (it remains unclear whether the killer's gender may shift depending on the user) grisly deeds from the first-person point of view.[22]

Against the backdrop of the opening credits, *Brainscan* establishes that its pro-

tagonist, Michael, suffers from a childhood trauma as the movie alternates between Michael sweating in his sleep and images of a car crash, his dead mother, and his permanently damaged knee (images that compulsively return several times in the course of the movie). After waking up, his friend Kyle calls, reading from an advertisement in the latest issue of *Fangoria*: "*Brainscan* is not for the squeamish . . . We dare you to participate in the most frightening experience available on this planet . . . Enter a game that feels more real than reality." The final sentence anticipates an exchange between Michael and the school's principal later in the movie in which the former notes that horror allows him to "escap[e] the real world."[23] Although this idea of popular culture providing escapism has seeped into the popular psyche, one should remember that in the mid-1990s, digital technologies promised "protection against the defeating stimulus of reality."[24] Haunted by the death of his mother and confronted with an absent father, Michael turns to popular culture to not simply escape reality but to experience and feel *something*.

When Michael launches *Brainscan* for the first time, the movie simultaneously (and somewhat paradoxically) highlights the interface between the user and the digital game and tries to erase it, acknowledging what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have called the "double logic of remediation"–the combination of immediacy (which "dictates that the medium itself should disappear") and hypermediacy (which "acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible").[25] On the one hand, upon pressing "play," the visual and sound design draw on traditions of imagining space travel in audiovisual media to showcase that Michael enters a different world (Illustration 3). On the other hand, the videogame operates via "mind program entry," which is "transmitted through the television's blanking signal."[26] This nearly magical design nullifies the need for a controller or similar interface that mediates between Michael's physical activities and his stand-in in the gameworld. Once Michael finds himself in the (purportedly) virtual world, the simulation is photorealistic and lacks a user interface (Illustration 4); the only sign of the mediated character of the experience is a voice-over narrator who guides Michael through the scenario.

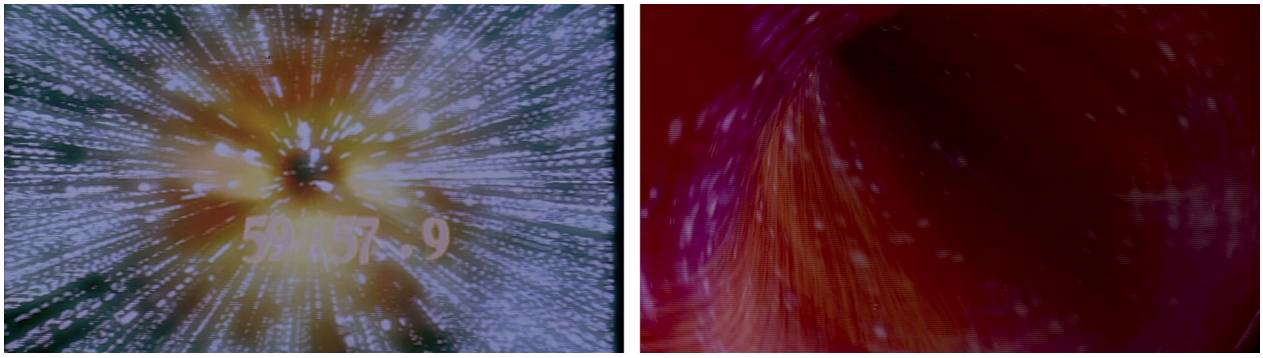

Illustration 3: Michael enters a different dimension.
Frame grabs from *Brainscan* © Triumph Releasing Corporation, 1994.

Illustration 4: The "videogame" looks like a movie.
Frame grab from *Brainscan* © Triumph Releasing Corporation, 1994.

In the gamespace, Michael approaches a stereotypical suburban home. He discovers an unlocked side entrance, takes a large knife in the kitchen, and proceeds to the bedroom, where he slaughters a middle-aged man before taking the man's tattooed right foot as a souvenir, which Michael finds in his actual fridge several hours after having stopped playing the game.

The first-person perspective employed in the murder scene recalls its role in horror cinema, in particular in the slasher subgenre. Although recent scholarship has explained that sharing the point of view with the killer "does not entail moral alignment or even sympathetic identification,"[27] as point-of-view shots suggest "some type of negative vision,"[28] *Brainscan* draws on the idea that aligning the camera's with a character's point of view places viewers "inside the perspective of the killer."[29] At first, *Brainscan*'s different layers of reality might seem to complicate the situation, but the visual depiction of the killer's murderous deed is practically indistinguishable from such iconic point-of-view sequences as the opening of *Halloween* (1978).

In videogames, similar to film, the first-person perspective has often been erroneously considered the perspective most conducive to identifying with the player-character, assuming what Laurie Taylor has called "the conceptual transparency of the video or computer screen."[30] The first-person perspective merges the viewpoints of the player and the player-character, which threatens to obscure the relationship between the player's and the player-character's bodies. *Brainscan* arguably intensifies the effect by removing control devices—which usually cause hypermedi-

acy due to how particular body movements and inputs are mapped onto in-game-world actions—from the typical videogame experience. These control devices are—somewhat paradoxically—key to player immersion, for "the player is engaged in physical activity … and … that action is synchronized with the actions of the game body."[31] By drawing on both the tradition of the first-person point of view in videogames and point-of-view shots in movies, *Brainscan* simultaneously alienates viewers from the killer and associates Michael-the-user with Michael-the-killer.

During the first murder scene, the movie repeatedly departs from the first-person perspective to focus on the knife and particular moments (Illustration 5), raising the question whether the audience of the movie can see what Michael sees (meaning that the videogame would turn to cinematic means to highlight particular aspects of the scene) or whether the movie departs from Michael's point of view to decidedly distinguish the film from the remediated experience of play. Viewed from the perspective of media rivalry, cinema could thus be said to showcase its superiority over videogames, as the movie incorporates the videogame. Such an argument would, however, be somewhat shortsighted because, as Sebastian Domsch has explained, "The video game is a meta-medium … that … allows the non-reductive incorporation of all other major [re]presentational media: spoken text, written text, as well as all kinds of sounds and images, both still and moving. Neither a written text nor a movie clip is lessened in their medial form by being part of a video game."[32] When a movie incorporates a videogame, on the other hand, it necessarily strips the videogame of

Illustration 5: During the first murder scene, *Brainscan* repeatedly departs from the killer's point of view.
Frame grabs from *Brainscan* © Triumph Releasing Corporation, 1994.

the interactive dimension characteristic of the medium. In addition, what becomes apparent in the context of *Brainscan* is that it doesn't really matter which medium is superior; what matters is that the two dimensions (and the media that they represent) become entangled, effortlessly bleeding into each other.

Indeed, after his first (virtual) kill, Michael tells his friend Kyle that "it was so real." However, he has no idea yet how real his actions, in fact, were. When he comes to understand the interconnections between what he believes are acts and actions in a virtual space and the real world (only to grasp later that everything was part of a dream or hallucination), Michael protests, "It wasn't supposed to be real!" but is told, "Real, unreal—what's the difference …?"[33] If not earlier, then this is the moment when *Brainscan* begins to challenge the dividing lines between virtual realities and outside reality, as Michael is made to wonder whether, in the media-saturated world that he lives in, there is no more "relation to any reality," as Jean Baudrillard put it.[34] In the hyperreal world imagined by Baudrillard, "irreality," as he called it, no longer resides in the domain "of dreams or fantasies, or the beyond or below, but in the *real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself*."[35] However, *Brainscan* does not embellish such a postmodernist worldview, embracing "the fetishism of the lost object" that is reality,[36] as Michael succeeds in re-establishing a difference between the world of the videogame and his experiential reality.

Nevertheless, what remains is the latent awareness that these dividing lines are porous, at best. In an article on postmodernist slasher films, Todd Tietchen explains that "the large-scale dissemination of electronic images leads to a saturated state of hyperconsciousness in which real and simulated events are increasingly determined/defined in mimetic relation to each other."[37] The character of Trickster, who functions as the digital game's voice-over narrator, embodies this idea, as he transverses from the world of the in-movie videogame to diegetic reality. Although the character's name foregrounds that he is squarely situated in the tradition of the trickster figure and thus a supernatural element that may impact the rules of the diegetic world, Trickster embodies what Sigmund Freud described as the type of the uncanny that results from erasing "the distinction between imagination and reality"[38]; the trickster becomes a corporeal manifestation of the digital sphere in the diegetic world.

Haunted Media

Stay Alive taps into the potentials emerging from the conflation of imagination and reality right from its start. After an opening jump scare, the film begins with an animated sequence set at Gerouge Plantation that makes viewers wonder whether they are confronted with bad digital visual effects or an embedded layer of reality.

The virtual camera moves through a foggy alley of leafless trees with dark clouds looming on the horizon, tapping into the aesthetics of "lushness flecked with decay" so typical of the southern gothic (Illustration 6),[39] while the very setting of the plantation evokes "the displacement and extermination of native populations, the forced exile and enslavement of millions of Africans, the tragedy of the Middle Passage, [and] the ravaging of peoples and lands."[40] The camera approaches an antebellum mansion (Illustration 6), which traditionally figures as "a house of bondage replete with evil villains and helpless victims, vexed bloodlines and stolen birthrights, brutal punishments and spectacular suffering, cruel tyranny and horrifying terror,"[41] to catch sight of a white male character who is about to enter the building. From here on, the perspective switches between first-person shots evoking the character's point of view and third-person shots showing him navigating the labyrinthine house. Ghosts appear in mirrors, while the bass-heavy sound of a beating heart and other uncanny sound effects support the atmosphere of dread and horror. A female figure starts chasing the character, eventually pushing him off the stairs, his neck gets tangled up in chandelier chains, and he dies, leading to a "Game Over" screen.

Illustration 6: The visual construction of Gerouge Plantation drips with southern gothic imagery.
Frame grabs from *Stay Alive* © Spyglass Entertainment, 2006.

The camera moves away from the screen, highlighting the embedded reality of the videogame, and turns to the player, Loomis, who looks dumbfounded. He calls his friend Hutch to tell him, "I played this new game called *Stay Alive*. Seriously, man. The sickest shit since *Fatal Frame*. It was creepy; really creepy." However, Loomis has no idea yet about the videogame's actual level of creepy, for he soon dies in a way similar to how his character did in the videogame—hung in chandelier chains. Some time later in the movie, Hutch notes the uncanny connection between the world of the videogame and "reality": "The police report said Loomis's neck was broken, and he was hung in the game."[42]

A group of people decide to play *Stay Alive* to honor Loomis. As they boot up the game, a book appears on the screen, displaying a page featuring "The Prayer of Elizabeth." Since nothing happens and pushing buttons doesn't seem to have any effects on the game, either, one of them wonders whether they are expected to read the lines out loud. "Voice-activated. No way. That's next-generation technology!" protests the group's resident geek, Swink. However, they read the lines, allowing them to proceed to the main menu, as a voiceover warns them, "You spoke the words, and soon you will die for it."[43] Here, *Stay Alive* draws on the supernatural qualities associated with books and manuscripts in the fantastic imagination. "Reading aloud from the pages of a magical book can . . . summon beings of unimaginable power, open gateways between worlds or dimensions, and orchestrate magical forces capable of reshaping the world at the reader's whim," Cindy Miller and Bow Van Riper describe some of the functions of books in horror.[44] Somewhat paradoxically, a digital medium (*Stay Alive*, the videogame-within-the-movie) draws on the haunted qualities of an analog medium (the book-within-the-videogame-within-the-movie), framed by an analog medium (*Stay Alive*, the movie), in this scene.

As the voiceover issues the warning, the six players configure their avatars, all opting to create virtual doubles of themselves (Illustration 7). The avatar is an interface between the player and the gameworld, allowing the player to act in the virtual world and project themselves into it. In short, the avatar is a "visual (and sometimes audial) representation of a player within the digital game environment."[45] The player accordingly simultaneously occupies a position in physical reality and the gameworld (mediated through the avatar). This liminal role has gothic qualities to it,[46] but these are amplified by how *Stay Alive* deploys the doppelgänger motif. In his study of uncanny architecture, Anthony Vidler highlights the uncanny's "propensity for the double, for the elision between reality and fiction."[47] The avatarial doubles in *Stay Alive* (and *Stay Alive*) operate in this tradition, as the characters' simultaneous existence as avatars in the gameworld furthers the mutual interpenetration of videogame and diegetic realities.

Reading from the (in-movie-)in-game book further corrodes the line separating diegetic reality from the embedded videogame. After a lengthy gaming session that lasts long into the night, Hutch's boss, Miller, who joined the game from his office, is killed by Elizabeth Bathory in the game. Upon reporting to the rest of the party what happened, he thinks to see someone in the corridor, remarking, "You know what they say: you play the game too long, you start seeing shit." Swink qupis, "It seems the longer you play, the more your subconscious mind perceives the gameworld to be a reality."[48] While this brief exchange explains the effects of *Stay Alive* on the characters in the diegetic reality as some sort of a media effect (and affect), Miller shares Loomis's fate a few moments later when he dies just like his avatar did in the gameworld.

Illustration 7: The players configure their avatars.
Frame grabs from *Stay Alive* © Spyglass Entertainment, 2006.

When Hutch digs into the case files, he concludes, "They all died the same way they died in the game. This can't just be some coincidence!" October, a mutual friend of Hutch and Loomis, then explains that her grandmother told her stories about Gerouge Plantation and that she has discovered that "this Elizabeth Bathory chick was sick and twisted and very real" and "couldn't stand to see herself get old." As punishment for her bloody deeds, she was "walled . . . up in her tower alive."[49] Indeed, Elizabeth Bathory's ghost uses the videogame as a gateway to the "real" world. Whereas the setting at the plantation is repeatedly highlighted in the course of the movie, its symbolic potential becomes increasingly backgrounded while the story progressively focuses on a what Barbara Creed called a "monstrous feminine" unwilling (or even unable) to accept the natural decay of her body,[50] contributing to the "vertiginous excess of meaning" characteristic of the gothic.[51]

Granted, *Stay Alive* draws on the idea that "the Southern Gothic haunted house spawns uncanny, often cataclysmic encounters between the past and the present,"[52] as Elizabeth Bathory's ghost invades the present moment and Hutch struggles with how the traumatic memories of his father setting the family home on fire compulsively return in the present. However, Hutch's example, in particular, demonstrates that these topics have broader applicability in gothic narratives and need

not be connected to the plantation setting or the American South, for that matter—"the Gothic is the perfect anonymous language for the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away," after all.[53]

Nevertheless, a specific dimension of the southern gothic that is related to how the movie seeks to understand digital technologies reverberates in *Stay Alive*. Teresa Goddu has explained that "identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot."[54] Set in New Orleans, *Stay Alive* taps into these "irrational impulses," as characters repeatedly stress that what they are experiencing cannot be real—neither can videogame events precede "reality" nor are ghosts real. However, in the technologically mediated worlds that the characters inhabit, the human is as much a product of the media and technology as the ghost that they have to confront. Kimberly Jackson notes in a discussion of early twenty-first-century techno-horror that "the real and the virtual bleed into each other, and the virtual is no longer an immaterial or spiritual space but rather is itself embodied . . . [T]he virtual . . . gains a bodily reality, a porous skin, a site of material birth."[55] As Elizabeth Bathory becomes physically manifest in front of the characters' (and viewers') eyes, she not only transgresses the borderlines between past and present but also virtual and purportedly real realms, highlighting the interconnections between these domains. In the film's closing moments, copies of *Stay Alive* (of which Hutch and company played a beta-version) hit the shelves of videogame stores to ominous music, indicating that the threat emanating from the digital game has not been contained. Here, a capitalist subtext surfaces, as the videogame not only requires its players to come into existence, but it also seems to feed on them, turning them into the resources that fuels the game industry. On another level, though, one might draw on Jeffrey Sconce and claim that *Stay Alive* (the videogame-within-the-film) produces an "uncanny space capable of collapsing, compromising, and even displacing the real world."[56]

Live-Streaming and Digital Communities

In *Livescream*, videogames and their live-streams have assumed such an important role in people's lives that they might, indeed, be said to have "displaced the real world"—despite the problematic exclusion of videogames from "the real world" underpinning this argument. *Livescream*'s narrative premise is very similar to *Stay Alive* and combines it with the real-time horror of digital communication evoked by movies such as *Unfriended* (2014). Scott is a streamer who plays the horror game *Livescream* on a Friday evening. Surprisingly, without entering his name, the game welcomes Scott, which causes him to note that things are becoming "creepy already."

When he dies for the first time, one of the users watching his stream, SimonSaid, "think[s] there is something in [their] house," which "sounds like [the] monster" that killed Scott in-game. "It's coming closer," SimonSaid reports; "It's banging on my door! HELP ME," before disappearing from the chat. Some minutes later, a voiceover tells Scott, "You can pull up your security cameras by hitting Q. This will allow you to see where Clyde [a murderous clown] is all the time." Pressing the key, however, allows Scott to see his audience in their homes. The clown suddenly appears behind one of the users in her video feed, but she reports that "there's nothing here in real life." However, moments later, the clown occupies one of the users' places on the screen before fading (or, rather, "glitching") away. Suddenly, the clown appears in the game again and kills Scott's avatar. The clown then appears behind another user and kills him. All but eleven users exit the chat, as the game informs Scott, "Abandon the game and die. Abandon the game and all of your followers die. Continue the game… and perhaps you will win."[57] Scott struggles with whether he should continue playing, knowing well that someone will die if (or, rather, *when*) he dies in-game.

In *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009), Miguel Sicart reflects on his experience of playing *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000), noting that the game "was challenging [him] as a moral being, showing [him] new ways of understanding games as well as [his] presence and actions as a player."[58] Although the stakes are different, as Scott's in-game actions and performance have consequences in his (diegetic) reality, he undergoes a similar experience because, to draw on Simon Turner and Stuart J. Murray's reading of the Zoom horror movie *Host* (2020), "those left on the call remain hostage at home and hostage to their screens."[59] Indeed, as the user JohnnyDope comes to understand at one point, "Chat won't let me leave."[60] (A comment that admittedly raises the question whether simply turning off the computer in order to leave the stream/digital space would not be a viable option.) While the videogame thus confronts Scott with the fact that he cares about his followers, it moreover forces him to acknowledge the sad reality that sitting in front of a computer and playing videogames is the only thing he is good at. In the end, Scott beats what he believes to be the final boss, Death, only to come to grasp that another user played Death, a boy. Scott posts a video on the reddit-like website crawllrr to warn potential community members of the dangers entailed by playing *Livescream* (Illustration 8).

Alongside examples such as *Host* and *Unfriended*, *Livescream* belongs to the emerging genre of desktop horror movies, which "utilize laptop and computer screens as mise-en-scène."[61] That is, desktop horror primarily relies on screen-capturing software in combination with cameras pointed at the users sitting in front of their computers to record "action." "Ill-suited to theatrical exhibition, where the desktop framing jarringly contrasts with the scale and noninteractivity of the big screen and therefore detracts from the spectator's involvement," Shane Denson notes about

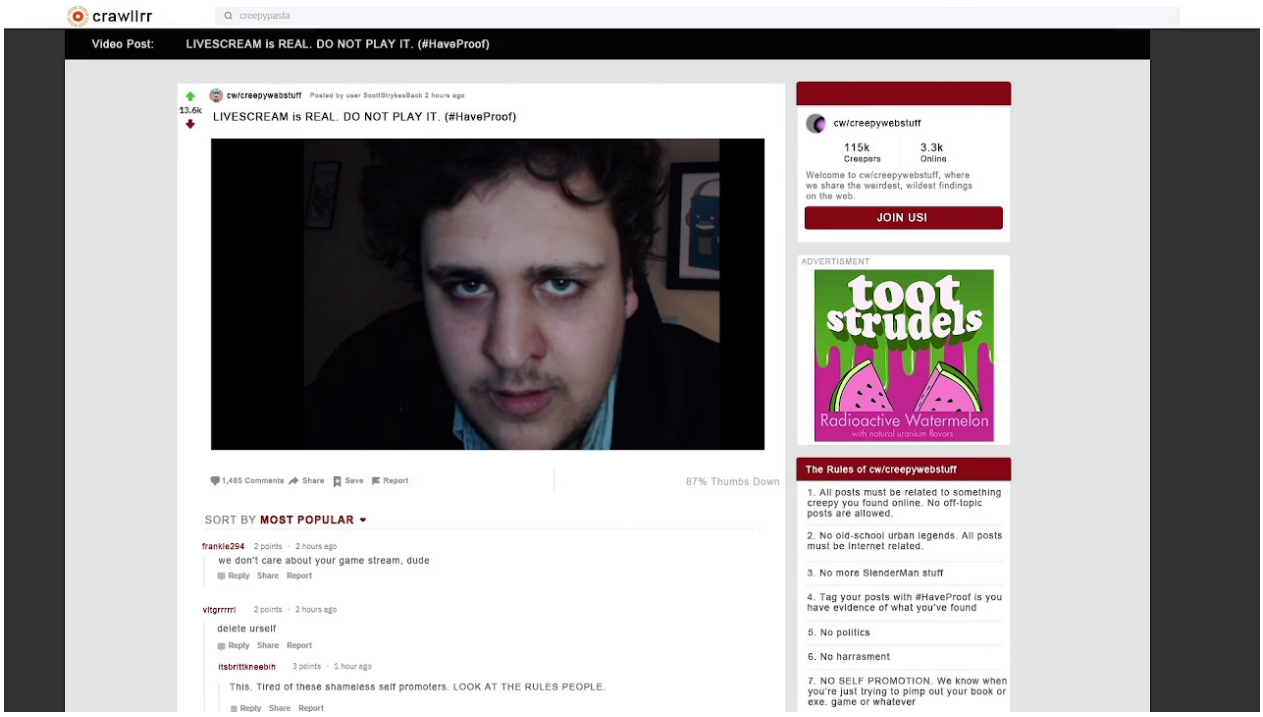

Illustration 8: Scott tries to warns others of *Livescream* in a post on a reddit-like website.
Frame grab from *Livescream* © Aether House LLC, 2018.

Unfriended, "the movie begs to be viewed on the small screen of a computer for full effect; it therefore insinuates itself fully into the post-cinematic networked ecology that it thematizes."[62] Similarly, *Livescream*'s horror is anchored less in its plot than in its form, which mobilizes digital anxieties, "exploit[ing] its own framing and stylistic devices to offer reflections on contemporary fears, especially those regarding digital technologies."[63] As the movie begins, the viewer sees Scott's desktop, how he is seemingly bored setting up his Open Broadcast System installation as he prepares to start streaming (Illustration 9). When his stream goes live, the viewer position suddenly changes, as they are interpellated as someone watching the stream. Scott's camera is placed in the top-left corner, the chat window in the bottom-left, and the majority of the screen is occupied by videogame footage, briefly interrupted by the other users' camera footage (Illustration 9). Other than the scene about the crawllrr post, which disrupts the end credits, this is the visual configuration of the entire movie (and even the crawllrr post suggests a desktop recording). Whereas in the opening moments, the viewer shares Scott's point of view, once the stream goes live, the viewer cannot be certain whose screen they see. Nevertheless, for someone used to watching streams, the movie's staging of online interactions seems eerily familiar to the point of being boring and/or banal. The typical, by now practically everyday, configuration of a screen imitating a video conference, in combination with the chat function offering social interaction, suggests the users' live- and aliveness, but the streaming session ends up being antithetical to life. *Livescream*'s aesthetics deploys

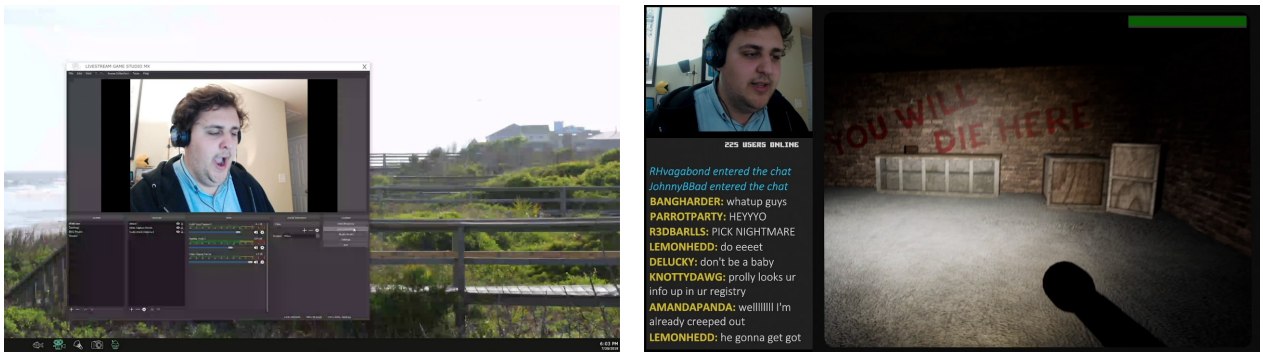

Illustration 9: Scott sets up his stream and the movie's standard visual configuration.
Frame grabs from *Livescream* © Aether House LLC, 2018.

the screen-within-a-screen to bring the potential dangers of the digital domain not only into the diegetic users' homes but also the extradiegetic viewers'.

As a desktop horror movie, *Livescream* is also situated in the tradition of what Caetlin Benson-Allott has called *faux*-footage horror.[64] Barry Keith Grant has explained that this type of horror relies on "the story unfolding in real time, as if it were there recording actual not fictional events."[65] *Livescream* not only emphasizes its live-ness through its title but also through a variety of intradiegetic markers, from the time and date on Scott's desktop in the movie's opening moments (see bottom right in Illustration 9) to the use of a timer that runs down in real time in one of the levels he has to master, creating the impression that "the full video was created in one go, in one uninterrupted run of the desktop-camera."[66]

What stands outside this temporal continuity is the concluding crawllrr post. By placing *Livescream* within the context of an online community, this closing further anchors the diegetic events in the everyday. Indeed, the online post, seen by close to 14,000 and commented on by nearly 1,500 users within two hours, embeds *Livescream* in the world of creepypasta and similar digital gothic artifacts. Notably, one of the rules of cw/creepywebstuff, where Scott's post is found, stipulates, "No more SlenderMan stuff," referring to the possibly most widely known creepypasta.[67] This connection to this type of digital-born gothic produces "a suspension of disbelief stemming from uncertainty about the tale's precise relationship to reality."[68] The post is titled "LIVESCREAM is REAL. DO NOT PLAY IT. (#HaveProof)" (Illustration 8) for a reason, anchoring the purported real-ness of *Livescream* (the game and the events unfolding in the movie) in everyday digital reality.[69] While the confusion pertaining to the truth-value of community-based gothic narratives springs from their speculative character, it just as much results from a postcinematic media landscape "in which all activity is under surveillance from video cameras and microphones, and in return video screens and speakers, moving images and synthesized sounds, are dispersed pretty much everywhere. In this environment, where all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code, we cannot mean-

ingfully distinguish between 'reality' and its multiple simulations; they are all woven together in one and the same fabric."[70] Through its emphasis on nonhuman agencies (made manifest through intradiegetic users' deaths that are commemorated in the virtual world), *Livescream* (the videogame) confronts Scott with how "the allure of a game, the fascination it exerts, lies precisely in the fact that the game subdues the players."[71] Scott's intradiegetic audience and the movie's real-world audience are asked (and tasked) to face anxieties emerging from the human loss of control in this digital world of simulation and surveillance capitalism. Attacking users' inside their homes (into which the users have brought them, in the first place), technologies and machines assert their autonomy, showcasing the networked nonhuman agencies invisibly operating in a digital environment that has become inseparable from the "real" world.

Player Agency and Taking Control of the Game

Choose or Die opens with a critique of exaggerating videogames' significance to people's lives, as the text-based adventure game *CURS>R*, released in 1984, provides a means for Hal to "living in the '80s, . . . playing with his toys, his weird, creepy shit," as his son puts it. Indeed, Hal's man cave oozes nostalgia for the 1980s (Illustration 10). The *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) poster prominently on display suggests that the horror movie viewers are about to see is more terrifying than Wes Craven's classic. The film projector on the left-hand side promises the grainy quality of 1980s movies without them having been digitally restored or "remastered." Finally, *CURS>R*, stored on a tape, combines the whirring noises known from early modems going online with graphics that simultaneously evoke the 1980s (even if text-based adventures had their heyday in the 1970s) and are too refined to have been produced back then, conflating the past with the present. In less than two minutes, the movie thus introduces two themes that will prove key: nostalgia and the confusion of different (time) spaces. These two dimensions are intricately interwoven, for "the nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space," as Svetlana Boym has put it. Nostalgia spaces are "about the . . . materialization of the immaterial," to quote Boym again,[72] as nostalgia is centrally concerned with paradoxically recovering what Baudrillard called a "lost referential."[73] In other words, nostalgia spaces are virtual spaces—spaces of possibility that do not (really; or only potentially) exist.

From blockbusters such as *Tron: Legacy* (2010), television series such as *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–), and podcasts such as *Video Palace* (2018) to videogames such as *Hotline Miami* (Demnation Games and Abstraction, 2012) and the M83 song "Midnight City" (2011), the entertainment industry has shown a "recent obsession with the 1980s."[74] "Since the millennium and 9/11," Kevin J. Wetmore has observed, "American culture has called a 'do over' and run straight back to the '80s."[75] Indeed, what

Illustration 10: Hal's man cave evokes nostalgia for the 1980s.
Frame grab from *Choose or Die* © CURSR Films Limited, 2022.

Dan Hassler-Forest has called the "nostalgia industry" has successfully (in economic terms) been mining the 1980s,[76] for which, in turn, the 1950s were "the privileged lost object of desire."[77] Fredric Jameson famously associated nostalgia with the "new depthlessness" of postmodernism,[78] but in *Choose or Die*, knowledge of the 1980s goes beyond the desire to revive an imagined past or return to an imagined past, as the past offers the means to solving the puzzles with which the characters find themselves confronted.

Seemingly echoing Hal, Isaac, the nerdy sidekick of protagonist Kayla, pronounces the 1980s "the greatest decade in pop culture history." Kayla may be well-versed in twenty-first-century technology and sufficiently skilled to repair a broken console and to launch *CURS>R* in an emulator, but Isaac's detailed knowledge about the 1980s offers insights into the decade's popular culture and technologies. When Kayla and Isaac are about to abandon the idea of revealing the secrets of *CURS>R*, he remembers that "some old games have code hidden in the analog loading sound."[79] This notion of sound as a carrier of a secret message draws on the uncanny quality of sound in audiovisual media: "sound suggests presence even when this presence is invisible or intangible, and is thus closely related to the ghostly," Isabella van Elferen has remarked.[80] Of course, Isaac succeeds in extracting the hidden code from the "fucking evil" sound.[81]

Choose or Die is thus positioned in the flood of popular culture artifacts and practices that "provide [a] link between geek culture, the 1980s, and contemporary nostalgia, creating a distinct popular culture phenomenon," to draw on Kayla McCarthy.[82] The geek is "a modern-day archetype born out of society's implicit reliance on, and potential resentment of, technology."[83] Although "masculinity, whiteness, and tech-

noculture are coconstitutive,"[84] the geek is traditionally associated with a nonhegemonic (usually straight) white masculinity: "white men who are too white and not masculine enough."[85]

Isaac's vulnerability becomes most explicit when he dies while trying to help Kayla end the game. By disposing of Isaac, *Choose or Die* also makes explicit that its focus is on Kayla, intimately interweaving the nostalgia for the 1980s with the topics of control and coercion of black bodies as well as claiming and asserting black power that permeate the entire movie. After launching *CURS>R*, Kayla finds herself in scenarios where the choices offered by the game either make no sense or are not really options, to begin with. When the game asks Kayla whether she wants to take a break while sitting in a diner, her opting for "yes" makes the waitress start dropping glasses. When the game asks whether the waitress should stop and clean up, another "yes" makes the waitress drop to her knees, onto the broken glass, which she starts to eat. Kayla's mother ends up in hospital when *CURS>R* suddenly develops a graphical interface and Kayla simultaneously controls a giant rat while directing her mother through their department via her phone, ending in her mother jumping out of a window. Finally, Kayla is made to revisit the trauma of losing her younger brother at a public pool in order to save Isaac, only for him to die the next night when the game only offers Kayla the choice of how he will die.

In the ensuing "boss battle," Kayla meets Hal and his family, whom he apparently controls through fear and violence. When the game tells Kayla that Hal is the final boss, he disgustedly remarks, "It thinks I'm the final-level boss? And you're the hero? Oh, that's... that's not fair. Aren't guys like me allowed to be the fucking hero anymore? You know, in the '80s...,"[86] anchoring his toxic, white masculinity in the decade known for its muscular action heroes, its "hard bodies."[87] "Fuck the '80s!" Kayla shouts, as she confronts both the whiteness of the decade that is nostalgically evoked and the whiteness of all the people who embody various obstacles in her life.[88] *Choose or Die* arguably taps into afrofuturism here, which is "a narrative practice that enables users to communicate the interconnection between science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures."[89] By entangling the racist politics of the 1980s with the present moment, the movie looks to the past to reflect on both the past and the present. But more importantly within the context of this article, for Kayla to assert agency, the virtual space of a videogame proves key. In an essay on posthumanism in black popular music, Alexander Weheliye explains that "black subjectivity appears as the antithesis of the Enlightenment subject by virtue of not only having a body but by being the body—within Enlightenment discourses blackness is the body and nothing else." "But," he wonders, "what happens once the black voice becomes disembodied . . .?"[90] A similar process of disembodiment takes place in the digital spaces of videogames: "information and communication technologies afford

Blackness a differently circumscribed space to luxuriate and grow—never free from white racial ideology but no longer materially coerced by it," André Brock notes in his book *Distributed Blackness* (2020). He continues, "This possibility exists because of the disembodiment enabled by virtuality . . . that is largely unrestricted by the fixity and pejorative reduction of the Black body that occurs offline."[91] Kayla's experiences may be situated in (diegetic) physical reality, but shaped by decisions and actions in *CURS>R*. Upon completing the game, she takes control over it, promising to only use its power on "people who deserve it."[92]

Writing about Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Susana Morris explains that "people of the African Diaspora are continuously creating culture and radically transforming visions of the future . . . These visions are necessarily transgressive and subversive in relation to dominant discourse. To be black and not only envision yourself in the future but at the center of the future—to be the agent and subject of the future, and not relegated to the primeval past, used as props or pawns, or disappeared altogether—is an act of resistance and liberation, particularly in a present plagued by white supremacy and imperialism."[93] Both Kayla's defeat of the (white and male) final boss and her explicit promise to only make people suffer who deserve it (while she, her family, and all sorts of marginalized groups have experienced systemic violence for no reason) represents such a challenge of the status quo, led by a black woman. However, Frank Wilderson warns us of overestimating such symbolic acts—even more so when they are contained within an entertainment product: "What does it mean . . . when the world can whimsically transpose one's cultural gestures, the stuff of symbolic intervention, onto another worldly good, a commodity of style?"[94] After all, while *Choose or Die* imagines that Kayla takes control of the game, it continues to exist and to offer limited options to those who have to play it (chosen by Kayla). The attendant vision of Kayla as a God-like judge and executioner aside, this imagination of an empowered blackness (partly empowered through its traumatic experiences) is incorporated into Western (techno)culture, leaving little possibility to escape that framework. Tellingly, the movie's director, Tobie Meakins, is a white man who effectively allows Kayla to become powerful—within the limited and limiting world of a film.

Digital Horrors

My decision to discuss the filmic examples in chronological order was driven by two ideas. First, I meant to move from rather general ideas pertaining to videogames and digital media (hyperreality and the hauntedness of the media) to more specific engagements with videogames and game culture (live-streaming, online communities, and agency). Second, I wanted to conclude with examples that may locate the horror in the digital domain but at the same time acknowledge the significance of digital spaces for community-building and for marginalized people to organize and

take action, thereby evoking new types of digital horrors (i.e., community-created horrors such as creepypasta and the potential leveraging of digital technologies by oppressed groups—the latter of which exposes horror as a notoriously white genre) while simultaneously acknowledging the socio-cultural significance of videogames and digital spaces beyond the trite and clichéd notions of escapist entertainment and videogames as valves to release anger (expressed in *Brainscan*, for example). I do not mean to suggest a kind of evolution here in which the depictions of videogames in horror movies have become increasingly complex (interestingly, the in-movie videogame *Stay Alive* could be said to be the visually most refined one), as such teleology would be based on a consciously selected group of films that are not necessarily reflective of larger trends and would ignore that the topics addressed in my interpretations of *Brainscan* and *Stay Alive* echo in *Livestream* and *Choose or Die* (i.e., the interpenetration of purportedly "real" and digital realms, the hauntedness of the media, etc.).

Horror, Adam Daniel has observed, "has historically infected both emerging forms and the technologies which deliver them, parasitically preying upon the fears that emerge from these developments."[95] In different ways, all four movies not only remediate videogame aesthetics but also turn them into essential elements of their plots. In all instances, the videogame worlds infect the diegetic realities to the point that they become interconnected—with horrifying consequences.

Notes

1 John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 139.

2 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Grammophon—Film—Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986), 22. Unless noted otherwise, translations of sources in languages other than English by the author of this article.

3 Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 23; Siegbert Solomon Prawer, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 83; Trond Lundemo, "In the Kingdom of Shadows: Cinematic Movements and Its Digital Ghost," in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 316.

4 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 126.

5 Kittler, *Grammophon*, 24.

6 Fred Botting, "Technospectrality: Essay on Uncannimedia," in *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture: Technogothics*, ed. Justin D. Edwards (New York: Routledge, 2015), 18.

7 Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 53.

8 *Evilspeak*, dir. Eric Weston (Burbank: Warner Bros., 1981).

9 *Prince of Darkness*, dir. John Carpenter (Universal City: Universal Pictures, 1987).

10 Paul Young, *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films from Radio to the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xi.

11 *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, dir. Rachel Talatay (New York: New Line Cinema, 1991).

12 Douglas L. Rathgeb, "Bogeyman from the ID: Nightmare and Reality in *Halloween* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19, no. 1 (1991): 40.

13 The extremely self-aware *New Nightmare* (1994) features, among others, writer and director Wes Craven as Wes Craven and questions the borderlines between the diegetic world of the Nightmare franchise and historical reality. On metalepses in *New Nightmare*, see Michael Fuchs, "A Horrific Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Simulacra, Simulations, and Postmodern Horror," in *Landscapes of Postmodernity: Concepts and Paradigms of Critical Theory*, ed. Petra Eckhard, Michael Fuchs, and Walter W. Hölbling (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2010), 82–85; Jeff Thoss, *When Storyworlds Collide: Metalepsis in Popular Fiction, Film and Comics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 91–100.

14 Philip Brophy, "Horrality: The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (1986): 5, DOI: 10.1093/screen/27.1.2.

15 Jeffrey Sconce, "Spectacles of Death: Identification, Reflexivity, and Contemporary Horror," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 112.

16 *Nightmares*, dir. Joseph Sargent (Universal City: Universal Pictures, 1983).

17 Jason Landrum, "Nostalgia, Fantasy, and Loss: *Stranger Things* and the Digital Gothic," *Intertexts* 21, nos. 1–2 (2017): 137, DOI: 10.1353/itx.2017.0006.

18 See, for example, Jessica Balanzategui, "Creepypasta, 'Candle Cove,' and the Digital Gothic," *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 2 (2019), DOI: 10.1177/1470412919841018; Michael Fuchs, "Monstrous Writing—Writing Monsters: Authoring Manuscripts, Ontological Horror and Human Agency," in *Terrifying Texts: Essays on Books of Good and Evil in Horror Cinema*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and Bowdoin Van Riper (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018); Ewan Kirkland, "Remediation, Analogue Corruption and the Signification of Evil in Digital Games," in *Promoting and Producing Evil*, ed. Nancy Billias (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011); Ewan Kirkland, "*Resident Evil*'s Typewriter: Survival Horror and Its Remediations," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2009), DOI: 10.1177/1555412008325483.

19 Werner Wolf, "Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon: A Case Study of the Possibilities of 'Exporting' Narratological Concepts," in *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality—Disciplinarity*, ed. Jan Christoph Meister, Tom Kindt, and Wilhelm Schernus (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 91, original in italics.

20 Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), vii.

21 Isabella van Elferen, "'And Machine Created Music': Cybergothic Music and the Phantom Voices of the Technological Uncanny," in *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*, ed. Marianne van den Boomen, Sybilles Lammes, Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Joost Raessens, and Mirko Tobias Schäfer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 124.

22 *Brainscan*, dir. John Flynn (Culver City: Triumph Films, 1994). Admittedly, *Brainscan* uses a fantastic framing that recalls *Freddy's Dead*, as a trickster figure (named Trickster) is behind the braiding of the (purported) world of a videogame and diegetic reality. How-

ever, whereas in *Freddy's Dead*, the videogame sequence is a few minutes long, *Brainscan* centers on the porous thresholds between digital and purportedly real worlds.

23 *Brainscan*.

24 Kevin Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (London: Routledge, 1996), 92.

25 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 9, 34.

26 *Brainscan*.

27 Mathias Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), loc. 2464.

28 Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 46.

29 Jane Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 84.

30 Laurie Taylor, "When Seams Fall Apart: Video Game Space and the Player," *Game Studies* 3, no. 2 (2003), https://www.gamestudies.org/0302/taylor/.

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32 Sebastian Domsch, *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 4.

33 *Brainscan*.

34 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1981), 17.

35 Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), 112.

36 Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique*, 112.

37 Todd F. Tietchen, "Samplers and Copycats: The Cultural Implications of the Postmodern Slasher in Contemporary American Film," *Popular Film and Television* 26, no. 3 (1998): 102, DOI: 10.1080/01956059809602780.

38 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychology Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917–1919):* An Infantile Neurosis *and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 244.

39 Matthew Wynn Sivils, "Gothic Landscapes of the South," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 83.

40 Elizabeth Christine Russ, *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

41 Teresa A. Goddu, "The African American Slave Narrative and the Gothic," in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Chicester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 72.

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A Genealogy of Power

The Portrayal of the US in Cold War–Themed Videogames

Regina Seiwald and Alex Wade

Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between power, knowledge, and an idea of American Exceptionalism in Cold War–themed videogames. The article focuses on three perspectives. The first section engages with how knowledge is positioned in videogames and what role it plays for shifting power dynamics. Next, it looks at the relationship between notable historio-political events—such as Ronald Reagan's 1983 "Evil Empire" speech and the United States' proposed Strategic Defense Initiative—and videogames to determine how historical knowledge is impacted when it is remediated in games. The third part of this article discusses how Cold War–themed videogames focusing on the US-American perspective embellish a hero who epitomizes and performs American Exceptionalism by establishing a notion of (moral) power that lies with the West. By connecting these three dimensions of knowledge and power in Cold War–themed videogames released between the 1980s and the present, this article suggests that videogames alter players' perception of Cold War ideologies by associating the US with victory while vilifying the USSR and depicting Soviets as the losers in this conflict.

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A Genealogy of Power

The Portrayal of the US in Cold War–Themed Videogames

Regina Seiwald and Alex Wade

The twentieth century was characterized by wars on a global scale. The first half was defined by two hot conflicts in 1914–1918 and 1939–1945, with both of them following a late-stage imperial logic.[1] The time in the aftermath of WWII is universally accepted as the Cold War. Marked by an age of extremes,[2] the period between the 1950s and 1993 was one of utmost precarity in the face of nuclear proliferation in the northern hemisphere between NATO and the Warsaw Pact: the West was committed to a utopia achieved through individual liberalism, while the East embraced the socialist idealism of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin that imagined a collective march toward a better tomorrow. The ideological struggle between democratic capitalism and communist command economy was primarily fought between the US and the USSR, but many conflicts were decided in Europe. Both sides were committed—in dramatically different ways—to improving the economic, social, and political polity of their citizens. Francis Fukuyama polemically argued that the triumph of the free(-market) individual signaled the end of history, as the last man and the political system they signify came to be the only game in town.[3]

For the purposes of this article, what we have termed "Cold War-themed" goes beyond the temporally discrete era between the end of WWII and the dissolution of the USSR between 1991 and 1993. Instead, this notion also expands to the future, with games and other media drawing on binary discourses in their geopolitical depictions long past the early 1990s. Cold War-themed videogames center on the cultural and technological battle between the "free" West, embodied by American individual exceptionalism, and the "tyrannical" East, epitomized by the socialist USSR. To be sure, games that depict war may be traced back to early examples such as Go and chess. However, what makes Cold War-themed games specific, as we will demonstrate in this article, is using computers to simulate scenarios leading to war and its potential outcomes as well as the processes involved in waging it. These dimensions are related to the advent and application of computing technology, which started to emerge during the Cold War.

In this article, we will argue that Cold War-themed videogames both produce and are a product of the discourse of technology and culture manifest in the conflict between East and West. Cold War-themed videogames imagine a technological and cultural battle between the West, often but not always represented by the US, against the East, often but not always the Soviet Union. This does not mean that these narratives were temporally limited to the second half of the twentieth century, for a range of narratives suggest that the Cold War continues far into the twenty-first century (e.g., the videogame *S.D.I.* [Cinemaware, 1986] and the movie *Crimson Tide* [1995]). These media texts are counterfactual because they represent a war that has not been waged; or if it was waged, then this was not a hot conflict between the two belligerents, but rather a strategic battle fought on big boards and in proxy and/or simulated wars. However, Cold War-themed narratives do not necessarily resort to the idea of an all-out war between the US and the USSR. In films such as *WarGames* (1983) and many of the videogames discussed below, individuals surmount impossible odds and situations to prevent a cold war from turning hot. No matter how videogames and other media may imagine World War III, they, as Matthew Thomas Payne argues in *Playing War* (2016), do not "have to explicitly reproduce our world to comment on it."[4] In this way, the computers that deployed game theory to analyze the zero-sums of nuclear war were engaged in counterfactual narratives themselves, lending an entirely new—and possibly unintended—dimension to Niall Ferguson's term of "virtual history."[5] Subverting the real to the virtual, computers calculated the gains and losses of an eventuality that by luck or design never came to pass. That videogames are the art form that originated from this technology is a double irony: individuals, despite their heroic portrayals in the media, had little or no control over the power, processes, pitfalls, and practicalities of war. The last man becomes post-human and ultimately, inhuman. Videogames, with their simulation of agency, provide some means to redress power imbalances, which is a key point we will explore in greater depth in this article.

The games we will discuss share two key features: *a)* their thematic focus on the Cold War and *b)* their privileging of the United States' ideological position as a morally righteous and "good" superpower who defends the world against the threat of tyrannical, Soviet communism.[6] Indeed, videogames are children of the Cold War, and in the West, "early videogames were programmed on machines designed for calculating the outcomes of nuclear assault on the population of the world."[7] Many early videogames were (strategic) war games, such as *Star Trek* (Mike Mayfield and Bob Leedom, 1971) and *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, 1962), whose "genesis," according to John Wills, "came at a time of peak hostilities between two superpowers vying for global dominance through the space race."[8] Allowing us to interactively engage with their narratives and worlds, videogames offer thought-provoking scenarios of alterna-

tive histories and presents as well as dystopian pasts and futures. That way, the player explores dystopias with a keen cognition of what nuclear annihilation of our planet ultimately entails. On the one hand, this can be achieved with a look toward the future, playing with "what if"-scenarios and often with a reversed man-machine relationship. On the other hand, dystopian games also often look backwards, giving us a retrospective view of alternate, counterfactual and, in the extended sense of the term, virtual historical timelines.

To further elaborate on both points, we also need to consider the Cold War itself and the kind(s) of worldview(s) it created in the West. Cold War-themed games frequently depict dystopian worlds destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. According to Jean Baudrillard, the Cold War was a war that simply could not be fought because it would result not in a conflict "between peoples, states, systems and ideologies, but rather of the human species against itself."[9] If the Cold War had turned hot, our binary conception of the world—namely "good" capitalist West versus "evil" communist East—would have disintegrated.[10] Mike Gane's conclusion that a nuclear holocaust will not become our reality is hardly an assuagement given that the only reason for this is that it would divest us from the pleasure of confrontation.[11] Instead, as we have stated elsewhere, "it is evident by this point that hyperreality, realised in the technologies that simultaneously integrate humans more closely with the machines that kill them either physically or symbolically, has re-hewn the weave of everyday life."[12]

As the ideological children of this conflict, being born en masse in the 1980s and heralding the computer's shift from functionality to entertainment in the geopolitical West and the East,[13] videogames give us an opportunity to imagine and "experience" what it would have meant if the Cold War had turned into a hot, military, and likely nuclear confrontation. The realism of these games, as argued by Jonna Eagle, results from a mixture of their "proximity to everyday experience and distance from it."[14] Their futuristic and counterfactual representations raise questions about power and knowledge, specifically bias, distorted depiction, and the subjectivism of the dominant socio-historical discourse and its portrayal in games. Some games appeal to the player's emotions and morality by presenting bi-polar worldviews, dividing the geopolitical landscape into "good"—embodied by the US—and "evil"—epitomized by often nondescript socialist and communist forces.[15] This opposition indicates that the imaginary worlds of Cold War-themed videogames are undergirded by a hefty dose of American Exceptionalism. Seymour Martin Lipset has defined American Exceptionalism as the US being "qualitatively different from other countries," with "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" being its key characteristics.[16] At its core, American Exceptionalism is not a system that aims at establishing superiority over anything that differs from the American perception of excellence; instead, it emphasizes the country's "myth of uniqueness" grounded in

its exceptional history of being founded as a republic.[17] However, the idea of American Exceptionalism lends itself to narratives of dominance, and this is what Cold War-themed videogames often adopt.

In the following, we will analyze the relationship between power, knowledge, and an idea of American Exceptionalism in Cold War-themed videogames. We will focus on three perspectives. In the first section, we will engage with how knowledge is positioned in games and what role it plays for shifting power dynamics. Next, we will look at the relationship between notable historio-political events, such as Ronald Reagan's 1983 "Evil Empire" speech and the US's proposed (and utopian/dystopian) Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and videogames to determine how historical knowledge is impacted when it is remediated in games. The third part of this article will address how Cold War-themed videogames focusing on the US-American perspective embellish a hero who epitomizes and performs American Exceptionalism by establishing a notion of (moral) power that lies with the West. By stringing together these three dimensions of knowledge and power in Cold War-themed videogames released between the 1980s and the present, we will suggest that videogames alter players' perception of Cold War ideologies by associating the US with a sense of victory while vilifying the USSR and depicting Soviets as the losers in this conflict.

Power and Knowledge: Changing Cold War Discourses

The Cold War was a war of power that was—apart from proxy wars—fought not by physically attacking the enemy but by demonstrating moral, cultural, historical, and political superiority over the enemy. The US and the USSR established intricate networks of knowledge and power. On the one hand, these networks were built on the accumulation of information by intelligence services. On the other hand, they also relied on how the media communicated certain ideas and concepts to the people, which would influence the formation of subjective perceptions of the conflict.[18] To uncover the mechanisms at work in the creation of this knowledge, we can draw on Michel Foucault's study of power structures in society. Historically, power organized the functioning of society and became particularly pronounced in class divisions and axiomatic hierarchies that did not allow for upward mobility. However, Foucault argues that from the eighteenth century onwards, power has transformed from an authority-led phenomenon to one that underpins social structures in every possible way. Power enters the everyday in forms we accept as normal, such as the hierarchical structures that undergird the education system.[19] Power is a foundation of most societal organization mechanisms that regulate our day-to-day lives, but its form has changed over time.

If we re-contextualize Foucault's notion of power in the present age, and particu-

larly when considering digital media such as videogames, we can witness this change in its ontology from power as force to power as societal habitus. As Paul Strathern has argued, "Power now becomes a 'technology': it is the technique by which a society regulates its members. The modern individual was created amidst this plethora of rules and regulations. In many ways he created himself in reaction to these restraints."[20] Power has become a structuring device that has lost many of its negative connotations, while it can still subtly influence past and present discourses in ways that influence constructions of historical truth. Media disseminate knowledge to the masses. They may be informative, but they may also be manipulative. The third-person shooter *Freedom Fighters* (IO Interactive, 2003) builds its alternative history around the Soviet Union as the sole victor of WWII.[21] The game overtly presents the fact that the USSR won this war as an alternative history, while failing to emphasize that the Soviet Union was, indeed, one of the four powers winning it—although, arguably, they suffered by far the most losses, from civilian deaths to economic effects. In this sense, the imbalance between historical inaccuracy and the power to control knowledge becomes apparent very early on. The game, however, presents the narrative that in the aftermath of WWII, Western forces slowly weakened, resulting in the global spread of communism. The game's protagonist, resistance soldier Chris Stone, fights his war as a war of knowledge by infiltrating and pirating the Soviet-controlled media network SAFN (Illustration 1).

At the same time, the occupation forces use media outlets associated with this network to shape public opinion, notably when Chris's brother Troy is forced to urge the resistance to abandon their plans. The player witnesses this episode in the form of a non-playable newscast, which live-streams Troy's speech. However, Troy departs from the scripted text and commandeers the live cast to urge the resistance to continue their fight. The camera tilts down to the red star communist emblem before switching back to the studio. This episode underlines that the media channel is a weapon, equating information dissemination with power that may even be superior to weapons causing physical harm. This time, however, the resistance controls it, realizing its potential for mobilizing the masses.[22] In his role as the "Freedom Phantom," Chris proceeds in his quest to take over the media network, which he sees as the only way to regain New York City, thereby symbolically freeing the West. In a last push, he raids the SAFN studios and urges his fellow citizens to rise up against the occupiers, which culminates in the mass mobilization of resistance fighters and the subsequent takeover of key Soviet infrastructure.

This videogame draws on different conceptions of the interplay between power and knowledge that are (or seem to be) historically specific. On the one hand, there are dated power structures that resemble those that Foucault described for the period up to the seventeenth century: domination, uniformity, and absolutism. These

Illustration 1: The SAFN network declares the death of Commander-in-Chief General Tatarin, using a media outlet to communicate their plans for revenge.
Screenshot from *Freedom Fighters* © Electronic Arts, 2003.

characteristics find expression in the "bodily rhetoric of honour" associated with the soldier, who epitomizes state-led totalitarianism in his looks, posture, and gestures.[23] This dated idea of overt power clashes with a new form of power as knowledge that, on the other hand, demonstrates that media can be used to educate and mobilize the masses against practices of governance that undermine the American core values of egalitarianism, individualism, and liberty.[24] Despite their obvious differences, both forms of power coexist today, and *Freedom Fighters* displays both of them. The game approaches the concept of power from an unconventional angle because, according to Lisa Downing, normally "no attention is paid . . . to the power of resistance or subversion on the part of those submitted to the regimes of disciplines. Only official discourses of knowledge are considered, not the reverse discourse of, for example, prison sub-cultures."[25] However, in videogames, and, by extension, many other forms of popular media, the figure of the underdog or any deviation from the status quo feature prominently and frequently in narratives; indeed, these characters are often even placed at their center.[26] By demonstrating how hierarchical power dynamics can be shifted if masses of people are mobilized, *Freedom Fighters*

displays power structures that are normally not shown because they divert too far from mainstream practices.

Homefront (Kaos Studios, 2011) also articulates this concept of dominance.[27] The game establishes its notion of power by combining generating information with disseminating it, contrasting this idea with military strength and economic superiority. The game opens with a look into the past, displaying a statement by then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, in which she condemns the killing of South Korean sailors by a North Korean torpedo attack in March 2010. From this historic event, the game envisions a dystopian future defined by political unrest, pandemics, and warfare. The game is set in 2027, over twenty years after the Greater Korean Republic emerged as the world's sole superpower as a consequence of being the only nation that profited from a global oil shortage following numerous wars. After Korea has detonated a nuclear device over the US, the nation's electrical supply fails, resulting in chaos and hysteria. Communication breaks down and message control is implemented from the top. Former American soldiers are shipped to re-education camps in Alaska, which resemble Russian gulags, both in their setup and in the kind of discipline they apply for breaking the prisoners' wills. On the side of the resistance, illegal information collation plays a central role. The resistance fighters infiltrate the enemies by attaching tracking devices to vehicles and goods sent to Korean territories. That way, information can be gathered, and power can be generated without being visible to the occupation forces. In addition, the control over information shifts because as soon as progress is being made by the US resistance forces, the European broadcasting network spreads these successes on various channels. Narratively, *Homefront* depicts a very modern kind of war that is fought by means of information control rather than physical confrontation.

While videogames *represent* power structures in their narratives, they also *embody* power structures ludically. Power is essential to all games because playing games requires their players to be aware of rules that they follow (or break, e.g., by cheating) *because* these rules are a key characteristic of the medium. While playing, players need to be aware of the rules governing progression and win conditions before applying this knowledge to excel in meeting the win conditions set out by these rules better than others, be they in-game enemies or real-life players. In this sense, the kind of link between power and technology in videogames is binate: the game functions as the technology that establishes and enforces power structures. At the same time, power is the technology that guides players' engagement with the game. Without this power, the purpose of playing would be debatable (if a player outright rejects all the rules a game dictates, what is the point of playing it?). Most often, these rules are not explicitly spelled out, but the player learns them by engaging with the game. In this sense, "power operates according to and by means of secrecy as

well as—or instead of—by voicing its presence in loud and oppressive interdictions and orders."[28] Nonetheless, videogames are still capable of (vociferously) perpetuating certain ideologies, but these tend to be communicated more overtly on a narrative level than on a ludic level. An example of a game that plainly communicates ideologies is *America's Army* (2002), which was jointly published by Ubisoft and the US Army with the intention of attracting young recruits. More covertly, all war games—even those far removed from any historical or present reality—communicate certain ideologies because in the act of producing a game, game makers need to make choices on how to represent the gameworld. Whether these power structures inform players' knowledge of the world, however, depends on the game's content, its aims, and objectives.

The idea of resisting power structures becomes apparent on a narrative level by focusing on a protagonist who rejects dominant ideologies, which will be addressed in the next section. The emphasis on resistance against (socialist) collectivism and a campaign for individualism shapes our perception of the Cold War as an American success story, which it was not because neither side won it, and the current shift in geopolitical power structure is testament to this argument.

Technological Ordering of Space and Time

The current plea by global actors to follow a "rules-based order," thrown into relief by the war in Ukraine, positions the social and political manifestation of what is "right" and "wrong" into disagreement and even disrepute. Where laws are inviolable, as with the moral imperative of not taking another person's life against their will, in war, the taking of life during a conflict or a "special military operation" can be secondary to larger strategic aims. These ideas are enshrined in widely agreed (albeit not always followed) protocols such as the Geneva Convention, rules of engagement, Just War, and nuclear non-proliferation treaties. In the case of thermonuclear war, the targeting of civilian centers is a central concern to the wider aim of paralyzing key infrastructure. The subsequent breakdown of society follows logically from this, placing the actors in a double bind that forms the basis of the "rules" of mutually assured destruction, or in Baudrillard's terminology, "impossible exchange"[29]: it is intolerable to imagine a world where the aim is to annihilate the opponent, while opening your own society to the same outcome. However, this does not prevent actors from engaging in theoretical or hypothetical musings about the scenarios leading to nuclear war or its ultimate outcome. In fact, the opposite is the case: without these ruminations, planning processes, and simulations of any potential "what-if"-scenario, widely credited to game theory, the impossible exchange of nuclear weapons would have already occurred in the post-WWII world. These contemplations are, in effect, always-already present counterfactuals, while they also illustrate the fundamental

mechanisms of historical development.[30] Therefore, the social habitus of power that is vital to its perpetuation, giving increasing weight to concepts such as deterrence and even weapons where defense is prioritized over attack.

As one of the architects of deterrence in game theory, Thomas Schelling found that using pencil and paper for complex thought experiments and mathematical equations was "hard to do."[31] Indeed, the invention of digital computers proved to be the most ubiquitous and perhaps most important legacy of the Cold War, allowing mathematicians and strategists to ponder the "infinite game."[32] In this abstract arena, rules are malleable by those who make them. These rules were integrated into the calculations attributed to the economic, binate, exceptional, and ultimately ludic discourse of "Communist governments and armies [that] were depicted as demoniac machines" where the "entire transaction was understood as an accounting procedure in which capitalists scored 'credits' and communists 'debits.'"[33] "Big boards," large panoptic screens that reduced megacities to icons and megadeaths to power numbers, became the widely accepted visual representation of the infinite game, further abstracting the consequences of mass murder. The contradictions of impossible exchange were used to great effect in movies such as *WarGames*, where a computer, having run through a multitude of scenarios, decides that there can be no winner. Despite such representations in other media, the Cold War computing legacy of videogames best sketches the labyrinthine infinity of game theory.

Missile Command (Atari, 1980) is a key example of the digital legacy of the Cold War.[34] As with many arcade games, it asks players to "insert coin[s]," which are then transformed, in the alchemy typical of democratic capitalism, into "credits." These credits provide what are effectively six lives in the form of cities that must be protected from nuclear attack. The player does not play fast and loose with power fantasies: the player is in purely defensive mode, managing scarce resources. Three anti-missile batteries protect the cities, and they can be used to destroy incoming missiles before they eliminate the cities or the player's batteries (Illustration 2). The user interface is atypical for the time, utilizing a proto-mouse trackball instead of a joystick, reminiscent of the electromechanical pinball machines of 1970s arcades. While *Missile Command* coerces the player into the ideas of game theory, its ideals fall apart: playtime and the lifespan of the cities under protection can be extended, while the "evil empire" needs to be decimated. *Missile Command* follows the custom of the infinite game: in the game, like in nuclear conflict, there are no winners or losers, and the game continues until one of the players drops out. Notably, the endgame splash screen does not announce "game over," but "The End," shrouded in the spectrum of colors heralded by nuclear airburst.

The rudimentary big-board graphics of *Missile Command* and similar games were

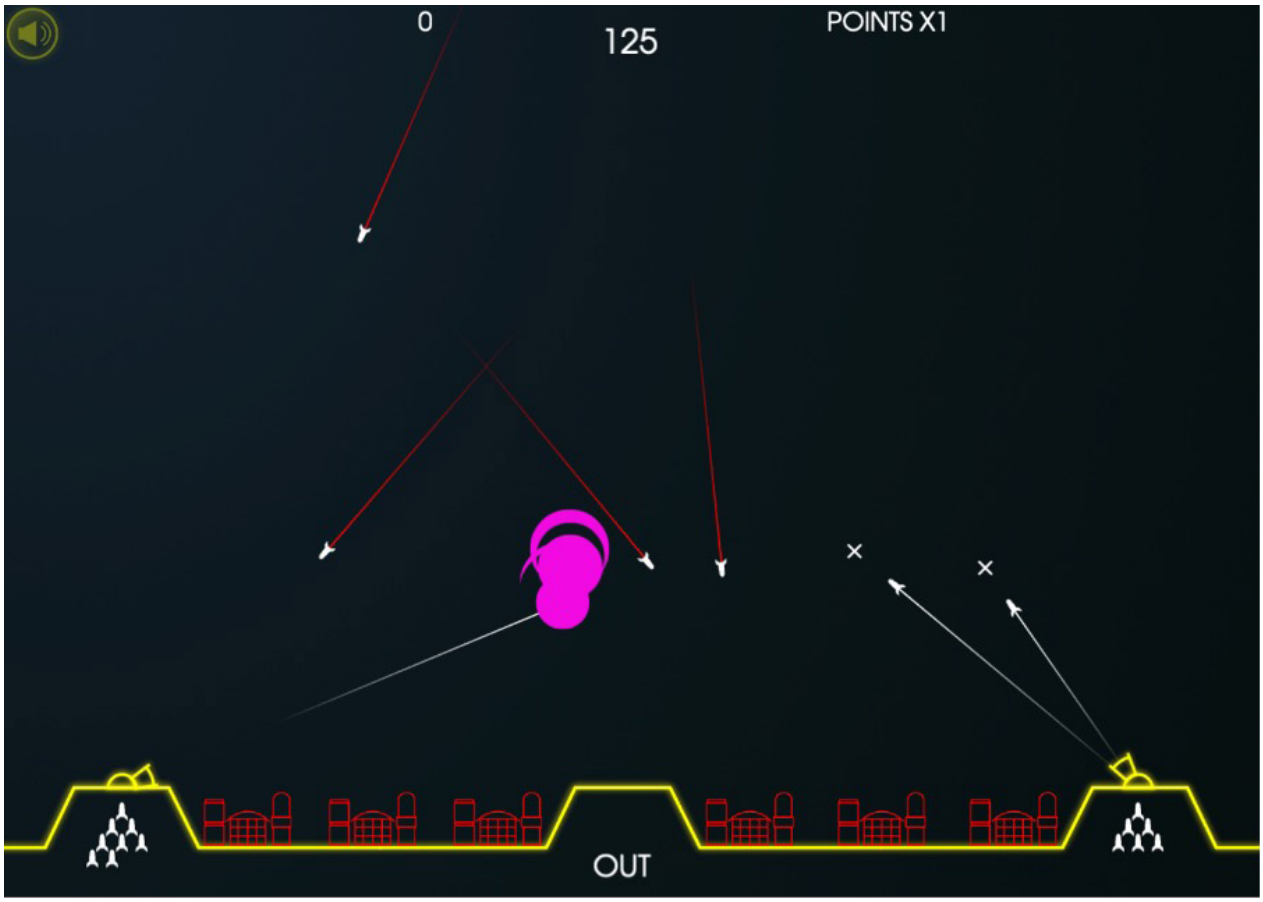

Illustration 2: Anti-missile batteries protecting the cities.
Screenshot from *Missile Command* © Atari, 1980.

products of their time, but they remain a pervasive index of the panopticism of nuclear war. Later games also use this setup to communicate a sense of the colossal drawing boards of Cold War strategic planning. Introversion's *DEFCON* (2006) uses big-board graphics to display the effective inability of the human race to avoid extinction, zero-summed as "Everybody dies."[35] Yet, playing in a defined space makes the nuances of warfare visible: six cities are more easily relatable to the player than the geostrategies demanded by global warfare. At the same time, *DEFCON*'s real horror lies in the effective inability to prevent human extinction. How the player shuffles the competing demands of an isolated, threatened settlement over their own missile batteries is key to the dichotomy at play here.

In March 1983, President Ronald Reagan gave two speeches that would redefine the US Cold War discourse. The "Evil Empire" speech addressed the imbalance between the US and the USSR, explicitly positioning the latter as the "focus of evil in the modern world," with the US as its "good" counterbalance.[36] Echoes of these ideas would be heard in later speeches justifying gargantuan military intervention and spending, such as President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" address in the wake of 9/11.[37] Just over two weeks after the "Evil Empire" speech, Reagan re-affirmed the US's position

as the victim in the escalation of nuclear weapons while, simultaneously, introducing plans for a new active defensive weapons system.[38] The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) would offer an identification, tracking, and destruction system that covered the United States in a protective shield, deploying a network of twelve military satellites using (theoretical) energy beam technology to eliminate nuclear missiles before they would strike the United States. The gambit was that if nuclear weapons cannot be used, then they should be rendered effectively useless, or even more impotent than they already were. Supplementing gung-ho affirmations that attack is the best form of defense, the latter stages of the Cold War brought *Missile Command*'s emphasis on prophylaxis full circle.

If attack is no longer the best form of defense, then all that is left is the technocratic sphere of prevention. This idea is enshrined in Reagan's bizarre proclamation that SDI technology could be shared with the Soviet Union, thereby rendering *all* nuclear weapons impotent, bringing another order of complexity to an already complex, indeed paradoxical state. The program relocated the battlefield from Earth to the heavens, bringing a new dimension to warfare: where satellites were used primarily for "passive" purposes of surveillance and intelligence, space-based machines would be deployed actively to destroy the opposition's weapons. The seemingly fantastical, indeed science-fictional proposal, which had not even been discussed with Pentagon officials, only added to the contradictions at the core of Cold War thinking: SDI technology effectively delegated wartime decision-making to machines. The fact that the scenarios the artificial intelligence would encounter could not be tested prior to use—given that a nuclear attack had never occurred—meant that SDI was expected to work perfectly first time, every time.[39]

The fantastic nature of the SDI program immediately led the news media to label it "Star Wars," offering an explicit configuration of the Military-Industrial Entertainment Network (MIME-NET) with overt, expected, and accepted links in the power nexus between media, entertainment, and war: entertainment and the threat of warfare overlap, blurring the line between reality and fiction.[40] Almost inevitably then, where the press coined terms, entertainment media turned to the alchemy of coins and credits with two commercial videogames carrying the SDI-moniker. Sega's *S.D.I.* (1987; also known as *Global Defense*) is a game first released to the arcades in 1987.[41] Following an intro in which an ICBM strikes New York City (Illustration 3), destroying the symbolic center of global capitalism—the Twin Towers—the player takes control of a satellite across multiple levels. In a nod to *Missile Command*, the player uses a trackball to control energy beams from the satellite. The player's satellite repels waves of missiles before docking with NASA's space shuttle, after which bar charts provide the player with a resumé of their performance. The battle starts above Earth before progressing to increasingly more machinic environments such as

Illustration 3: *S.D.I.*'s loading screen asks players to "insert coins."
Screenshot from *S.D.I.* © Sega, 1987.

space stations and mechanical globes. These changes in setting suggest that artificial intelligence conceived of in the SDI program becomes independent and develops its form and that humans are no longer the primary lifeform requiring strategic defense. Unlike *Missile Command*, this is an arena entirely purged of humanity, where only posthuman machines can thrive in zero-g, zero oxygen, zero-sum environments and exceptionalism is measured in technological, technical, and technocratic accomplishments.

Sega's *S.D.I.* reflects on the power of technological developments through its own technology by taking a step back. In their System 16 boards, used to produce visually accomplished games such as *OutRun* (1986) and *After Burner* (1987), Sega had already shifted the state-of-the-art in arcade hardware. *S.D.I.* is a technically simpler game drawing on influences in the horizontal and vertical shooter genre such as *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) and *Scramble* (Konami, 1981). Amidst the growing moral panic that arcades and their games were deleterious to the nation's youth,[42] *S.D.I.* showed how rhetorical power "proved considerable," allowing its proponents to "claim that they were supporting defensive rather than offensive weapons."[43] This worked as much for the conservative position of reclaiming the ethical compass from critics of untrammeled nuclear proliferation as redeeming the arcade as a means to which

to digest the nuclear and digital discourse seen in *Missile Command*. In this way, both the military program and the game program of SDI demonstrate the symbolic political power of infinite games that determine "American high technology in full control, a shield rather than a nuclear sword."[44] To this end, they extend exceptionalism, first to protecting American civilian centers above all else, and then to the exceptional technology that makes this political symbolism possible.

The second game carrying the SDI moniker was published by Cinemaware in 1986,[45] a company specializing in slick interactive narratives inspired by motion pictures. Set in an alternative 2017, the plot is eerily prescient of the failed coup that occurred in the USSR in 1991.[46] The KGB have seized control of nuclear missile launch sites in the Soviet Union and blackmail the US and USSR to succumb to their demands. In this future, Reagan's utopian vision is seemingly actualized as SDI is shared between the West and the East, becoming a mutually protective technology. Following the intro, the player-character, Sloan McCormick, needs to defend the twelve SDI satellites from an attack by the splinter KGB faction, suggesting that even the world's most advanced weapons system is not impervious to attack. The player has access to surveillance technologies including radar and long-range scanners (graphically represented by "big boards") to defend the SDI network. If the satellites are not defended adequately, the resultant gaps in the defensive shield allow nuclear weapons to enter American air space and territory. Irrespective of the player's success on this level, the KGB faction launch nuclear weapons and the player has to use pulse or beam energy weapons to intercept incoming ICBMs. Reflecting the projected success rate of the SDI program, some missiles inevitably penetrate the shield, levelling major civilian centers such as Chicago and New York City. This is not a fail-condition and McCormick is praised by the President through the metonymy of a picture of Congress: "America thanks you, Captain."[47]

While players may fail at this stage of *S.D.I.*, with reports saying that the "situation in orbit has deteriorated, nuclear war is inevitable," before a splash of 'The End' is displayed on screen, the key to the game, like in *Missile Command*, is found in the microcosm of human relationships. McCormick must rescue his lover, Natalia Kazarian, from the VI Lenin space station, which is under attack from the "diving attack ships of the fanatical KGB."[48] A static first-person section follows, laden with historical Soviet iconography including a portrait of Karl Marx and CCCP hammer and sickle flags, where the player must rescue Kazarian within four minutes. If the player manages to beat the clock, McCormick and Kazarian kiss against the backdrop of a brightly lit Earth in an ending typical of space operas. Another sequence of defense follows, and Congress once again praises the player's performance, with the "best" ending pronouncing, "Congratulations! You have defeated the KGB. The revolution is over and the entire human race is in your debt."[49] In a twist that accentuates Cin-

emaware's filmic inspirations, at the game's conclusion, the camera rolls back to reveal an audience watching the credits in a movie theater. "The End" is displayed on a cinema screen, on the one hand spotlighting the contrasts between "The End" as in the cessation of human life in *Missile Command* and the "bad" ending of *S.D.I.*, and on the other hand suggesting the close of a film, a device that neatly places the videogame in the cinema projector's black box, rendering it as a movie. In doing so, it defers to film—and especially action hero narratives, a staple of 1980s American cinema—being the most influential American medium. It positions the form and the content of film as the locus where the individual can achieve immortality. At the same time, it bridges the intractable gap between the Evil Empire and the benevolent United States through the vehicle of romantic love and one man's—as it is invariably a man in older games—commitment to duty and heroism against impossible odds.

The Cold War as an American Hero Story: The (Historio-Political) Relationship Between American Exceptionalism and Videogames

The SDI-related games analyzed above indicate a development toward characterization and individualization in videogames that was not present in games made in the 1970s, largely because the technology would not allow for it. The idea of power represented in Cold War-themed games of the 1980s is still mainly located on an abstract level (e.g., the nation state and state institutions). Later games spotlight the individual subject, forming a stylistic device that constitutes a contrast to the authoritarian Soviet system. Foucault has translated the idea of power onto the subject by introducing the concept of the "docile body" in reference to humans who "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."[50] A docile body is ultimately the result of strict and regimented training implemented by (and in) institutions such as prisons but also in the military or, less obviously so, in educational settings and the hospital.[51] These and similar institutional frameworks demonstrate that the relationship between knowledge and power must be placed in social relations because both elements need a subject, be it docile or not.[52] The producer of knowledge unavoidably has power over those that do not (yet) possess the same knowledge, and hence a form of hierarchical dependence is established between them. This relationship, however, is never static but constantly negotiated and questioned by other instances of power. In this sense, knowledge perpetually changes and grows, having "its own genealogy,"[53] which also has an impact on the truth associated with this particular knowledge. In other words, if knowledge changes, the truth we associate with certain discourses or ideas changes as well. As a consequence, power relations between bearers of knowledge and those lacking it shift (e.g., the transition from a geocentric

to a heliocentric worldview).

All political systems produce docile bodies. However, their existence is more apparent in totalitarian states such as the USSR because docility forms an integral part of this system's functioning. The Korean soldiers in *Homefront*, for example, are stripped of their individuality, as they have been molded by the state authorities to fulfil the functions they have been trained for; the troops are portrayed as (stereo)typical, faceless stormtrooper types. Apart from the agents of state-sanctioned violence (e.g., the police and armed forces), docile bodies also populate democratic/capitalist societies, albeit on a more subtle level: "the docile bodies of modernity are recognisable as the workforce of high capitalism, as well as prisoners, schoolchildren and soldiers, citizens trained and moulded in the operational factories of the schools and barracks."[54] Capitalism is built on the idea of assigning roles to individuals who need to fulfil them for the system to work. Of course, a docile body is not synonymous with uniformity, but many Cold War-themed videogames focusing on an American perspective tend to emphasize the docility and lack of individuality associated with Americans' antagonists. In the East, the mass of Sovietism stands above all. In the West, if the individual loses, everything and everyone is lost. Videogames that invite the player to assume the role of a character have a particular relationship with the triumph of the individual. When the player-character dies, all is lost. The player's enemies, however, are easily replaced: death is not the end for them, in their stead are more, bigger, and deadlier enemies, until victory is eventually attained.

Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis (Bohemia Interactive Studios, 2001), for example, thematizes the relationship between docility and authority by distinguishing between two Soviet political attitudes—those that lean toward the American system and those that radically divert from it.[55] Aleksei Guba, a renegade Soviet general, wants to bring down Gorbachev to lead the USSR into a new totalitarian era of anti-Americanism, but his break from docility is met with American antagonism, wanting to defend American Exceptionalism by all means. Ironically, however, the idea of a docile body opposes the focus on individualism and freedom of the subject the US seeks to promote as foundational values. *Operation Flashpoint* puts this idea on its head as the individual American does everything in their power to defend America's foundational myths. Simultaneously, the dissident Soviet general undermines the docility demanded by the authoritative state, thus building his moral stance on American values. The game is nonetheless symbolic of an anti-communism underpinning the US mentality that "grew out of and became the institutionalized version of the anti-radicalism, nativism, and Americanization movements,"[56] which are still predominant in the US today. The game does not abandon this American value system to serve docility; on the contrary, individualism becomes a key characteristic of the American docile body that serves (democratic) authority. In a nod to Ronald

Reagan's labelling of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire," the depersonalization of the enemy in *Operation Flashpoint* stipulates them as a collective, which opposes the fundamentally American value of individualism.

To a certain degree, Foucault's idea of the docile body clashes with individuality. For the American value system, this proves particularly problematic because of its focus on the individual rather than a collective.[57] In its legal history, the United States placed the individual at the center of the creation and protection of rights against external powers and the state. This focus on the individual's (alleged) freedom rather than the state's (actual) power over it explains why Cold War-themed videogames focusing on an American perspective emphasize socialism's uniformity in exaggerated ways. In addition, this focus on the individual is also the reason why socialism would never work in the US. Yet, instead of recognizing it as a legitimate alternative system, America's antagonism demonizes it in these games. This is particularly pronounced in the role of the "lone wolf,"[58] who is the American hero fighting against totalitarianism in a dystopian world overrun by socialism. A character who epitomizes this individualized heroism is Marines Captain Nathaniel Renko, the protagonist of the first-person shooter *Singularity* (Raven Software, 2010).[59] Renko needs to decide how to alter the past by travelling back in time, preventing the world from falling into chaos. The player is tasked to make a series of decisions that center on individual survival versus the greater good. Essentially, any decision made by the player that does not involve Renko's suicide as well as the murder of two other characters who were corrupted by power brings an end to the established world order, raising questions regarding the value of individual actions in the course of history. While the American moral value system is built on a focus on the subject's singularity, history (and the game) shows that power structures eventually decide the direction a society takes. The conclusions drawn from this insight thereby rely on the individual player, who must be docile to the game's pre-programmed narrative in order to arrive at this point. The only way to resist docility would be by not playing the game (or, by changing its source code).

Another game that places emphasis on the protagonist-player as a heroic individual and the only one who can save the world from (communist) absolutism is *America's Army*.[60] In 2002, the game was launched by the US Army with the aim of appealing to young Americans as potential recruits. The game has received numerous updates, and the US Army even has its own Esports team.[61] As a convention for first-person shooters, the game puts the player in control of moving the plot and determining an action's outcome, hence placing them in a position of singularity and heroism in comparison to their adversaries, who are often depicted as a collective that opposes core American values. While the game certainly presents insights into Army life, it has not remained without criticism. For example, media critic David B.

Nieborg argues that "the *America's Army* development team cleverly mixed various educational, marketing and propaganda mechanisms at their disposal to offer a free game which on the one hand fits perfectly into the FPS genre while at the same time reinforcing a highly politicized recruiting agenda."[62] This game is therefore part of the "virtual military/entertainment complex" mentioned above,[63] which was developed by the US Department of Defense in collaboration with various entertainment outlets to positively influence the public perception of the US military. When looking at *America's Army* more closely, however, a discrepancy between core American values and those propagated in the game becomes noticeable: for the soldier to be successful, a person needs to be docile and follow the seven basic values of the US Army: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.[64] These values promoted by the US Army are in clear opposition to the ones embellished by *America's Army*. Rather, the seven core values resemble closely what Foucault wrote about the seventeenth-century soldier, who can be molded and formed as needed for the purposes of the authoritative state power.[65] In other words, the values of the US Army are incompatible with ideas of American Exceptionalism as individualism, which does not stop the military-entertainment complex from selling both sets of values as utterly American. The image of the lone wolf therefore sits uncomfortably with the US (or any) military system, while it seems to epitomize the concept of American Exceptionalism with its focus on the hyper-individualized subject.

Conclusion

Our article has shown that Cold War-themed videogames draw on many ideas associated with the relationship between knowledge and power. Unlike the more linear historical development of power discourses from docility to individuality, however, these videogames mix elements from various eras. As a result, docility and individuality can be and are present simultaneously without resulting in discrepancies. Videogames' capacity to do so is partly owed to the relationship between values of American Exceptionalism and the celebratory status of the Armed Forces in the United States. The focus on positive associations with American values also has the effect that these videogames can potentially influence our awareness of Cold War epistemes because the subjective world they create is biased, particularly due to their focus on the US as the supposedly triumphant victor of conflicts from which the US did not emerge victorious. While videogames do not primarily distribute information, they nonetheless possess the potential for impacting our historical knowledge.

Political processes and programs have been popular topics in videogames. One reason for this prominence is the simplistic worldview reality *and* fiction try to paint, articulated in simple "good versus evil" topoi. While many (Cold War) games, notably pre-1990s titles, articulate this unmitigated contrast between good and bad in ref-

erence to institutions of authority, such as the governmental system, later games move it to an individualized level. However, while the "good" and righteous US-associated character is portrayed as an individualized subject, the communist-led enemy is still painted as a faceless collective. Throughout their history, Cold War-themed videogames have thus utilized many of the concepts Foucault analyzed in the context of the relationship between power and knowledge. Games therefore possess the capacity to present power structures in their storyworlds, while they themselves can also potentially function as generators of historical discourses due to their portrayal of power and the subsequent knowledge they form.

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65 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.

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Working-Class Labor in Postapocalyptic America

Affect, Politics, and the "Forgotten Man" in *Death Stranding*

Stefan Schubert

Abstract

This article examines Hideo Kojima's 2019 *Death Stranding* as a postapocalyptic video game intent on evoking a particular kind of "Americanness." I analyze the game for its textual and cultural politics, arguing that it reconstructs a vision of the United States that is not just built on older myths like that of westward expansion and rugged individualism but that also evokes a more contemporary trope of the "forgotten man." In my reading, *Death Stranding* champions not just any person as the potential savior of America but it specifically marks its protagonist as a white working-class male, suggesting that this is the kind of person—and the kind of labor that he allegedly performs best—needed to bring the US back together. I trace this argument by examining how the game's visuals, narrative, and gameplay intersect in depicting a postapocalyptic America that evokes the western genre, in affectively guiding its players to feel for the game's protagonist as a "forgotten man," and in how the gameplay's embrace of working-class labor leads to a ludo-affective dissonance that complicates *Death Stranding*'s political project.

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Working-Class Labor in Postapocalyptic America

Affect, Politics, and the "Forgotten Man" in *Death Stranding*

Stefan Schubert

Hideo Kojima's 2019 video game *Death Stranding* presents a particularly striking vision of the postapocalyptic United States: a cataclysmic event (the eponymous "death stranding") has made the landscape uninhabitable and has led to the remaining US population living in isolated underground hubs. They rely on "porters" like the game's protagonist Sam to deliver important items and equipment from one location to the next. These porters, many of whom work for the United Cities of America (UCA), build both literal and metaphorical "bridges" in order to reconnect parts of the United States with each other. Released in November 2019,[1] the game's fictional premise eerily reminded later commentators of the global changes brought on by the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020,[2] with many people sitting at home, isolated and socially distanced, and increasingly dependent on parcel deliveries and new services like no-contact delivery. In this way, the game's postapocalyptic imaginary world soon hit close to home and offered its audience a digital, playable version of a clearly postapocalyptic America that, at the same time, drew parallels to the contemporary (political) landscape not just in terms of its themes but also partly through its speculative setting.

Against this backdrop, in this article, I focus on an ideological reading of *Death Stranding* that analyzes the game's cultural politics and how it taps into mythologized discourses about the US. My analysis of *Death Stranding* goes beyond the predominant themes of the game's reception, which seemed evenly split between celebrating it as another genius invention by the gaming "auteur" Hideo Kojima or deriding it for its slow, convoluted story and its mundane gameplay, jokingly labeling it "the most advanced walking simulator the world has ever seen."[3] Instead focusing on the game's cultural politics, my argument is that in imagining a particular kind of future,

Death Stranding not only evokes well-known American myths such as the frontier and the rugged individualist but also a more recent one—the trope of the "forgotten man": that is, stories that focus on white working-class men as protagonists and stylize them as victims. In my reading, *Death Stranding* champions not just any person as the potential savior of America, but it specifically marks its protagonist as a white working-class male, suggesting that this is the kind of person—and the kind of labor that he allegedly performs best—needed to bring the US back together.

I will pursue this argument about the cultural work that *Death Stranding* does by analyzing how its narrative, visual, and ludic elements intersect. I begin by introducing the game's world as a postapocalyptic America, highlighting how it rests on specifically US-American myths to represent this world, specifically tied to the western. Then, I connect this more general perspective on the game's visuals and its setting to its narrative ambitions, demonstrating how its story both narratively and affectively taps into the trope of the "forgotten man." Finally, by taking the gameplay into consideration more closely, I identify a ludo-affective disconnect in the game's political ambitions, which principally revolves around the representation of the working class and the neoliberal embrace of the role of labor in (postapocalyptic) US society.

Postapocalyptic America

Death Stranding is difficult to pinpoint as a game—that is, what (game) genre(s) it adheres to has been a matter of debate. Even before the game's release, Kojima promoted the idea that it might lead to an entirely new genre of "strand" games.[4] Most generally, *Death Stranding* could be seen as an action game that provides players with a third-person perspective on their protagonist Sam, controlling him through the environment. Careful navigation through the terrain is the main principle of engaging with the world, since Sam is tasked with bringing different kinds of (sometimes fragile) cargo from one location to another; he often travels on foot—with loads of equipment attached to his body—but later also on a motorcycle and in a truck, and he interacts with the environment by constructing bridges or using ladders and ropes. Although there are also combat and stealth elements, the gameplay centrally revolves around the transportation of goods while traversing hazardous environments and difficult-to-reach areas. For instance, when climbing through a mountainous region, maintaining Sam's physical balance so that he does not drop and damage any of the cargo is often the main challenge. These tasks complement the game's central storyline of Sam having to reconnect parts of America with each other by bringing certain hubs back into the network as he delivers cargo to them, a job he performs at the behest of the government-like entity of the UCA and its main leaders.[5]

Overall, the game's visuals, setting, and general narrative premise evoke a postapocalyptic world that is at the same time distinctly US-American. This goes beyond the actual physical setting of *Death Stranding* in the continental US and includes numerous subtler and more mythical references to the United States' national imagination. Specifically, in how the game portrays a postapocalyptic world and narrative, it essentially follows the pattern of the ur-American genre of the western. In this sense, while its game genre is harder to define and its "narrative" genre is certainly also a generic hybrid (among others, it is also very clearly postapocalyptic science fiction), I would argue that aspects of the western are at the core of its narrative and semantic interests. As part of a recent trend towards postapocalyptic video games, *Death Stranding* can thus be seen to follow the framework of the "post-apocalyptic cowboy" who "mistrust[s] or learn[s] to mistrust large communities."[6] Next to some basic plot and character elements (for instance, imagining Sam as a cowboy, having traded a horse for a motorcycle), this extends to the mythology of the western as well, since *Death Stranding* champions some of the ideas inherent in the myth of the frontier, the rugged individualist, westward expansion, and, thus, American exceptionalism.[7]

These myths are evident in the game's basic narrative drive: the overall task of "resurrecting" America and (re)creating a union by connecting individual underground hubs and cities with each other is imagined similarly to the narrative of westward expansion characteristic of the western genre, as the game's overview of showing the "Chiral Network Coverage" suggests (Illustration 1). As the map shows, Sam starts out in Washington, D.C., which in the game is referred to as "Capital Knot City," and from there he has to go west. As players progress through the game, more and more dots on the map are connected to each other, until they arrive on the West Coast, dubbed the "Western Region" in the game. The map, with the stars of the UCA logo superimposed on it, thus tracks Sam's progress and encourages players to continuously move west in what is essentially a civilizing quest: the areas to the west are imagined as the unconnected "wilderness," and bringing them into the UCA network is akin to bringing "civilization" to areas imagined as barren, underdeveloped, and generally empty space. Although some of the more remote "preppers" are initially hesitant to joining the network, the actual process of connecting them to the UCA is generally framed positively—Viktor Frank of Port Knot City, for instance, wants Sam to "usher [them] into a new chiral age" and tells him that they have been "waiting forever and a day for this."[8] Hence, just like the liminal figure of the cowboy protagonist in the prototypical western, it is only Sam who knows how to properly navigate between wilderness and civilization, continuously moving the line of the "frontier" westward while not immersing himself too much in the "civilized" communities, as he has to leave these cities again to continue west.

Illustration 1: Map showing the "Chiral Network Coverage."
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

The mythical iconography of the western—and the implicit binary oppositions that come with it—is also evoked in the visual representation of the game's landscape. Next to narrative cutscenes that force players into specific story sequences, players are free to navigate the game's open world and position the camera accordingly, being able to look around the environment. However, at numerous points, the game imbues the open-world exploration with more meaning because after certain story triggers or when arriving at a location for the first time, a particular song (usually with vocals) is being played. In such instances, the song and artist are displayed on the screen, for instance the track "Asylums For The Feeling feat. Leila Adu" by Silent Poets when players approach Port Knot City for the first time (Illustration 2). This feature increases the affective significance of that particular sequence, suggesting to players that they have achieved something important or that they should take a moment to reflect on their surroundings. In Illustration 2, for instance, the natural, rocky landscape in the foreground that the player is traversing is set up in contrast to the industrial cityscape seen in the distance. From this particular space, Sam then has to navigate his way down the sloped and rocky surface until he arrives at the outskirts of the underground hub. The visual division between rural wilderness and urban "civilization," with Sam negotiating between the two spaces, presents a significant parallel to the western as well, enhanced in its narrative significance by the careful use of vocalized, emotional music.

Although a call to community is key to the game's main plot, *Death Stranding* also

Illustration 2: Sam on a motorcycle looking over Port Knot City.
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

subscribes to the importance of a "rugged individualist" facilitating this kind of unity. Similar to the protagonist in westerns,[9] Sam is portrayed as a loner, unable to join any of these communities or form bonds with people. Sam even suffers from "aphenphosmphobia," the fear of being touched, to emphasize his isolated, misanthropic attitude. While he encounters a number of other characters throughout his journey, the main tasks are all performed alone by the player as Sam, whose name's evocation of "Uncle Sam" further cements how interested the game is in telling a story specifically about the United States. In this way, the game's plot follows a stereotypical hero myth of one particular individual being able to save the world, and Sam's "legendary" status among the UCA is frequently mentioned by the people he meets and connects to the network. The game seems aware of this stereotype, for instance when the character Heartman tells Sam, "As cliché as it sounds, you're our only hope."[10] Yet the mere self-reflexive awareness of these tropes does not diminish their narrative impact,[11] as this is exactly how the game imagines a solution to the desperation brought about by the apocalyptic event of the death stranding: what is needed are the heroic efforts of one single person (specifically a white working-class man).

In addition to this adherence to the western formula and ideology in the game's narrative premise, *Death Stranding* also includes more overt references to the actual United States and the time of the game's release. For instance, the game features an extensive database that collects texts about the world and the people who inhabit it, among them interviews with and emails from some of the preppers Sam meets

on his journey. One of these, called "The Elder," makes explicit references to what he calls the "America of the Past," saying that, as an immigrant, he "even bought into the American Dream for a minute" because "they let a black guy and a woman take a shot at the presidency." After, however, he recalls that "people became so damned … intolerant" and that "we even elected a guy right before the Death Stranding that wanted to build a wall along the whole border."[12] Clearly evoking Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump in all but name, the game here is quite explicit in explaining how its fantastic postapocalyptic scenario engages with the backdrop of the United States of the late 2010s, even chronologically tying its cataclysmic event directly to the Trump presidency. While the character of The Elder is first presented as disillusioned with the promise of America because of the kind of national character that became visible through Trump's election, Sam's actions can eventually convince him to join the UCA, but only with him insisting that "you damn well better make sure that you do right by each and every American … That's the social contract."[13] This minor character stands symbolically for the overall idea behind the game's quest to have Sam reunite and thus rebuild the US: there is disillusionment with the current (or past) political landscape and its divisiveness, but there is also still hope that things can get better if everybody trusts, helps, and relies on each other again. By tying this idea directly to the Trump presidency, *Death Stranding* expresses political ambitions, centered around the importance of unity and human connection. This notion of community, however, stands at odds with the game's western-inspired individualism, and it is curiously motivated by a politically reactionary appeal to embrace the figure of the white working-class man in particular.

The Trope of the "Forgotten Man"

Death Stranding's depiction of the possibility to reunite and rebuild the United States after the apocalypse—and how the game wants its players to emotionally invest in this idea—does not just follow the established myths tied to the western but also taps into what could be called the trope of the "forgotten man." This term refers to (both political and pop-cultural) representations of white working-class men as allegedly "forgotten" and neglected in public discourse, a misconceived idea that has become increasingly popular in mainstream film during the 2010s, slightly preceding Trump's presidential campaign. In fact, the phrase "forgotten man" has a longer history in the US, first used prominently by William Graham Sumner in a series of essays in 1883 and then later picked up by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in quite a different meaning, and by other presidents as well.[14] In these contexts, the "forgotten man" is mostly used as a political and arguably populist tool, to point to an allegedly neglected part of society, sometimes the working class, sometimes the middle class. More recently, however, in his 2017 inauguration address, Donald Trump referred to

"closed . . . factories" and "struggling families all across our land," claiming that "the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer."[15] While the vagueness of who exactly Trump was referring to was part of the appeal, the images used to describe this portion of society were distinctly working-class. A particularly explicit evocation of this image, the 2011 painting *The Forgotten Man* by the conservative political artist Jon McNaughton, depicts past US presidents (especially but not only Democrats, and particularly Barack Obama) showing no interest in a man relegated to the painting's bottom left.[16] The person is clearly marked as a man, a white man, and through his shirt, his boots, and his jeans, also as working-class. Politicians are not paying any attention to that particular part of society, the painting seems to suggest—in turn, Trump framed his electoral upset also as a kind of redemption for this segment of the US population.

While such a trope had been present in US popular culture long before Trump was elected, there has been a surge of similar stories around his election, also in films and other media texts that might not follow an avowedly conservative project but that nevertheless tap into this backlash discourse. This includes, for instance, the films *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), *Hell or High Water* (2016), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Leave No Trace* (2019) as well as, to different degrees, the 2019 *Ad Astra* and *Joker* as well as the television shows *Ozark* (Netflix, 2017–2022) and *Fargo* (FX, 2014–). On some level, they all feature what Jack Halberstam calls "white men behaving sadly": they depict "a world where the white working class man has no power," for instance having "a really bad job," suffering from the "burden of parenthood," or facing "verbal abuse from women and people of color." And yet these characters take center stage in these worlds; as Halberstam phrases it: "All the bad things that happen around him, are *his* bad things," disregarding the fact that the "tragedy from which the white man suffers is of his own making."[17] In these media texts, the audience is supposed to feel for and with these characters—that is, they are narratively and cinematographically designed in a way to afford feelings of pity and empathy for their protagonists because they seem neglected, disregarded, and without power or agency—despite their privileged status as white men.[18]

Such stories can be seen as part of a larger discourse of white masculinity "in crisis." As Sally Robinson argues, in a number of recent fictional texts, "we . . . see white men taking up the position of rebel or resistance fighter, fighting the power and the status quo. The irony, of course, is that the status quo is embodied, these somewhat paranoid narratives suggest, in the minority." A "collective white male identity" is then forged "around claims of victimization," "a fantasy that . . . requires the erasure of systemic and institutionalized white and male privilege."[19] Intersectionally speaking, the designation "working-class" then risks becoming "the identity of last resort for those, mainly white men, left out of other identity categories."[20] It is within this

ideological paradox that stories about the American "forgotten men" depict them being constrained by their wives, feeling lost and not "valued" by society anymore, suggesting to their audience that these protagonists should be pitied for things happening to them, disregarding their agency. Such narrative patterns also work across media and can be traced in *Death Stranding* as well, which is thus an example of adapting the forgotten-man trope not only to the genres of science fiction or dystopia but also to the medium of video games.[21]

The game's protagonist, Sam, is closely modeled after actor Norman Reedus, a fact that was pointed out repeatedly in trailers for the game and that is metatextually referenced in the game's world as well.[22] This extratextual element characterizes him as male and white, something that the diegetic world also strengthens, for instance through the inclusion of nonwhite characters like Die-Hardman, who, in turn, mark Sam's whiteness. While the postapocalyptic world of *Death Stranding* is in many ways structured radically differently from the contemporary US, there are still elements in the game that mark Sam as working-class. This includes the casting of Norman Reedus, who is best known for portraying the character of Daryl Dixon in the television show *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–2022),[23] initially introduced as a "redneck" and expert in hunting and tracking, along with other lower-class stereotypes. In addition to this intertextual nod, it is especially Sam's primary job that links him to the realities of America's working class, with the focus on hard manual labor as a delivery person (something that I will return to in the final section). Plus, there are smaller elements, like his fondness of motorcycles, his anti-authoritarian attitude, and stand-your-ground stance, that function as expressions of "working-class culture,"[24] which together construct an intersecting identity of a white male heterosexual working-class protagonist.

Portraying Sam in an affectively similar way to forgotten-man stories mainly works through his backstory, which is gradually unraveled in the game. Throughout most of *Death Stranding*, Sam is characterized as a disillusioned individual, seemingly pessimistic about the future of the United States, and generally sad and sulky in his everyday encounters. While he accomplishes the things that are asked of him, he does so in a notably dispassionate and indifferent manner. As players find out in the course of the game, one of the reasons for that is a traumatic past: Sam has a special connection to the world of the dead, and he is able to resurrect (or "repatriate," in the game's lingo) after dying. The revelation of the consequences of this condition eventually led his wife, Lucy, to commit suicide while pregnant with their unborn child. Her death, in turn, caused what the game refers to as a "voidout," a massive explosion that killed everybody in her vicinity, with only Sam—as a repatriate—surviving. Not only is Sam grieving this loss, he also blames himself for it. Apparently unable to cope with the guilt he feels, his isolation and detachment from the world seem to work as

a kind of martyrdom for him, not wanting to associate himself with anybody again for fear of what happened to Lucy. Overall, this is a remarkably similar plot setup and affective revelation to a film like *Manchester by the Sea*, whose "sad" protagonist also blames himself for having caused the death of his children and who, as a consequence, goes throughout life in a detached and isolated manner, not wanting to associate himself with other people because he feels he does not "deserve" the joy that could come from that.

This kind of vulnerable masculinity is further established through the game's interest in fatherhood. On the one hand, players gradually witness how Sam forms a bond with his "BB," an unborn baby that he carries with him in a special pod in order to connect to the world of the dead. He later names the baby Lou, in reference to his own unborn child, who was supposed to be called Louise. This embrace of fatherhood is paralleled in his own experience of growing up without a father. Another character in the game, Cliff, who is technically dead but continues to roam in the world of the living, is shown continually searching for his BB. Via flashbacks, players see that he had lost his wife and later his unborn son, as well. Throughout the game's plot, Cliff follows and haunts Sam presumably because the latter is carrying Cliff's son, the BB Sam has named Lou—players learn about this through flashbacks as well, which Sam seems to have access to thanks to his connection to Lou. However, at the end of the game, it is revealed that Cliff's unborn son turned out to be Sam, which is why Sam is experiencing these memories.[25] In a fantastic flashback sequence, Sam and Cliff get to interact, and Cliff tells Sam that "being a father . . . didn't make [him] scared. It made [him] brave," referring to Sam as "[his] son" and "[his] bridge to the future."[26] This particular cutscene shows Sam looking at a dying Cliff, sitting on the floor and holding baby Sam in his arms (Illustration 3), with father and (the older version of the) son around the same age. Cliff holds baby Sam similarly to how the adult Sam keeps Lou close to his body throughout the game, establishing the importance of fatherhood through this parallel but also highlighting the exceptional role Sam plays for the story of saving postapocalyptic America as a person being able not just to be reborn but also to encounter a younger version of himself.

Through this complicated narrative setup, *Death Stranding* features two fathers who mourn the loss of their wives and children and who blame themselves for that, and the game also links them directly as father and son. Sam is thus doubly betrayed by fatherhood, having lacked a proper father himself and being indirectly responsible for his son not being born.[27] Fatherhood thus adds a more sensitive side to Sam's "rough" working-class exterior, aligning with constructions of masculinity along paradigms of the "new man" and the "new father."[28] The game primarily uses Sam's desire for fatherhood and the plot's tragic denial of it to turn him into a figure to more easily sympathize with, feel bad for, and recognize as vulnerable and powerless. Such an

Illustration 3: Cutscene showing Sam, Cliff, and baby Sam.
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

overemphasis on masculine suffering aligns with the notion of "crisis" that Sally Robinson notes is both performative in itself and constitutive of the discourse of masculinity, "as the rhetoric of crisis performs the cultural work of centering attention on dominant masculinity."[29] In the game, fatherhood and being a husband are portrayed as aspects that make Sam vulnerable, and the game wants its players to feel with Sam because it depicts these tragic events as having happened to Sam in a way that made him feel powerless. However, this idea contradicts Sam's depiction in the rest of the game, where he actively, and almost by himself, follows the clichéd plot of saving the world, a display of hegemonic masculinity that is far removed from the notion of a powerless person lacking agency. This, in turn, aligns him with the power white men have traditionally enjoyed in the game's pre-apocalyptic world and seem to continue to hold on to in the postapocalypse. Overall, this setup centralizes the family, and fatherhood in particular, as a source of anxiety for men, and it does so while sidelining or downright excluding mothers from this construction. As Korine Powers has pointed out, the way in which Sam has to carry his BB with him the entire time while being encumbered by the weight of his cargo simulates some aspects of a pregnancy, which adds to how the game casts masculinity as paramount in questions of survival and reproduction. In the game's logic, reuniting and recreating the United States necessitates the discursive power of masculinity.[30]

The game's story of Sam is thus one of guilt and redemption. Similar to how Cliff wanted to achieve some purpose in his life after having lost his wife by endlessly

searching for his son, Sam accepts the task of traveling westward in order to reconnect the UCA as a way to atone for his guilt. In the process, he also forms a new bond with Lou, mirroring Cliff's "final" encounter with his adult son (Illustration 3). While this works out narratively on the individual character level, affectively, by following the game's story from Sam's point of view, players are encouraged to believe in this idea of redemption as well, which depends on Sam's status as sad or "forgotten." With this, however, *Death Stranding* ambiguously connects to the reactionary idea inherent in Donald Trump's evocation of the forgotten man: the suggestion that white men are actually to be pitied for not being in the cultural spotlight of US society anymore. While the game's overall story advocates for a sense of community and bonding, this appears at odds with a belief in having to recuperate the allegedly lost power of white men in America. Politically, this sets up the contradictory affective regime of the game in terms of its affective affordances: players are meant to feel for Sam, to recognize him as "broken" because of his failures as a father, as a husband, even as a son. At the same time, he symbolizes the enduring power of white masculinity in the game's world. Thus, the way in which *Death Stranding* connects its investment in certain affective structures with a narrative backdrop that contextualizes its events in an explicitly political context is also how it evokes what Soraya Murray calls "political affect," a "diffuse structure of what Ann Cvetkovich has described as "relations between the emotional, the cultural and the political."[31] To recognize Sam as a victim, then, seems to build, in Robinson's phrasing, on "a fantasy that … requires the erasure of … white and male privilege."[32] This fantasy is maintained through the trope of the forgotten man and its explicit evocation of "working-class-ness": similar to other forgotten-man stories, the game tries to downplay the power and agency that comes with Sam's status as a white man by also marking him as quasi-working-class.

Working-Class Labor and Ludo-Affective Dissonance

Of course, social classes as known from the actual United States do not necessarily exist in *Death Stranding*'s postapocalyptic world anymore, and there is generally not enough insight into how society is structured to be able to discuss the game's representation of class on a larger scale. Likewise, when following an understanding of class as being about "the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result,"[33] Sam could actually be considered the most powerful character in the game, since he is set up as America's savior, controlled by the player. Yet narratively, he follows the orders of others, especially political actors associated with the UCA. At the same time, through aspects like lifestyle, status, and habitus, and in Sam's actual actions and character design, he is marked as working-class through class markers known from the pre-apocalyptic US,

and this is how questions of class intersect with Sam's whiteness and masculinity.

In addition to the more general markers I already mentioned previously, it is especially the gameplay that aligns Sam with the working class—his main tasks and actions resemble the job of a person who works in parcel delivery (bundled with some elements of a construction worker). The game's many missions usually consist of bringing some kind of cargo from one location to another, for which Sam has to plan his route and equipment carefully. Cargo has specific weight and comes in different sizes, limiting how much can be carried on a particular trip. For maximum efficiency, players can engage in inventory management in order to optimize the best ratio between weight/size of the cargo and potential rewards (and in relation to possible risk). When traversing the environment, players have to be careful not to damage their cargo and to balance Sam's center of gravity through the controls; by using environmental tools like ladders and ropes, they can cross rivers and climb mountains. Routes can be planned in advance, and Sam's health and stamina have to be managed just as much as equipment durability. All of these gameplay mechanics try to simulate various aspects of the job of planning and carrying out parcel deliveries; the focus on "min-maxing" one's rewards according to how much and how fast one can deliver cargo follows a neoliberal logic based on delivery rates that is similar to how many real-life parcel delivery services treat their employees.[34]

Added to this kind of job are tasks of literally building roads, bridges, and other kinds of infrastructure to connect locations with each other. Repairing the roads of America's highway system requires materials that other missions provide as rewards; in turn, the finished roads make it easier to traverse the vast landscapes with vehicles. All of these elements add to how Sam is marked as working-class, but arguably on a more significant level, since rather than "only" being about how the game looks and what kind of story players witness, this concerns how *Death Stranding* works and how exactly players get to interact with the world.[35] Similar to many forgotten-man films, this is also how *Death Stranding* can be understood as setting up its affective regime, in order to avoid the contradiction I highlighted above: the game suggests that it is okay to feel (bad) for Sam, because he is not a powerful white man but a disenfranchised working-class hustler. In turn, *Death Stranding* suggests that what is needed to bring the United States back together is exactly this kind of working-class labor, which the game implies Sam, as a white man, performs best, achieving legendary status as a porter.[36]

The idea of the white working-class man as "forgotten" and as thus lending himself more easily to being felt for and victimized is generally flawed and overly simplistic, but in *Death Stranding*, an additional complication arises due to the game's ludic nature: the working-class labor that players perform in the game is actually fun—or,

at least, it is supposed to be the main source of pleasure in the game. Judging from the split reaction to the game, this might not have worked for everybody, but optimizing how many orders to take, how much cargo players can carry, to which location to go first and then pick up something on the way to neatly line up toward other destinations, or collecting material to build another road, or planning out so-called "zip-lines" for the perfect delivery shortcut, and basically almost all of the many mechanics in the game feed into a particular kind of pleasure tied to planning and organizing efficiently. In a way, it is the pleasure gained from managing loads of data, visualized and made playable in a fantastically postapocalyptic and often stunningly beautiful world. In terms of difficulty, these tasks are not particularly hard to complete, but they are certainly often tedious, with very long distances having to be covered in a repetitive manner. The spectacular backdrop of the postapocalypse against which these tasks take place helps hide this monotony, as does the stream of new regions Sam has to explore and the increasing amount of tools and new gadgets that are provided to him.

These aspects of *Death Stranding*'s design lead to a particular disconnect: since, for the game to be successful as a mainstream title, playing it should be fun, *Death Stranding* is invested in making the tasks players have to perform enjoyable as well, which in turn does not make them seem like hard manual labor but appear as a fun activity with immediate gratification. This is not an instance of "ludonarrative dissonance,"[37] though, since the game's narrative does not comment much on the difficulty of Sam's tasks. Instead, it is a contrast between the game's ludic core and the affective regime I examined before: in order to genuinely feel for Sam as disenfranchised and powerless, the game marks his identity also as working-class, and while this works on a narrative level, it does not succeed on a ludic one. Even though Sam might think of the missions he has to perform as difficult or tedious, this is not the case for how these gameplay aspects have been designed—for players to enjoy. Accordingly, this is instead an instance of "ludo-affective dissonance," a disconnect between how the game wants players to feel about something in the game or how a character might feel about it and how it is actually like to play it.[38] Unlike in a film such as *Manchester by the Sea*, where the audience gets to witness that the protagonist does not enjoy the monotonous custodial work he performs, the kind of work that Sam does cannot feel like a particular hardship to players since the game is invested in making it fun. Consequently, Sam's status as a working-class figure does not manage to intersect with his whiteness and masculinity in a way that would justify feeling pity for him for lacking power or agency—to the contrary. Ultimately, this dissonance is why the game cannot avoid the reactionary political undertones that it evokes by tapping into the forgotten-man discourse.

Finally, *Death Stranding*'s embrace of working-class labor is also connected to a

distinctly neoliberal and capitalist ideology.[39] After all, the better players perform their deliveries, the higher their "score" and the potential rewards they receive. There are multiple systems at work to incentivize players to do well on these tasks, most visible in the results screen that is displayed after every completed mission (Illustration 4). The delivery itself receives a score, in addition to certain bonuses, such as for how heavy or undamaged the cargo was. Using new delivery routes, and being as efficient as possible with respect to the distance traveled, also gains additional rewards, which are tracked as "likes" Sam receives from the person they delivered to. These likes level up Sam's stats, and individual likes from one specific recipient also raise the "connection level" Sam has with them, conferring further rewards. That the rewards are framed as *likes* between the different characters also highlights how they build up an affective community, or rather economy,[40] that maintains this circulation of labor. In addition to a score, the delivery receives an overall rating (which tracks "new records" for that particular mission), and the game attaches achievements to the different kinds of deliveries, adding to a mixture of stats and likes audibly being tallied up after every mission (Illustration 4).

This additional kind of data connects to an overall effort of gamifying the relatively tedious, monotonous, and repetitive tasks Sam has to perform, to make them more fun by being able to track oneself, collect data, look up statistics, try again to improve one's numbers, etc. This way of tracking labor aligns with the neoliberal realities of many contemporary working-class jobs,[41] and it masks the actual monotony and exploitation of much working-class labor. In fact, adhering to these kinds of systems also relates to the game's overall vision of how to reconnect America. While many of its characters and the UCA purport that this is about reestablishing *human* connections, what accomplishes this on the level of gameplay is consumerism: ordering and delivering cargo—connections through goods, through capital. The game follows this capitalist and consumerist idea mostly uncritically. This creates a conflict with elements of the game's story that want to criticize the lack of civility or humanity that characterized the game's United States before the death stranding: after all, the general arc of the story contrasts the "wall" that one of the characters mentions Trump wanted to build with the "bridge" that Sam represents both individually for Cliff and more generally for the communities he has reconnected to the UCA. The game's political project, then, is ultimately fraught with contradictions, and in how *Death Stranding* highlights as essential the working-class labor of its protagonist as a "forgotten man," it embraces and reiterates the trope that it wants to criticize in its mockery of Trump-style politics based on division instead of human connections.

Illustration 4: Results screen after completing a mission.
Screenshot from *Death Stranding* © Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019.

Conclusion

By having examined how *Death Stranding* evokes a particularly American kind of (post)apocalypse and ties it to the western, how its affective regimes build on a forgotten-man story centered around fatherhood, and how its embrace of working-class labor in its gameplay leads to a ludo-affective dissonance, I hope to have shown how *Death Stranding* taps into a similar affective logic as other stories focused on the figure of the forgotten man. The game tries to legitimize a victimization of its protagonist because he is not just a white man but also a working-class one, alongside being portrayed as a failed husband, father, and son. While that is a reductive logic to begin with, the move of this type of story from television and film to game—or from "analog" to digital, interactive, and playable narrative—does not quite pan out because of how *Death Stranding* makes playable, and in turn romanticizes, the monotonous and hard labor of the working class. This is not necessarily a dynamic that the game seems to be aware of, leading to an ambiguous and contradictory political project due to the combination of narrative, ludic, and affective elements at work in the game. As a contemporary cultural artifact that combines older narratives about the US with newly imagined speculative worlds, this reading of the game's politics also reemphasized that this kind of romanticization of white working-class labor is very much at the core of earlier mythical narratives of the US (such as the western) as well, where it usually worked in just as contradictory a manner. The genealogies between such established myths and newer imaginaries certainly merit

further studies, particularly for digital narratives found in video games, and perhaps especially for texts and games that are sometimes deemed "auteur" fiction. Kojima's *Death Stranding* belongs to a category of games that certainly try to experiment with narrative and world-building elements or that could be called "radical" in terms of their gameplay, but their politics often lag behind these innovative ambitions.

Notes

1 All references to *Death Stranding* in this article are to the 2019 PS4 version of the game.

2 Brian Ashcraft, "*Death Stranding* Makes More Sense Now Than Ever," *Kotaku Australia*, March 16, 2020, https://www.kotaku.com.au/2020/03/death-stranding-makes-more-sense-now-than-ever/; Todd Martens, "From My Coronavirus Quarantine, a Love Letter to Video Games," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-26/love-letter-to-video-games-in-a-time-of-coronavirus; Rich Stanton, "*Death Stranding* Hits Even Harder in Lockdown's Aftermath," *PC Gamer*, April 13, 2022, https://www.pcgamer.com/death-stranding-hits-even-harder-in-lockdowns-aftermath/.

3 Jade King, "Two Years Later, *Death Stranding* Is Still A Misunderstood Masterpiece," *TheGamer*, November 8, 2021, https://www.thegamer.com/death-stranding-anniversary-misunderstood-masterpiece/; David Richards, "Hideo Kojima: The Making of a Video Game Auteur," *GamesIndustry.biz*, November 19, 2021, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2021-11-19-hideo-kojima-the-making-of-a-video-game-auteur; Russ Frushtick, "*Death Stranding* Review: Hideo Kojima Tries to Make Fetch Happen," *Polygon*, November 1, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2019/11/1/20942070/death-stranding-review-hideo-kojima-ps4.

4 Robin Meyer-Lorey, "*Death Stranding*: Is It Really a New Genre?" *Game Rant*, November 24, 2019, https://gamerant.com/death-stranding-genre-new/.

5 As mentioned, the game's exact plot is quite convoluted and builds on a few narrative tropes typical of speculative fiction, but in this article, I will only detail those aspects of the story that are relevant for my argument.

6 Óliver Pérez-Latorre, "Post-Apocalyptic Games, Heroism and the Great Recession," *Game Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019), http://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre.

7 John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 46, 57.

8 *Death Stranding*, dev. Kojima Productions (San Mateo: Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019).

9 Lydia R. Cooper, *Masculinities in Literature of the American West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

10 *Death Stranding*.

11 This is similar in a scene between Sam and Amelie, when Sam tells her, "So I'm Mario and you're Princess Peach." While the game points to its awareness of the damsel-in-distress trope in which the video game character Mario has to save the princess, it nevertheless follows a similar pattern.

12 *Death Stranding*.

13 *Death Stranding*.

14 Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

15 "Full Text: 2017 Donald Trump Inauguration Speech Transcript," *Politico*, accessed July 21, 2022, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907.

16 Jon McNaughton, "The Forgotten Man," *McNaughton Fine Art Company*, accessed July 21, 2022, https://jonmcnaughton.com/patriotic/the-forgotten-man/.

17 Jack Halberstam, "White Men Behaving Sadly," in *Unwatchable*, ed. Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 276–79; emphasis added.

18 That is, my interest here lies not in the empirical emotional experience of one particular player but in how the game has been designed in order to afford (or encourage) a particular kind of feeling while playing due to its narrative, audiovisual, ludic, etc. structure, an understanding of affordances that owes to Caroline Levine. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

19 Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 7–8.

20 Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald, "Introduction," in *Literature, Class, and Culture: An Anthology*, ed. Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 8.

21 The (post)western, in turn, lends itself more easily to the forgotten-man trope through its embrace of the cowboy figure; *Hell or High Water* would be one recent example.

22 For instance, when using a certain type of motorcycle, Sam occasionally cries out: "I feel so fucking cool right now. I feel like *Ride with Norman Reedus* is happening right now," referencing an actual travel show on AMC.

23 The character has since received his own spin-off series with *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon* (AMC, 2023–).

24 Sarah Attfield, *Class on Screen: The Global Working Class in Contemporary Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 59–61.

25 The game wants its players to be further emotionally invested in its story by presenting this revelation as a twist, a moment of narrative instability that is built on the ambiguous identities of some of the game's characters and that is enabled by how the storyworld's realms of the living and of the dead intersect, destabilizing time and space. On this notion of narrative instability in contemporary popular culture, see Stefan Schubert, *Narrative Instability: Destabilizing Identities, Realities, and Textualities in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019).

26 *Death Stranding*.

27 Yet it is exactly this kind of fatherly suffering that eventually changes Sam's characterization as a western loner, since the ending seems to suggest that he is embracing his fatherly role again by resorting to take care of Lou—after his own father told him that having a child made him "brave," not "scared," apparently valuing bravery as a stereotypically masculine trait.

28 Elizabeth Podnieks, "Introduction: Pops in Pop Context," in *Pops in Pop Culture: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the New Man*, ed. Elizabeth Podnieks (New York: Palgrave Macmil-

lan, 2016), 15.

29 Robinson, *Marked Men*, 11.

30 Powers thus points out how the game "coopts symbols of female pregnancy to tell stories of male legacy and authorship," imagining "a future where men imbue the world with new life, while women's bodies and pain are beautifully rendered on screen but ultimately stillborn." Korine Powers, "Playing Pregnant in *Death Stranding*," Electronic Literature Organization Conference 2020, July 3, 2020, https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2020/asynchronous/talks/19.

31 Soraya Murray, "America Is Dead. Long Live America! Political Affect in *Days Gone*," *European Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 3 (2021), DOI: 10.4000/ejas.17409.

32 Robinson, *Marked Men*, 8.

33 Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 20.

34 Michael Sainato, "14-Hour Days and No Bathroom Breaks: Amazon's Overworked Delivery Drivers," *The Guardian*, March 11, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/mar/11/amazon-delivery-drivers-bathroom-breaks-unions.

35 It is also a significant contrast to most other action games, since these usually center around more spectacular tasks and actions, such as shooting guns, which only play a minor role in *Death Stranding* compared to the comparatively mundane job of delivering parcels.

36 Although this association of white masculinity with the working class is ubiquitous in US popular (and political) culture, the working class in the US does not actually consist of a majority of white men. Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, 48–49. Generally, though, it is significant that *Death Stranding* embraces the importance of manual human labor in the midst of its science fiction setting that is full of technological innovations, whereas in the contemporary US, efforts are being made to automate parcel delivery or use drones or robots. Such delivery bots exist in *Death Stranding* as well, but significantly, compared to the player, they are quite terrible at the job.

37 Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *Bioshock*: The Problem of What the Game Is About," in *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, ed. Drew Davidson (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2009).

38 For an analysis of how another recent postapocalyptic video game, *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), builds on a specific affective relationship between the player and the game's protagonist(s) and how it (albeit more consciously) makes use of instances of ludo-affective dissonance, see Stefan Schubert, "Playing as/against Violent Women: Imagining Gender in the Postapocalyptic Landscape of *The Last of Us Part II*," *Gender Forum*, no. 80 (2021), http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Issue80_Schubert_ViolentWomenTheLastofUs.pdf.

39 For a more in-depth reading of the game along these lines, see Ryan House's "Likers Get Liked" (2020), in which he frames Sam and the other porters as "precarious laborers in a gig economy." Ryan House, "Likers Get Liked: Platform Capitalism and the Precariat in *Death Stranding*," *gamevironments*, no. 13 (2020), 299, DOI: 10.26092/elib/408.

40 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 46. See also House, "Likers Get Liked," 301.

41 Jay Greene, "Amazon's Employee Surveillance Fuels Unionization Efforts: 'It's Not Prison, It's Work,'" *Washington Post*, December 2, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/02/amazon-workplace-monitoring-unions/.

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Staying Human in the Post-Apocalypse

The Frontiers of Individualism in *The Last of Us* and Its Sequel

Valentina Romanzi

Abstract

Naughty Dog's video games *The Last of Us* (2013) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) stage a complex tale of human drama in post-apocalyptic settings, retrieving several features of the Frontier myth. In this essay, I argue that the characters' narrative arc is a post-apocalyptic, American Frontier tale in which the individual and collective levels clash (as they often do in such stories), generating moral challenges for the characters and, in turn, for the player controlling them. Thus, I set out to analyze how TLOU draws on and subverts some of the traditional tropes and characters belonging to the classic American Frontier tradition, investigating a number of issues related to individualism, collectivism, violence, and selfishness.

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Staying Human in the Post-Apocalypse

The Frontiers of Individualism in *The Last of Us* and Its Sequel

Valentina Romanzi

In July 2013, the American video game developer Naughty Dog released *The Last of Us* (TLOU1), followed by a long-awaited sequel, *The Last of Us Part II* (TLOU2) in 2020.[1] Both are third-person action-adventure games set in a post-pandemic world in which the few human survivors must fend off hordes of zombie mutants in order to survive. The events start in 2013, when a new kind of Cordyceps fungus spreads throughout the United States, transforming most of the population into monstrous creatures. The games, which have a fixed, non-modifiable diegesis, give the player control of one of the three main characters: Joel, a smuggler tasked to deliver teenager Ellie to the Fireflies in the hope of using her immunity to the fungus to develop a vaccine; Ellie herself; and Abby, a National Liberation Front fighter who is seeking revenge on Joel for killing her father to save Ellie. As the story unravels, the player is forced to switch characters several times and, in the case of TLOU2, to relive the same three days in Seattle from two diametrically opposed perspectives. As the games retrieve a Frontier setting evocative of the origins of the United States, in what follows I argue that the characters' narrative arc is a post-apocalyptic, American Frontier tale in which the individual and collective level clash (as they often do in such stories), generating moral challenges for the characters and, in turn, for the player controlling them. Thus, I set out to analyze how TLOU draws on and subverts some of the traditional tropes and characters belonging to the classic American Frontier tradition, investigating a number of issues related to individualism, collectivism, violence, and selfishness.

The Last of Us as a Post-Apocalyptic, American Frontier Tale: The Setting, the Tropes

The American Frontier tale, which originated in early Euro-American folklore and

popular writing and later coalesced into the western,[2] has narrated the evolution of the United States and its ideology, glorifying it during its most prolific moments and attempting to address it critically as it started to decline around the 1970s. Set at the American Frontier, the western—especially its filmic version—helped solidify the myth of the lone ranger, the small, tight-knit community surviving in and taming the wilderness, and the fear of a ferocious enemy—be it a cruel outlaw or some "savage Indians." The tension between the individual and the collective level has thus become a staple of classic westerns, mirroring the same attention it has received in historical reconstructions of the real Frontier experience.[3]

The classic western tale set at the Frontier, depicting "man coming to terms with the lawlessness of survival in an untamed frontier, the unrelenting power and cruelty of nature, and slippery notions of good and evil,"[4] started to wane at the tail end of the Vietnam War, signaling a crisis in the ideology it depicted.[5] However, the genre has not disappeared completely; rather, it underwent a transformation that gave rise to a series of texts generally known as "post-westerns." As Neil Campbell has noted, "In the post-West there might live on the haunting presence of the past within the present and future and . . . together these multiple stories provide some fuller and better understanding of the contemporary West itself."[6] Susan Kollin, in her 2007 edited collection *Postwestern Cultures*, also attributes the post-western genre a critical dimension, an intent to reassess and interrogate the narrative of classic western tales.[7] This critical impulse can be found even beyond texts that evidently belong to the western genre, even in its "post" phase. According to Richard Slotkin, in the past fifty years some traits of classic western tales have been absorbed by other genres like science fiction and horror to constitute what he calls "post-Frontier" narratives, in which the "underlying structures of myth and ideology that [have] given the genre its cultural force" have been translated into different settings and contexts, but "violence [remains] as central to these new genre-scenarios as it [has] been to the Western."[8] One such genre lies at the intersection of science fiction and horror, generating post-apocalyptic narratives like TLOU. In these post-Frontier texts, the myth of the Frontier is "inverted" so that the themes recurring in western fiction find a setting which stifles their original optimism, rather than enhance it. In Slotkin's words, "the borders their heroes confront are impermeable to the forces of progress and civilized enlightenment; if anything, the flow of aggressive power runs in the opposite direction, with the civilized world threatened with subjugation to or colonization by the forces of darkness."[9] This inversion is evident in TLOU, where the few human survivors must fend off continuous attacks by the mutants and other violent communities, trying to defend themselves from the aggressive power of "savagery" rather than asserting their "colonizing" power over them.

Diegetically, there are several other elements that configure TLOU1 and, to a lesser extent, TLOU2 as a post-western, post-apocalyptic, American Frontier tale. In terms of characters, John Cawelti identifies three broad types populating western fiction: "the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes."[10] At first glance, such a tripartite division can also be found in TLOU: the small communities featured in the games mirror the original Frontier townspeople in trying to tame the wilderness that has reclaimed most territories in the aftermath of the pandemic; the "savage" infected threaten the precarious civilization restored by these settlements[11]; and the heroes—especially Ellie in TLOU1—attempt to secure the permanence of these new experiments in communal life. Nevertheless, as Michael Fuchs has observed, in TLOU1 "America has forsaken the idealization of the Founding Fathers and the nation's foundational myths—which begs the question as to whether this post-apocalyptic America may still be considered America."[12] In my view, TLOU does portray an American frontier, not just because it uses a traditionally American setting and stages some of the original social dynamics ascribed to the Frontier, but because it seems to be doing so in order to expose them to nuanced criticism—the very goal of the postwestern. In other words, the American setting and "feel" of TLOU serves the specific purpose of highlighting the failure of what once was one of the most self-celebratory narratives of American exceptionalism. As such, the games had to retrieve some of the most recognizable features of western Frontier tales to expose them to critical assessment and showcase the failure of such old systems in a new world.

The nods to the American Frontier setting are most visible in the small communities that exist within the game ecology: the small, protected settlement in Jackson, so evocative of a Frontier shantytown, down to the stables and saloons, and the two warring factions in Seattle, which are reminiscent of (more) contemporary American examples of armed militias and extremist religious communities (Illustration 1), respectively—expressions of a different kind of Frontier.

Jackson, in particular, features the same social structure and values typically associated with the traditional American Frontier. Remarking on the gendered structures of such tales, Brenda M. Boyle argues that "in American westerns (essentially war stories about manifest destiny) the male and thereby masculine individualist cowboy riding alone across the plain is prized over the female and thereby feminine collectivist woman developing a frontier community. Or, in a traditional American war story (ostensibly masculine), males leave to fight heroically at the combat front, while (ostensibly feminine) females remain pitiably at the home front."[13] Despite the modernization of social roles, which is especially noticeable in the two female protagonists, the Frontier community of Jackson is still mostly built around Maria, who is never shown leaving the town, while her husband Tommy and other men routinely

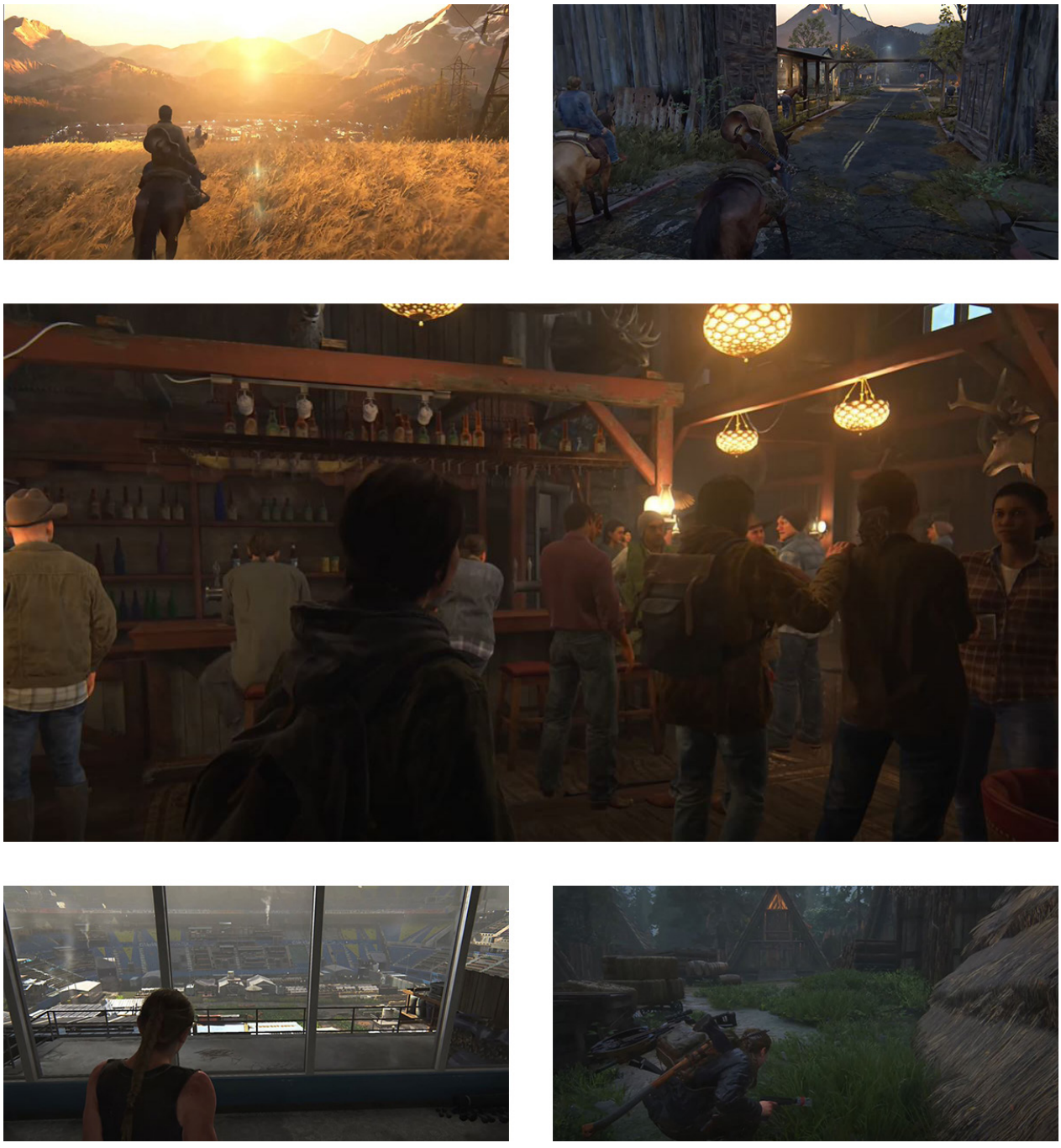

Illustration 1: The small communities evoke the American Frontier.
Screenshots from *The Last of Us* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013, and *The Last of Us Part II* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2020.

go hunting and protect the community from outsiders' attacks. Despite emphasizing this dimension, I do not wish to downplay the overall importance of the decisions made by TLOU's creative team in terms of gendered stereotypes. In TLOU2, the player experiences life in the settlement in more than just brief glimpses, and it is quite evident that the developers put some effort into showing that *not only* men go out hunting and patrolling, and *not only* women take care of the community. Within

the wider video game ecology, moreover, most traditionally "masculine" traits are transferred to both Ellie and Abby—a move that has gathered loud criticism from a small but vocal subset of the fanbase.[14] Nevertheless, Jackson retains enough social dynamics and roles to perpetuate the same social patterns that typified the traditional Frontier outpost—even in the aftermath of an apocalyptic event.

Similarly, the Seraphites, a religious sect controlling the Lower Queen Anne suburb of Seattle (by 2038 isolated from the mainland by several flooding events), reinstate some of America's earliest notions of community. Their connection to the Puritans, who first settled in the Northeast, is evident in their architectural choices (bottom right in Illustration 1) and in the religious teachings and practices they put in place (most evidently, their strict regulation of families and social roles). More broadly, they borrow from several religious doctrines present on American soil, such as the Amish—with their rejection of modern technology—and the Mormons.[15] These scattered examples of communal life in TLOU have a decidedly American feel: in a sense, they are seedlings—primitive, run-down versions of the original experiments that gave birth to the very nation that is trying to resurface from the aftermath of catastrophe. However, whereas the original Puritan settlers, running from a Europe they considered apocalyptic,[16] imagined America as "the site of the new heaven and earth" envisioned in the Book of Revelation, the events in TLOU locate the apocalypse *within* the United States, and what is left of the Promised Land is nothing but ruin and danger. It is a rather different endeavor, then, that the "settlers" in TLOU must undertake: they are not facing the unknown territories of a continent that held the potential reward for their faith, but the monstrous remains of their own civilization, the sad testament to the failure of American society, to face the devastation brought about by the cordyceps epidemic. Thus, the protagonists of TLOU must make their way through eerily familiar locations slowly being reclaimed by nature; they move in and through uncanny spaces whose monstrosity—the very same feature that the first European settlers attributed to the unknown territories of North America[18]—derives not only from the fear of what might hide in these untamed lands but from the sense of loss for a world that would have been deemed safe before the apocalypse. Well-known landmarks are portrayed as both threatening and harshly beautiful, as the landscape slowly elides the traces of civilization and nature takes over spaces once tamed by a human hand,[19] a process well represented by the giraffes roaming Salt Lake City in TLOU1 (Illustration 2).

Of the two games, the first reproduces the path taken by nineteenth-century pioneers more evidently than its sequel, as the player follows the protagonists on a journey from Boston to Jackson, in Wyoming, passing through Pittsburgh. Joel and Ellie then have to double back to Boulder, in Colorado, only to resume moving westward toward Salt Lake City and finally once more back eastward to Jackson. Conversely,

Illustration 2: Giraffes and other wildlife inhabit the vacated former urban centers.
Screenshot from *The Last of Us* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013.

the playable events of the sequel all take place in static locations, mostly Jackson, Seattle, and Santa Barbara, with much less attention to the journey between these cities—an indicator, in a sense, of a shift in diegetic focus and themes in TLOU2. Nevertheless, the second game complements the westward journey begun in the first one: as David Callahan rightly notices, TLOU1 does not take its characters to California, leaving the pioneers' journey incomplete.[20] TLOU2 remedies that, as it moves most of its story to the west coast and ends on the idyllic, usually sunny shore of Santa Barbara, depicted in shades of ominous gray for the last fight between Ellie and Abby. Such a setting also plays an understated but profoundly important role in conveying a post-diegetic message: for the duration of the entire first playthrough, TLOU2 opens on a menu portraying an old boat floating on gray, foggy water, moored to a broken pole. Eventually, the player recognizes it as the boat Abby uses to leave with Lev, the Seraphite child she is traveling with, after Ellie decides not to kill her at the end of the story. Once the first playthrough is completed, the main menu transforms to show the same boat resting on a sunny beach, with Catalina Island visible in the background (Illustration 3). It is the last known location of the Fireflies, and the destination Abby and Lev head for at the end of the game, inferring that they might have reunited with the last survivors of the rebel group. After such a long, gloomy experience, it is a small beacon of hope for the player,[21] and a fitting conclusion of the westward journey started in TLOU1. The player-character's final destination is fixed permanently on a (digital) canvas, a visual memento inhabiting the gray area between realism and romance that Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher attribute to the art

Illustration 3: The main menu changes upon completing the first playthrough.
Screenshots from *The Last of Us Part II* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2020.

produced to accompany the many real-life Frontier expeditions of the nineteenth century.[22]

Individualism, Progress, and Violence at the Post-Apocalyptic American Frontier

TLOU does not only relate to the traditional Frontier in terms of geographical and spatial commonalities. Rather, it continues to converse with, adapt, and at times critique its traditional themes and ideology. For instance, Joel's narrative arc in TLOU1 is indicative of a shift away from the original American hero, whom Slotkin describes as "the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, [whose] acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against the spirit and her avatars."[23] In Joel, there is no love for the wild territories of North America, nor an intention to tame them through violence in order to make space for a civilized community; rather, his violent acts all serve a much more personal purpose. In the sequel, both Ellie's and Abby's story arcs likewise invalidate the western hero trope, as they contaminate Slotkin's argument of violence as a regenerative force by removing its "constructive" power and only staging its "destructive" side. While in traditional Frontier tales violence serves the purpose of establishing Western civilization and is considered regenerative for the European settlers who were looking for a blank slate to create their Eden on earth, in TLOU violence—brutal and extremely graphic, as several reviewers acknowledge[24]—only leads to futile loss. Joel's murder of Abby's father leads to his death, which, in turn, drives Ellie and Tommy to embark on a wild hunt for Abby that ends with several casualties on both sides and, eventually, no happy ending. Although regeneration arguably happens at the end of TLOU2, when Ellie and Abby choose to stop fighting each other and go their separate ways, such a decision yields but a pale substitute of the bounty usually awaiting the traditional Frontier hero, granting them respite rather than a reward.

This rewriting of the classic Frontier tale extends to the underlying ideology

expressed by the western genre. With regard to TLOU1, Michael Fuchs notes that although Joel and Ellie's journey feels "mythical in scope," it does not reproduce the original Frontier ethos completely, as "Joel and Ellie repeatedly stray off well-trodden paths which epitomize the American experience."[25] Of the many features typifying the traditional American Frontier experience, here I only focus on how TLOU engages the strongly held belief in the above-mentioned power—if not inevitability—of human progress as a force that will move civilization forward at and beyond the Frontier, and how such portrayal of progress derives from its relationship with different forms of individualism.

TLOU's gameplay is progress-based: the player is forced to follow a pre-set series of events in a linear way that will increase the completion percentage as they play. However, diegetically TLOU avoids both encouraging and celebrating progress. Despite some scenes hinting at the improvement of the lives of the community that Joel's brother and his wife have founded in Jackson, the few advances made at the collective level are left in the background and often invalidated by the choices of the characters. There are several examples of this, but the most evident are the decisions that end the two games and the one that jumpstarts the action in the second installment.

In TLOU1, after months of looking for the Fireflies in the hope of developing a cure for the cordyceps infection, Ellie and Joel reach the hospital facility in Salt Lake City, where Ellie is meant to be sacrificed for the greater good. Upon learning that the Fireflies are willing to kill Ellie in order to produce a vaccine, the player, acting as Joel, must force their way through several floors, leaving a trail of dead bodies in their wake before reaching the operating room where Ellie is about to be sacrificed. There, Joel shoots the surgeon and nurses. He takes Ellie back to Jackson, swearing that the Fireflies had no use of her because they had already tried and failed to develop a vaccine using other immune subjects. Joel's decision contrasts with the stated goal of their whole journey and Ellie's strong desire to help humanity; it places him in the role of the villain of the story, the one whose decision condemns humanity to continue suffering, as an online reviewer argues.[26] The reactions to such a controversial moment have been as numerous as they have been nuanced, with some players expressing solidarity with, or at least understanding for, Joel's plight and others rejecting his choice as wholly selfish.[27] Setting the moral value of Joel's actions temporarily aside, his decision essentially resets the diegesis, at least in general terms, with the characters and society itself being back to square one: at the end of the events of TLOU1, humanity still has no hope for a cure, Ellie has lost her purpose as a savior of humanity, and her relationship with Joel has been damaged by the suspicion that he is lying to her about the events in Salt Lake City.[28] There is very little to no progress to the overall state of things.

Five years later, the consequences of what transpired at the hospital jumpstart the events of TLOU2: after Abby, the surgeon's daughter, kills Joel to avenge her father's murder, Ellie, her girlfriend Dina, and Joel's brother Tommy all decide to leave the community in Jackson to fend for itself in order to chase after her. Such a choice leads them on a wild hunt that feels increasingly futile and which progresses painstakingly slowly, lingering on Ellie's increasingly harsh and violent actions as she seems to set morality aside and lets her thirst for revenge drive her.[29] Thus, the one character whose youthful innocence and selflessness propelled the heroic quest of TLOU1 regresses to a state of unchecked selfishness that leads to personal and collective catastrophe. Moreover, after three days of playing from Ellie's perspective while she tracks down Abby's friends and kills, maims, and tortures them to get information, the game switches characters and makes the player interact as Abby, starting again from the first day in Seattle and nullifying all the progress made both plot-wise—as the player must relive the same three days "meeting ghosts"[30]—and game-mechanics-wise, as Abby does not inherit the skills, weapons, and extra resources the player acquired as Ellie.

In terms of thwarted diegetic progress, the ending of TLOU2 mirrors that of the first game, as it also returns the story to its original point of departure. Indeed, in TLOU2 the characters show a recurring tendency to have a change of heart and not follow through with their original decisions. Abby kills Joel but spares Ellie's life in Jackson. Ellie chases her down to and through Seattle and there, for a second time, Abby, originally hell-bent on killing her, chooses not to. Ellie then goes back to Jackson, only to walk back on her decision to return. She abandons Dina and her new-born to pick up Abby's trail again, only to relent at the very end. After their gruesome fist-fight on the shore of Santa Barbara, Ellie lets Abby go and returns to Jackson *again*, only to find Dina and the baby gone. It is a much more disheartening ending than the one of the previous game: in TLOU1, players can understand the loss of a potential cure for humanity in exchange for a newfound father-daughter bond between Joel and Ellie.[31] In TLOU2, both Ellie and Abby experience profound loss, with the former, especially, returning to an empty house that can bring no solace to her: as she has chosen revenge over love, abandoning Dina and the child, so she is in turn abandoned. She cannot even play the guitar—one of the skills that Joel taught her—because she has lost two fingers in a fight with Abby. Although the ending of TLOU2 may indicate a moment of moral growth, as both Ellie and Abby understand the futility of revenge, several reviewers have lamented the bitterness they felt upon not finding emotional release, some form of catharsis that most players expected as a reward for engaging with such challenging content for dozens of hours.[32] Thus, at the end of TLOU2, progress is also thwarted on the level of play: while players complete the game, not everyone derives enjoyment from it.[33]

Both games tell a story that shows a noticeable lack of progress because of the form of individualism expressed by the characters inhabiting this specific post-apocalyptic frontier. Individualism—the ideal that "regards each individual as a moral, political, and economic primary, meaning that each person in a civil society is by right an independent and sovereign being and that he or she should be free to choose his or her associations voluntarily and not have obligations or duties imposed by society without consent"[34]—is one of the prominent traits of American identity. Validating J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's and Frederick Jackson Turner's classic studies,[35] sociological research has tied the concept of Frontier individualism to the contemporary American attitude toward the community.[36] Despite its prominence in the culture of the United States, individualism is not in direct opposition to collectivism at the traditional American Frontier. As Thomas Paine once claimed, "Public good is not a term opposed to the good of individuals. On the contrary, it is the good of every individual collected. It is the good of all, because it is the good of every one; for as the public body is every individual collected, so the public good is the collected good of those individuals."[37] Eric Daniels, among others, draws on Paine's assertion to argue that at the traditional Frontier, individualism was believed to beget collective benefits. In other words, the Frontier ethos worked on the assumption that individual good would spread onto the collective dimension.[38]

Elsewhere, I have distinguished between inward-looking individualism and outward-looking individualism—that is, between a form of individualism that is put at the service of the community, and one that is mere narcissistic decision-making.[39] In essence, individualistic choices made in order to prompt positive change at the societal level—choices that, despite being tied to the one person making them, have conscious repercussions on the wider community— differ drastically in intent and effect from decisions that disregard the collective dimension altogether and derive from a form of selfish, isolated contemplation of one's needs and wishes. Inward-looking individualism characterizes our contemporary society, making it an atomized gathering of individuals that do not truly cooperate to generate a collective body.[40] Outward-looking individualism, conversely, is what Alexis de Tocqueville calls "self-interest well understood" or "enlightened self-interest"—that is, a form of selfishness that retains a collective, congregational dimension, and that is said to typify American democracy especially.[41]

The forms of individualism depicted in TLOU reveal the mechanism that "sours" the Frontier experience of its characters, stripping them of their heroic import and impeding progress both at the personal and collective level. Indeed, the games foreground the individual struggles of Joel, Ellie, and Abby, exploring the intimate relationship between the necessity of violence and the moral boundaries the characters must cross as the plot unravels. While the collective dimension of the story is not

absent, it is evidently placed in the background. Thus, TLOU eschews being categorized as a narrative that tells a story of the violent construction of a civilization in the wilderness.

In a previous work, I have suggested that a trait shared by protagonists of contemporary dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives is their displaying outward-looking individualism as they stand up to a monstrous community and strive to bring about a new society through personal choices.[42] However, this is only partially true of TLOU1 and does not at all apply to the sequel. At its outset, TLOU1 seems to follow the general outline of the heroic quest, with Joel and Ellie traversing a perilous land in order to save humanity, but a closer look reveals that their journey is less about saving the world and more about Joel and Ellie forging a bond with each other. As the IGN reviewers commented about TLOU1, "Like [Cormac McCarthy's] *The Road*, TLOU isn't so much about what happened to humanity as it's about the tale of two people and their journey."[43] As the game progresses and the player gets access to Joel's—and, to a smaller extent, Ellie's—emotions, the narrative shifts away from the collective dimension of their quest, the stated "restorative" goal of their journey, toward an exploration of the familial bond that the two protagonists develop and that guides their decision-making. The ending of TLOU1, already discussed earlier, underscores this by sacrificing humanity in favor of the father-daughter relationship that drives Joel's actions. This authorial choice serves well to highlight that the game has never really been about saving everybody, but rather only about saving Joel, who finds in Ellie a new reason to live. In other words, by centering the plot so prominently on the individual dimension of the characters, TLOU has no need to invest them with outward-looking individualism: Joel and Ellie—not to mention Abby—are not saviors of an imperiled society who need to make personal decisions to benefit the community. They are people thrown together by events outside of their control who are trying to survive first and foremost, no matter what the cost for the rest of the world.

In an essay analyzing morality in TLOU1, Amy M. Green argues convincingly that there are three dimensions of moral choices in the diegesis: the player has to judge whether "a character acts only in self-interest, acts with compassion, or acts with senseless brutality."[44] Here, I assimilate self-interest to inward-looking individualism, while compassion is at times (although not always) a trait of outward-looking individualism. Senseless brutality, instead, removes decision making from the equation, but retrieves the classic Frontier theme of violence.

Joel, whose perspective the player inhabits for most of the first game, seems to act in shrewd self-interest, especially at the beginning of the main plotline, when he is a smuggler in Boston. His reluctance to get attached to Ellie suggests a form of selfish detachment from any type of social bond, a refusal to engage in any kind of

community. Tess, his smuggling partner, for instance, first convinces him to take Ellie to the Fireflies, saying that "she's just cargo" and appealing to his greed. When they realize their liaison with the Fireflies is dead and they have to take Ellie to a lab "someplace out west," Tess guilt-trips him into following through with her plan by revealing she is infected and choosing to sacrifice herself to make sure Joel and Ellie can flee the city without being followed.

Joel: What are we doing here? This is not us.
Tess: What do you know about us? About me?
Joel: I know you are smarter than this.
Tess: Really? Guess what? We are shitty people, Joel! It's been that way for a long time.
Joel: No, we are survivors!
...
Tess: You've got to get this girl to Tommy's. He used to run with this crew, he'll know where to go.
Joel: No, no, no, that was your crusade![45]

In this brief passage, Joel highlights how his worldview hinges on the notion of survival and on not participating in communal efforts to restore some form of civilization, as the Fireflies (and his brother Tommy) were attempting to do. Tricked into participating in a rescue mission badly concealed as a smuggling gig, he tries to back out from it at every possible point, showing his deeply ingrained distrust in others and his stubborn refusal to join forces with others. This theme recurs throughout the first game. For instance, after traveling with Ellie all the way to Jackson, Joel tries to convince Tommy to take Ellie to the Fireflies, saying, "This is your cause," reiterating that he has no interest in trying to restore society or self-immolating for it. Yet, even Tommy, who is framed as an idealist, seems to reject an appeal to the collective good, arguing that "[his] family is [his] cause now," and refusing to ask other members of the community in Jackson to undertake the task, as "they got families, too." What little remains of a collectivist approach to human life seems to be reduced to small forms of familial bonds, which Joel nevertheless continuously tries to sever: in one of the most emotionally loaded moments of TLOU1, when Ellie confronts him after she learns he tried to convince Tommy to take over the mission, he angrily tells her: "You are not my daughter, and I sure as hell ain't your dad."[46] Despite his refusal to acknowledge the bond forming between them, Joel eventually allows Ellie close, to the point that, as mentioned earlier, the most selfish, inward-looking decision he makes is sacrificing humanity to save her and, at the same time, himself. An online reviewer has expressed this idea eloquently: "I don't even know that he saved Ellie for the sake of saving her ... In some sense, I think it was kind of a selfish decision. I mean, it's why he lies to her about it at the end. With the amount of loss and suffering that he's experienced in the past, he'll do anything to prevent it from happening again, even damning

the rest of the world, because Ellie quite literally means the world to him."[47]

Yet, argues Green, "Joel's actions cannot be classified as wholly selfish. TLOU consistently contends that community equates to danger and that the human race may not be worthy of saving."[48] She frames Joel as implicitly making an outward-looking individualist decision that will lead to the slow demise of humanity in favor of earth's non-human inhabitants. Although in general terms I agree that TLOU tries to eschew the collectivist outlook of many contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives, I struggle to see Joel as a character that has any form of outward-looking individualism. His actions might have collective repercussions, but his intentions are deeply, almost totally self-centered. Rather, in TLOU the very last vestiges of a collective vision for humanity, of a form of individualism that looks at the betterment of society, are mostly embodied in the stubborn, youth-infused idealism of Ellie, who is indeed willing to sacrifice herself for the good of humankind. As Joel is running away with her after having killed the surgeon, the leader of the Fireflies, Marlene, tries to stop him by saying, "It's what she [Ellie]'d want… and you know it," which makes Joel hesitate, seemingly admitting that she is right.[49] At the very end of the first game, Ellie makes him swear that his story about the Fireflies having given up on finding a cure is true, and he acknowledges her need to find a new purpose after months of being defined by her wish to put herself at the service of humanity at large.

If Ellie is the last remaining outward-looking individualist in TLOU1, in the sequel, she, too, steps away from decision-making focused on the community. In a sense, there is very little in TLOU2 that evokes the classic post-apocalyptic narrative and its focus on the restoration of civilization, as the game dials up the focus on morality by staging a tale of personal vengeance from two opposed perspectives and at the same time removes the collective dimension completely. As soon as Joel is killed, both Ellie *and* Tommy, arguably the two characters that cared the most about the community, abandon Jackson and their commitment to protect its people to chase down Joel's murderer. Familial ties continue to play a fundamental part in the decision-making process of the characters, although in TLOU2 most choices lead the characters on a quest for blind, selfish revenge—in itself another type of classic western tale. This is true not only for Ellie and Tommy, but also for Abby, who is motivated by her father's death. TLOU2, then, turns out to be little else than a visceral tale of personal unraveling, as both protagonists face increasingly harsher moral decisions that they make out of pure inward-looking selfishness. For instance, Ellie's choice to hunt down Abby, despite going against the well-being of the community in Jackson, feels morally justified by her love for Joel. Her subsequent decision to torture Nora, Abby's friend, and gruesomely beat her to death with a metal pole, mirroring Joel's murder, sits much less easily with her: she returns to the theater, where Dina and her ex-boyfriend Jesse are waiting for her, covered in blood, visibly in shock, shaking and

horrified by her actions. Despite the toll her choices take on her, she does not desist and, a few scenes later, kills two other friends of Abby's, Owen and Mel, realizing only too late that the woman was pregnant. Online reviewers have latched onto such a radical devolution of Ellie's morality, with most commentators highlighting how challenging it was to enact such reprehensible actions within a diegetic context that did not "excuse" or "absolve" them (compared to, for instance, games like *Grand Theft Auto*, where violence is the standard, unpunished *modus operandi*). Every murder in TLOU2 is felt to a degree, aided by the extremely life-like animation of killings and by the introduction of non-playable characters that call out for each other and mourn each other loudly. Even the most insignificant NPCs die in a graphically accurate way that does not let the player avoid confronting the action the game has just made them act out.[50] Ellie's repugnant actions, however, only seem to yield more abhorrent choices: they feed her need for revenge, as it is her only justification for them. Additionally, it is not only in the cruel, murderous actions against strangers or enemies that Ellie's moral downfall is evident; her personal life also suffers from it. Despite being in love with Dina, who has followed her to Seattle but has fallen ill due to an unexpected pregnancy, Ellie chooses to leave her behind; and, even upon returning to Jackson the first time, she cannot seem to settle into a quiet family life. Her familial bonds are not strong enough to surmount her desire for revenge, and when she realizes the importance of her emotional bond to Dina and her son JJ, it is too late: Ellie returns to Jackson to find an empty house and nobody waiting for her.

Abby's arc is somewhat different, as a good portion of her story focuses on her encounter and subsequent relationship with two Seraphite children, Yara and Lev, who are running away from their religious sect. Abby's relationship with her friends Owen and Mel is strained after she had taken revenge on Joel, which they have facilitated and witnessed, and she is trying to navigate life after killing her father's murderer—that is, life after getting the revenge she was seeking. Her plotline intersects Ellie's at the end of the three days in Seattle, when Abby finds Owen and Mel dead at the aquarium and she tracks Ellie down to the theater, only sparing her life because Lev stops her. Unable to remain in Seattle with a Seraphite child in tow and her friends' blood on her hands, Abby takes Lev to Santa Barbara in the hope of finding the Fireflies, but they are both captured and enslaved by a gang called "the Rattlers." Following the opposite trajectory of Ellie's plotline, Abby's biggest moral failure is at the beginning of the game, when she chooses to torture and kill Joel, and her subsequent actions seem to be less morally questionable and more directed toward building a redemption arc for her, in a sense foreshadowing what could await Ellie once she obtains the revenge she is after. This is most evident in the way Abby's relationship with the Seraphite child Lev, both unforeseen and initially unwanted, echoes the evolution of Joel's bond to Ellie in TLOU1. As a reviewer argues, Abby is a "hardened killer

that starts to reconnect with her lost humanity thanks to the innocence of her child companions. Sounds like anybody you know?"[51] Abby, much like Joel, chooses to save the Seraphite child and his sister more than once, despite them being one of the enemies of the Washington Liberation Front (WLF), to which Abby belongs. Most significant, perhaps, is her choice to risk her life to save Lev's at the end of the game. By then, Abby is weakened by many months of enslavement and torture and has already given up avenging her friends' deaths. Ellie, still unable to let go, forces her to fight by threatening Lev. Abby then sacrifices herself and engages Ellie in a fistfight, so that she might spare Lev's life, and only avoids being killed because Ellie suddenly remembers Joel as he serenely played the guitar. "Go," she orders Abby. "Just take [Lev]."[52] For the second time in the franchise, the main action ends with a parental figure carrying their chosen family out of danger. Much like Joel, and despite her redemption arc, Abby does not express a form of outward-looking individualism. Her initial actions, which started the whole chain of events featured in TLOU2, essentially bring upon her loved ones the brunt of Ellie's and Tommy's revenge, causing the death of most of her friends. Her selfish choice of revenge over anything and anybody ends in catastrophe, and her moral growth through her relationship with Lev does not move past the quasi-familial bond that links them, never reaching the collective level. Just like Joel, she is but a survivor who has found an anchor and a new chance at life in an innocent child. She is willing to sacrifice herself for him, but she would most probably not do that for anyone else, and certainly not for a greater, collective good.

Thus, where TLOU1 jumpstarts the action down a path that leads to inward-looking individualism, annihilating, at the end, even Ellie's desire to help save humanity from its doom, TLOU2 takes this form of individualism to the extreme, never restoring a collective dimension to the post-apocalyptic frontier. With each reckless, grief-induced decision Ellie and Abby make, the protagonists never truly move forward, impeding progress both at the personal and the collective level, as the consequences of their selfishness spill over and reach their friends and communities. Stuck on revenge, they can only move forward once they relinquish it. The ending of TLOU2 suggests that such progress might still happen, given time, past the suddenly clear landscape of the main menu.

Conclusion

With its diegetic subversion of western tropes and ideology, TLOU is a rich example of a post-Frontier text that attempts to retrieve some of the longest-lasting staples of American fiction and address them critically by displacing them to a post-apocalyptic setting. Deprived of its collective outlook, the "mythical scope" of TLOU has little to do with the establishment of a new civilization built on the ashes of an apocalyptic event. Rather, it hinges on interrogating the interplay of violence and morality,

and the boundaries between personal choice and collective good at the post-apocalyptic Frontier. Thus, the mythopoetic intent of TLOU does not aspire to include the collective American society (or what little remains of it); rather, it is invested in the American values that its characters either retrieve, discard, or corrupt. Oli Welsh, in an early review of TLOU, comments, "It's the classic journey into the west, the pioneers[?] tale—but turned on its head, because this anti-Western isn't about the birth of a nation. It's about the death of one."[53] By retrieving Slotkin's notion of an "inversion" in the mythical import and diegetic content of post-Frontier tales, Welsh's comment validates the notion that TLOU forsakes the celebration of the ideology undergirding the western tradition and the notion of restoring the United States in a post-apocalyptic setting. Progress, thus, loses meaning and, indeed, relevance in this specific post-apocalyptic setting. The protagonists can only express an individualist, careless attitude toward life, disregarding the consequences of their revenge-driven choices. At the same time, their actions and their motivations originate a serious, critical interrogation of violence, one of the fundamental elements of the traditional mythology of the United States, thus also generating a space for other values to supplant violence as its core motivator. One by one, TLOU stages several traditional elements of the American myth—progress, individualism, violence—and shows them lacking when extracted from their original context, to the point that it is not clear whether, diegetically, we are witnessing the demise of the whole concept of Americanness, together with that of the nation itself. This, perhaps, is the overall message of TLOU: by placing the Frontier in a post-apocalyptic setting and then challenging the very values that propelled the establishment of American civilization, it underlines how they are not fit for the (quasi-)apocalyptic present and post-apocalyptic future; the games underscore that a new era might come about if, individually, we relinquish these old-fashioned tools in order to embrace new, as of yet undisclosed values that better answer to the needs of the future.

Notes

1 As of December 2022, the franchise has sold over 37 million copies globally. See Neil Druckmann, "Reflecting on a Big Year to Come for *The Last of Us*," *Naughty Dog*, January 4, 2023, https://www.naughtydog.com/blog/the_last_of_us_10th_anniversary_kick-off?sf174194040. Henceforth, I will refer to the franchise as a whole as TLOU, to the first game as TLOU1, and to the second game as TLOU2.

2 For a chronology of the evolution of the Frontier tale, see Richard Aquila, "Introduction: The Pop Culture West," in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

3 For an investigation of the clash between individual and collective good in westerns, see, for instance, Matthew P. Harrington, "The 'Citizen-Savage': White Masculine Degeneration in the Indian Hater Narrative," *JAm It!*, no. 6 (2022).

4 Amanda Keeler, "A Postapocalyptic Return to the Frontier: *The Walking Dead* as Post-Western," *Critical Studies in Television* 13, no. 4 (2018): 423, DOI: 10.1177/1749602018796696.

5 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 627–28.

6 Neil Campbell, *Postwesterns: Cinemas, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 2.

7 Susan Kollin, "Introduction: Postwestern Studies, Dead or Alive," in *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*, ed. Susan Kollin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xii.

8 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 633–34.

9 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 635.

10 John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1999), 29.

11 As Patrick B. Sharp argues, even as science fiction (which arguably includes post-apocalyptic narratives) updated the western genre and displaced it geographically and temporally, it retained the racist views of the savage as the biggest threat to civilization. See Patrick B. Sharp, *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 6–7.

12 Michael Fuchs, "'Is That Really All They Had to Worry About?' Past, Present, and Future Hauntings in *The Last of Us*," *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 44, no. 1 (2019): 70, DOI: 10.2357/AAA-2019-0004.

13 Brenda M. Boyle, "Lone Wolf Family Man: Individualism, Collectivism and Masculinities in *American Sniper(s)* and *Lone Survivor(s)*," *European Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 2 (2019): 118, DOI: 10.1386/ejac.38.2.117_1.

14 See Amy Coles, "The Rampant Body-Shaming of Abby in *The Last of Us Part II* Shows Gamers Still Can't Accept a Realistic Female Lead," *The Independent*, July 9, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/last-of-us-2-abby-gaming-naughty-dog-a9609616.html; Jen Glennon, Dais Johnston, and Eric Francisco, "*The Last of Us* 2 Trans Controversy, Explained," *Inverse*, May 15, 2020, https://www.inverse.com/gaming/last-of-us-2-trans-controversy-explained-abby-tlou.

15 Notably, a nod to the history of American Mormons is also evident in the route Joel and Ellie follow in TLOU1: the protagonists, in fact, move on a westward trajectory that takes them to Salt Lake City, mirroring the path taken by the Mormons during their exodus from Illinois to Utah in the mid-nineteenth century.

16 See Matthew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles, *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012), ch. 4.

17 Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8.

18 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 32.

19 Several commentators and reviewers of both games remark on the bittersweet feeling of being immersed in such beautiful scenery while being constantly on alert. On TLOU1, see, for instance, IGN, "*The Last of Us* Review," *YouTube*, June 5, 2013, https://youtu.be/GBXuE6jcl4; Rev3Games, "*The Last of Us* REVIEW! Adam Sessler Reviews," *YouTube*, June

5, 2013, https://youtu.be/ZEs33aWkX2Q; on TLOU2, see, for instance, GamingBolt, "*The Last of Us Part 2* Review – The Final Verdict," *YouTube*, June 16, 2020, https://youtu.be/HXOHEKyeonE; HappyConsoleGamer, "*THE LAST OF US PART II* SPOILER REVIEW – Happy Console Gamer," *YouTube*, June 22, 2020, https://youtu.be/DEMpwoHC2DM; videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)," *YouTube*, June 23, 2020, https://youtu.be/I7OcL8j6rhk.

20 David Callahan, "The Last of the US: The Game as Cultural Geography," in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 49.

21 Chandler Wood, "*The Last of Us Part II* Post Credits Scene That Everyone Missed (Spoilers)," *playstationlifestyle.net*, June 30, 2020, https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2020/06/30/the-last-of-us-part-ii-post-credits-scene/.

22 Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 194.

23 Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 22.

24 See, for example, HappyConsoleGamer, "*THE LAST OF US PART II* SPOILER REVIEW"; Rev-3Games, "*The Last of Us* REVIEW!"; videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)."

25 Fuchs, "Past, Present, and Future Hauntings," 71.

26 See Grant Voegtle, "*The Last of Us* Changed My Life: In Depth Analysis and Dissection," *YouTube*, December 23, 2013, https://youtu.be/3sJA-C1yrtk.

27 See, for example, Errant Signal, "Errant Signal – *The Last of Us* (Spoilers)," *YouTube*, July 22, 2013, https://youtu.be/bAzqDgKYfiM; Chris Stuckmann, "*The Last of Us* – SPOILER Review by Chris Stuckmann," *YouTube*, June 24, 2013, https://youtu.be/i_-697pnUjk; Voegtle, "*The Last of Us* Changed My Life."

28 This becomes evident at the beginning of TLOU2 and in a flashback at the very end of the game, where Ellie remembers talking to Joel the night before he was killed. "I was supposed to die in that hospital. My life would've fucking mattered, but you took that from me," she tells him and continues, "I don't think I can ever forgive you for that. But I would like to try."

29 The GamingBolt review, for instance, comments, "As the story progresses and the brutality begins to pile up you start wondering whether any of this is worth it." GamingBolt, "*The Last of Us Part 2* Review – The Final Verdict."

30 GameSpot, "*The Last Of Us Part II* Spoiler Review," *YouTube*, June 20, 2020, https://youtu.be/houfCEZrFss.

31 See, for example, Chris Stuckmann's comments in his review. Stuckmann, "*The Last of Us* – SPOILER Review."

32 See, for example, The Critical Drinker, "*The Last of Us Part 2* – A Beautiful Nightmare," *YouTube*, June 30, 2020, https://youtu.be/iGtKUaPhdfk.

33 Entertaining players is not the only purpose of video games. Several "games with a purpose" can be used to educate, inform, raise awareness, or even as marketing tools. Nevertheless, TLOU2 does not belong to this category of games; it was developed and marketed as a mainstream, triple-A title and as such players expected to derive enjoyment from it. For a reviewer's take on this, see ScreenCrush, "The Reason People Hate *LAST OF US 2* is Why it's a Masterpiece," *YouTube*, January 27, 2023, https://youtu.be/n_uWAo8TEJI.

34 Eric Daniels, "A Brief History of Individualism in American Thought," in *For the Greater Good of All: Perspectives on Individualism, Society, and Leadership*, ed. Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Hoyt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 70.

35 See, for example, J. Hector St. John. de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; New Dehli: Prabhat Prakashan, 2015); Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894).

36 See, for example, Geert Hofstede, "Culture and Organizations," *International Studies of Management and Organization* 10, no. 4 (1980), DOI: 10.1080/00208825.1980.11656300; Samuel Bazzi, Martin Fiszbein, and Mesay Gebresilasse, "Frontier Culture: The Roots and Persistence of 'Rugged Individualism' in the United States," *Econometrica* 88, no. 6 (2020), DOI: 10.3982/ecta16484.

37 Thomas Paine, *Dissertations on Government, the Affairs of the Bank, and Paper Money* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist Press, 1838), 9.

38 Daniels, "A Brief History of Individualism," 72–73.

39 Valentina Romanzi, *American Nightmares: Dystopia in Twenty-First-Century US Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2022), 92.

40 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Society* (London: Polity, 2000); Stefano Tani, *Lo schermo, l'Alzheimer, lo zombie: Tre metafore per il XXI secolo* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2014).

41 Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pt. 2, ch. 8.

42 Romanzi, *American Nightmares*, 98–99. Some examples are the protagonists of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), the movie *The Book of Eli* (2010), and the video game *Detroit: Become Human* (2018).

43 IGN, "*The Last of Us* Review."

44 Amy M. Green, "The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in *The Last of Us*," *Games and Culture* 11, nos. 7–8 (2016): 754, DOI: 10.1177/1555412015579489.

45 *The Last of Us*, dev. Naughty Dog (San Mateo: Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2013).

46 *The Last of Us*.

47 Voegtle, "*The Last of Us* Changed My Life."

48 Green, "Morality and Naturalism," 759.

49 *The Last of Us*.

50 See, for example, Easy Allies, "*The Last of Us Part II* – Easy Allies Review," *YouTube*, June 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/wfH-FPwhoto; GameSpot, "*The Last Of Us Part II* Spoiler Review"; HappyConsoleGamer, "*THE LAST OF US PART II* SPOILER REVIEW"; The Critical Drinker, "*The Last of Us Part 2* – A Beautiful Nightmare"; videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)."

51 videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)."

52 *The Last of Us Part II*, dev. Naughty Dog (San Mateo: Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020).

53 Oli Welsh, "Journey's End: *The Last of Us* Review," *Eurogamer*, June 5, 2013, http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-06-05-the-last-of-usreview.

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