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Special Issue

Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

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Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann

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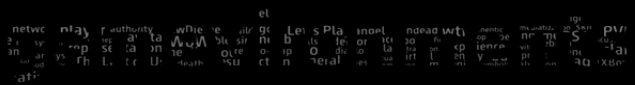

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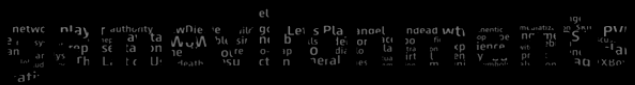

report

interview

review

Videogames about Politics as States of Exception[i]

Yu Hao

Abstract
This article looks at videogames about politics within the theoretical framework of Giorgio Agamben's *states of exception* and argues that while videogames can reveal political issues by implementing rules into the gameplay, they simultaneously render the in-game rules and consequences inoperative in regard to real-world politics, which can be described as *states of exception* in Agamben's sense. Agamben distinguishes between the fictitious and the real state of exception, and this distinction leads to his proposal of a politics of *pure means* in which he considers play as a means of profanation that renders what has been played with inoperative and free. Drawing on this discussion, the article looks at the parallel between the rules in videogames and the laws in states of exception and re-examines the concepts of game rules and play under the rubric of Agamben's political philosophy. In so doing, it explores how playing with rules in videogames about politics can turn these games into states of exception to talk about and reflect on various political issues.

Keywords: Videogames, Politics, Play, Rules, Agamben, State of Exception, Inoperativity, Freedom, Profanation, Pure Means, gamevironments

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This article argues that while videogames can reveal political issues by implementing rules into the game mechanics, they simultaneously render the in-game rules and consequences inoperative in regard to the real-world politics, and this can be described as "states of exception" which is extensively discussed by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. For Agamben (2005, 4), "the state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept." In other words, the

state of exception is not only a suspension of law, but also "an attempt to include the exception itself within the juridical order" (Agamben 2005, 26). What is at stake is the relationship between law and the suspension of law: the latter is essentially "outside the law" (McLoughlin 2016, 512), but by making this temporary suspension a new norm, the state of exception gets established. Agamben further distinguishes between the fictitious and the real state of exception: the former characterizes our political reality; the latter, on the other hand, illustrates a new way of thinking about politics. In order to form a structural parallel between videogames about politics and states of exception in real-world politics, this article proposes to understand videogames about politics from two perspectives, considering them as simulations[ii] of politics, and as politics in their own right. Considering games as simulations of politics highlights videogame's ability to model complex political systems (i.e., Bogost 2006), whereas considering them as politics in their own right focuses on the "political transparency" (Galloway 2006, 92) of videogames and indicates the process of gameplay as a relatively unmediated[iii] political experience. Taking both perspectives into account, this article emphasizes videogame's capacity to simulate politics in a mediated manner and to invite players to act in an unmediated way. In a cross-exposure of these two perspectives, the article will compare the rules in videogames and the laws in Agamben's state of exception, arriving at new insights on game rules. Within game studies, the discussions around game rules tend to consider rules as "abstract tools for thinking about the formal structure of a game" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 149), or as proscriptions of the "use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means" for reaching a prelusory goal in a game (Suits 1978, 41). I will go beyond this view of considering game rules purely abstract and fixed, distinguishing between abstract rules written in the program code, and operative rules experienced by the players in the narrative and the actual gameplay. This allows me to discuss games in relation to Agamben's notions of inoperativity and freedom. For Agamben,

the real state of exception is established through rendering the juridical power and sovereignty inoperative (Prozorov 2014, 93). To render something inoperative is to deactivate its old use in the apparatus and create a new and free use for it (Agamben 2007, 86). *Inoperative* here does not mean dysfunctional, but rather that "it has no defined or definable function" (De la Durantaye 2009,7), indicating a liberation from instrumental rationality and a practical end. How can videogames about politics become states of exception? How to render game rules inoperative in regard to the relatively unmediated political experience videogames provide? By responding to these questions, this research will provide a new perspective from which to analyze videogames about politics, which goes beyond the scope of simulation and representation, and complements the paradigmatic perspectives from which games about politics are usually discussed, such as procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2010).

The state of exception as a theoretical framework for exploring real-world politics has been increasingly used in the field of cultural and media studies in recent years. Although it is sometimes controversial or even dogmatic to apply the theory of state of exception to actual political measures (i.e., Agamben [2020] dogmatically considers social distance and lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way for governments to extend the state of exception), we should not erase the flexibility of its application in cultural and media studies. In fact, because culture and media studies normally address the culturalization/mediatization of reality in which reality itself becomes inoperative, they can provide us a conceptual space that works as a state of exception in regard to reality, and thus allows us to reflect on the legitimacy of reality. The current discussions of the state of exception in these two fields revolve mostly around the representation of violence and its related imageries, such as the concentration camp. For example, film scholar Paola Bonifazio (2009) explores the cinematic representations of the suburbs of post-war Italian industrial cities and

juxtaposes them with the concentration camp where humanity is only qualified as bare life. Game scholar Mark L. Sample (2008) explores the torture and interrogation in videogames set in the context of the USA's Global War on Terror in which the state of exception has become the rule. Atkinson and Rodgers (2015), from the perspective of criminology, argue that violent videogames, together with online pornography, are "cultural zones of exception" (Atkinson and Rodgers 2015, 1293) in which we become temporarily suspended from social norms and thus enabling permission to immerse in extreme and exceptional experience.

While bearing the influence of cultural and media studies, this article moves beyond the exploration of violence as a state of exception in videogames and in the following four sections looks at videogames about politics in particular as states of exception. In the first section, I will unpack the concept of videogames about politics and clarify the nuance between games as simulations of politics and games as politics. Videogames about politics used in this article should be understood in both senses, highlighting game's ability to simulate politics in a mediated manner and to invite players to act in an unmediated fashion. Based on this understanding, I will then interrogate the structural parallel between videogames about politics and states of exception in real-world politics in the second section. In order to do so, I will make a comparison between the rules in videogames and the laws in states of exception, which will lay out the theoretical foundation for the research. For Agamben (2005, 64), the creation of the real state of exception lies in the inoperativity of the law, that is, to find a new use of the law. And in order to do that, Agamben suggests "to 'study' and deactivate it, to 'play' with it" (ibid.). Here, the act of playing frees the law from its original use value and renders it inoperative. Following Agamben's conceptualization of *playing with the law*, in the third section, I will explore *playing with rules* in videogames about politics. I will do this by looking at two videogames about politics

Papers, Please (2013) and *Not for Broadcast* (2020, Early Access). The former lets the player be an immigration inspector to control the flow of people entering the fictional communist state of Arstotzka, whereas the latter lets the player be a TV broadcast operator to control the national news program in an alternate 1980s Britain. Both games recreate political scenarios that are common in real life and allow players to experience the difficult choices and moral dilemmas faced by a cog in the massive political machine. My analysis of these two games seeks to reveal how immigration issues and political propaganda are modeled in the game rules respectively and how playing with rules allows for the occurrence of states of exception. In section four, I will look at the distinction between Agamben's idea of play and the play in contemporary videogames. Agamben suggests that play is an organ of "profanation" (2007, 76) – the creation of a new use through liberating from an old use. This echoes the early romantic play theories, exemplified by Huizinga's (1998 [1949]) *magic circle* metaphor which suggests the separation of game and reality and the suspension of real life in the game world. However, at the same time, Agamben (2007, 76) also criticizes modern man for forgetting how to play through the proliferation of various games. Is playing with political rules in videogames liable to think about new ways of political order or is it just a reinforcement of existing political order? Is play as a means of profanation still possible in our time characterized by neoliberalism and consumerism? In attempting to answer these questions, this article seeks to demonstrate how the playing of videogames about politics can be operative and inoperative, as well as restraining and emancipatory at the same time. While using Agamben's state of exception as a theoretical framework, this research is not a simple application of or affirmation for this theory, but rather an attempt to explore what kind of light Agamben's theory can shed on the study of videogames.

Understanding Videogames about Politics

For the purpose of the argument in this article, I will use the term *videogames about politics* instead of "political videogames" (Bogost 2007, 77). The latter has been used extensively by Bogost when discussing the political rhetoric in videogames. According to Bogost (2007, 78), "2004 was the year when political videogames became legitimate." Different from videogames that carry political messages and make political statements, political videogames in Bogost's sense refer specifically to the games that are designed for bolstering political campaigns (ibid.). One typical example is *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* (2003), a game commissioned by Dean for America and aimed to support Howard Dean, a candidate to the 2004 U.S. election. In this case, "political videogames" can be seen as a synonym for "videogames for politics", to use Bogost's (2006) own words. Along similar lines, Neys and Jansz (2010, 232-233) adopt the term "political games" to highlight the political functions (i.e., recording, persuasion, and engagement) of certain games. By contrast, *videogames about politics* does not emphasize any political end or function of the game itself, but covers games which talk about things commonly known as *politics*. Therefore, it avoids the historical and conceptual baggage and the specific rhetorical ends attached to *political videogames* and allows for a more general account of the representation and presentation of politics in videogames. Nevertheless, this article is not an attempt to claim any ontological territory or to be a definitional account of *videogames about politics*, the term itself remains to be tested in further research.

In order to form a parallel between videogames about politics and states of exception in real-world politics, we have to first think of videogames about politics as a subset of politics in general. In other words, we need to understand videogames about politics from two perspectives, first as simulations of politics, then as politics in their own right. The former indicates videogame's capacity to effectively model complex

systems such as politics. Such capacity is often understood in relation to "procedural rhetoric" – the way that a videogame makes arguments with its computational structure (Bogost 2010, 3). Because of this connection, videogames about politics are often defined as a subgenre of persuasive games (i.e., Šisler 2005; Robinson 2012; Neys and Jansz 2019) which address political issues with their procedural affordance. One such example is *September 12* (2003), a web-based game depicting the War on Terror in a Middle Eastern village. The game uses a very simple mechanism (violence causes more violence) to demonstrate the then-current situation of the United States' War on Terror, conveying a particular political message to the players. On the other hand, understanding games as politics in their own right refers to the "political transparency" (Galloway 2006, 92) of videogames, denoting their capability to "present contemporary political realities in relatively unmediated form" (ibid.). In this sense, the player's actions in political videogames are coterminous with real political actions. This can be explained by the player's actions in *September 12*. Whether the player chooses to launch missiles against terrorists or not in this game, she is participating in a political debate of terrorism, "unifying the act of playing the game with an immediate political experience" (Galloway 2006, 103). Considering these two perspectives, the use of videogames about politics here implies videogame's capacity to simulate politics in a mediated manner and to invite players to act in an unmediated way.

By looking at videogames about politics from these two perspectives simultaneously, this article seeks to challenge the traditional cultural studies understanding of games, which considers cultural products, including videogames, as a "culturalization of politics" (Žižek 2008, 660). For Žižek (ibid.), culturalization of politics is the process in which

> "political differences, differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, etc., are naturalized/neutralized into 'cultural' differences, different 'ways of life', which are something given, something that cannot be overcome, but merely 'tolerated'."

As interpreted by Murray (2018, 12), Žižek's analysis of culturalization of politics suggests that there is a lack of intervention, both methodological and intellectual, in cultural products in general. To understand videogames about politics not only as simulations, but also as politics in their own right, is to recognize that games not merely neutralize differences and cultivate tolerance as Žižek criticizes, they also invite interventions from the players, albeit mainly at the metaphorical level.

This double-layered understanding of videogames about politics also responds to the limitations of the concept of simulation proposed by Woods (2007) and Bogost (2008) to a certain extent. For Woods (2007, 19), the simulation in single-player videogames is often reduced to "an exercise in morality – a reflection of the views of the designer/s which are too easily dismissed." In the case of videogames about politics, this implies an inevitable bias resulting from the designers' own political intentions. Looking from the player's perspective, Woods argues that the simulations in single-player games are "rendered ineffectual as the imperative of mastery is inevitably foregrounded over reflective consideration of the system" (ibid.). However, this argument is based on the overgeneralization of game player as the "implied player" (Aarseth 2007, 132) who fulfills a set of expectations (i.e., mastery) for the game to "exercise its effect" (ibid.) and it fails to recognize other types of player behaviors. For example, in the case of games about politics, the political transparency of these games can allow the players to reinterpret and intervene in the systems without focusing too much on winning or losing. The reinterpretations and interventions here can be seen as instances of transgressive play that "are not part of

the game's intended repertoire" (ibid.). Along similar lines, Bogost (2008, 135) proposes the concept of "simulation gap" to indicate that games are inevitably biased and carry the baggage of ideology, and as a consequence, there is always a gap between the player's subjective understanding of the game and the game itself as an objective simulation, between the chaotic real world and the ordered game world. Nevertheless, if we consider games about politics as politics in their own right, the relatively unmediated nature of player's action can partly dissolve the boundary between the game world and the real world, and therefore, bridges the gap between simulation and reality.

Videogames about politics can be seen as states of exception on two different levels. On the one hand, if we see videogames about politics as simulations of real-world politics, then the in-game rules and consequences appear as generally inoperative in regard to the external real-world politics, which renders videogames about politics an exceptional space to talk about and reflect on political issues. This is similar to Crawford's (1984) idea that the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models. In this sense, videogames about politics appear as a safe place to experiment with different political ideas. On the other hand, if we consider videogames about politics as politics in their own right, what we are dealing with is the state of exception internal to the game, which requires the player not only to participate, but also to intervene in the game systems by rendering the game rules inoperative.

Rules versus Laws

After having unpacked videogames about politics in the preceding section, I will interrogate the structural parallel between videogames about politics and states of

exception in real-world politics in this section. In order to do so, I will make a comparison between the rules in videogames and the laws in Agamben's state of exception. Just like nation-states using law and the suspensions of law to enforce sovereignty, videogames rely on game rules to exercise control. As citizens of a certain country, we need to obey the laws of that country; similarly, as players, we are also bound by the rules of the game. For Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 149), rules are "abstract tools for thinking about the formal structure of a game", formal in the sense that "rules constitute the inner form or organization of games." They have summarized three types of game rules: constitutive, operational, and implicit. Constitutive rules refer to the internal functioning of the game logic. For example, a major constitutive rule of Tic-Tac-Toe is that "two players take turns marking the spaces in a 3 by 3 grid" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 130). Operational rules specify how a player behaves and interacts with the game. In the case of Tic-Tac-Toe, one basic operational rule is that "a game begins with an empty 3 by 3 grid on the paper" (ibid.). Implicit rules are the "unwritten rules" (ibid.) of a game, i.e., the player should only spend an appropriate amount of time on each turn when playing Tic-Tac-Toe. In examining Juul's (2003) definition of games, rules also appear as one of the most prominent features of games. According to Juul, games are, first and foremost, rule-based formal systems.

> "The rules of games have to be sufficiently well defined that they can either be programmed on a computer or sufficiently well defined that you do not have to argue about them every time you play" (Juul 2003, 36).

Videogames have the ability to uphold and process rules, which allows for a much larger space for complex game rules. According to Suits (1978, 24), the rules and ends in games are inseparable. The end in a game is to do the things prescribed by the rules and not do the things proscribed by the rules (ibid.). He differentiates between constitutive rules and rules of skill. The constitutive rules are "proscriptions of certain

means useful in achieving prelusory goals" (Suits 1978, 37), whereas the rules of skill operate "within the area circumscribed by constitutive rules" (ibid.). The former is related to the existence and continuance of the game, while the latter is concerned with the performance and well-playedness of the game. Most of these analyses are based on the understanding that game rules are abstract, pre-defined and fixed, without taking into account the different ways in which game players experience and interpret game rules. Building on the preceding discussions, this article will re-examine the notion of game rules from the perspective of Agamben's political philosophy and diversify the current understanding of game rules.

In order to look at videogames within the theoretical framework of Agamben's state of exception, we have to first respond to the question regarding the extent to which we can equate the rules of games with laws in contemporary legal systems. For Agamben (2005, 4), "the state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept." What is at stake is the relationship between law and the suspension of law, the latter is essentially "outside the law" (McLoughlin 2016, 512) and by making this temporary suspension a new norm, the state of exception gets established. In other words, in the anomic space of the state of exception, there is "a force of law without law" (McLoughlin 2016, 39). In the analysis of the state of exception, Agamben makes a juxtaposition between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. In his essay *Critique of Violence* (1921), Benjamin differentiates between legal (or state) violence and pure (or divine) violence. The former is law-making, whereas the latter is law-destroying; the former sets boundaries, the latter destroys boundaries (Benjamin 1921, 297). The idea of pure violence allows Benjamin to think of a new form of political action that is not instrumentally related to state power and political domination. Building on this idea, in the eighth of his *Theses on the*

Philosophy of History (1968 [1940]), Benjamin (1968 [1940], 257) explicitly claims that "it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency". Schmitt, on the other hand, develops a theory of sovereignty that counters Benjamin by highlighting the opposite violence – the violence of the state. In *Political Theology*, Schmitt (2005[1922], 5) has famously defined that "sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception." The establishment of sovereignty depends on the state's authority to make decisions about the application of the law. In the normal situation, law as abstractions and law as applications decided by the state are congruent. But in the exceptional situation, the state can decide to suspend the law and the decision itself becomes part of the law. Therefore, the state of exception in Schmitt's sense is still instrumentally related to the power of law and sovereignty, hence a "fictitious state of exception" for Agamben (2005, 3).

Following Benjamin's ideas of the real state of exception and pure violence, Agamben proposes a politics of "pure means" (2000, 59). For him, pure means refers to "the sphere of those means that emancipate themselves from their relation to an end while still remaining means" (Agamben 2000, xi). Pure means is a means without an end and it essentially belongs to the sphere of gesture. In order to explain the concept of pure means as gesture, Agamben (2000, 56) distinguishes three types of action:

> "if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, *as such*, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends" (emphasis in original).

In this sense, pure means as gesture is a pure mediality, exhibiting means *as such*. With this politics of pure means, Agamben seeks to break with the fiction of power

and sovereignty and opens up the conceptual possibility of a "non-statist form of political action" (McLoughlin 2016, 510). But how is a politics of pure means possible? In order to render law as a pure means with no legal ends, Agamben (2005, 64) suggests "to 'study' and deactivate it, to 'play' with it." Here, Agamben uses play in the sense of children playing with disused objects. This kind of play is nearer to *paidia* than to *ludus* if we map it onto Caillois's (2001, 13) continuum, the former implies spontaneous, free-form play, whereas the latter is structured and subordinated to rules. For Agamben (2005, 64), this unstructured, spontaneous play can liberate what has been played with (i.e., law, toy guns) from its original use value and renders it inoperative.

The relationship between law and the state of exception in contemporary political theory serves as a theoretical background for us to consider how videogames about politics can become states of exception in relation to game rules. In the case of law, there is the distinction between normative law and anomic law (or "a force of law without law" [Agamben 2005, 39]), between law as abstractions and law as applications. Is there any similar division in game rules? What is outside the rules in videogames? For Salen and Zimmerman (2004), the analysis of rules not only provides us a way to understand games, but also to enact meaningful play. Because for them, "rules are merely the means for creating play" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 302). Juul (2005, 1) suggests that videogames are "half-real", consisting of real rules and fictional worlds. Rules create fiction and in so doing they provide a context for play. For Leino, the analysis of game rules in videogames is often taken from "the scientific third-person perspective" (2010, 275) and is "part of an account by an expert who has observed the software's behavior long enough to perceive patterns and make her own inferences, whether or not accurate, about the alleged rules guiding the behavior" (2012). For videogame players, the concept of rules is not helpful to

explicate their gameplay experience from the first-person perspective. Therefore, Leino (2010, 275) proposes to use "gameplay condition", a condition "which the player needs to do and to acknowledge in order to remain a player" (ibid.), to open up the possibility to think about videogames beyond rules, videogame play beyond "mastery" (Giddings and Kennedy 2008, 30, cited in Leino 2010, 276).

These above-mentioned juxtapositions of rules and play, rules and fiction, rules and gameplay condition, indicate the distinction between rules as abstractions and rules as operations, or more precisely, between abstract rules and operative rules. The former refers to the rules written in the program code and observed by the experts; while the latter implies the rules experienced by the players in the narrative and the actual gameplay. This distinction is similar to Mosca's (2011, 2) distinction between descriptive rules and prescriptive rules. The descriptive rules (i.e., laws of physics) are derived from "observational induction from a state of things" (Mosca 2011, 5), whereas the prescriptive rules (i.e., state law) are "always and only imposed by the subject to himself" (ibid.). But for Mosca, there is no descriptive rule in the case of games, a system or an object becomes a game only if the player intends it as a game and imposes prescriptive rules onto herself (i.e., in chess, the player chooses to obey the rules in order to play). In terms of computer-based games, the situation gets more complicated. Mosca further rejects the existence of prescriptive rules in computer-based games because he believes that "[d]esigner and programmer do not prescribe rules neither to computer nor to player. They just create affordances which to play or not" (Mosca 2011, 7). The denial of the existence of game rules makes videogame play seem like a free and spontaneous activity, but in fact, as I will further investigate in the next section, the player's action is inevitably restricted by game rules. For instance, among the many possible choices afforded by the game, the player can only make certain choices that help her achieve the goal, whether it is the

goal of the game or her own goal. However, the relationship between abstract rules and operative rules is not opposed, but reconcilable. Leino's (2015) attempt to reconcile gameplay condition and rules by drawing on Heidegger's ontic/ontology duality is also applicable here. For Heidegger, the distinction between ontic and ontology lies in that "the former is concerned with facts about entities and the latter is concerned with the meaning of Being" (Wheeler and Zalta, 2011). As Ihde (2010, 32) further explains, according to Heidegger, "it is only through the ontic that the ontological can be understood but the ontological dimension is in turn the field of the conditions of possibility that founds the ontic". Following this ontic/ontology duality, Leino (2015, 9) suggests that on the ontic level, game artifacts can be described as "imposing a gameplay condition on their users", whereas on the ontological level, they can be described as "containing rules, goals, and other game-like elements, through which the gameplay condition becomes manifest, and for which gameplay condition gives their significance" (ibid.). In the same vein, we can locate operative rules on the ontic level and abstract rules on the ontological level. The operative rules manifest themselves through the abstract rules hardcoded in the program, while the abstract rules rely on the operative rules to exert their effects on the players. The reconciliation and interplay between abstract rules and operative rules in videogames have the potential to enact the state of exception, just as the interrelationship between normative law and anomic law, between law as abstractions and law as applications forms the basis of the state of exception in politics.

Playing with Rules in Videogames about Politics

As demonstrated in the previous section, the real state of exception relies on the inoperativity of law which requires we play with it. Can we play with game rules in Agamben's sense of playing with the law? How is playing with rules possible when we

are actually bound by them in the process of gameplay? This section is going to investigate these questions with analysis of what *playing with rules* means in theory and in actual gameplay experience.

Leino (2010, 133) points out that the difference between playing a game and playing with a game lies in

> "the possibility for the player's choices to become meaningful (via the threat of failure and expulsion from the game by means of game over) in relation to her responsibility for her freedom as a player."

When playing takes place, the game imposes the gameplay condition onto the player and the player makes choices that are subjected to evaluation by the game. What is at stake here is the continuation of gameplay. However, when playing with a game, the player is actually playing with "the materiality of the game" (ibid.) and it is up to the player to "decide how long the [play] activity should continue" (ibid.). In this mode of play, the player enjoys a larger degree of freedom and is not limited by the gameplay condition. Möring (2016, 10) considers this second mode of play as a way of experimenting with the gameplay condition, which often takes place while engaging with open-ended games, such as the creative mode in *Minecraft* (2011) and *Kerbal Space Program* (2015).

However, some videogames about politics do not have this openness, since they may have a particular message to convey. This makes them different from open-ended videogames such as *The Sims 4* (2014) and *Minecraft* where the goals are for the players to decide, these games normally have clear goals and expectations for players. For the players of *Papers, Please*, the goal is to survive which requires the player to perform well as an immigration inspector and make as few mistakes as possible, or to join in the riots and escape to a neighboring country. The goal for the

players of the early access version of *Not for Broadcast* is to keep the audience rating above 5% so as to keep the job. This goal involves a series of players' efforts, such as choosing the proper angles, headlines, and pictures, censoring bad language, hiding controversial scenarios, i.e., nudity and violence. These goals function as the borderline of the games: if the players fail to reach these goals, they will be out. As long as they keep these basic or "undeniable" (Leino 2007) goals fulfilled, they can play with other possibilities inside the games.

If the goals of most videogames about politics are undeniable and therefore cannot be *played with*, what is also undeniable here is the abstract rules that are attached to the goals and hardcoded into the game. Playing with them would be cheating (Consalvo 2007), which is not the focus of this research. For us, playing with rules refers to playing with the operative rules that are embedded in the game's narrative, experienced by the players and to some extent reflect the rules in real-world politics. In *Papers, Please*, for example, one important action is to carefully check the rulebook which tells the player how to inspect papers, including the basic rules, regional map, booth info, documents and the later added passport confiscation policy. These rules are a reflection and slight exaggeration of the real-life scenarios where, at real border checkpoints, immigration inspectors are also required to be objective and indifferent, and they need to carefully check each applicant's passport and entry permit for name, ID number, gender, appearance, etc. The same applies to the game where any discrepancies and forgeries need to be carefully investigated, and if left unattended, they can lead to penalties which may result in debt, arrest and end of the game. But there are times when the player would deliberately disobey the rules in the rulebook within a safe range (would not cause a game over), such as when she sympathizes with an old man who wants to enter the country for surgery, despite his lack of relevant papers; or when she chooses to help the agents of a mysterious organization

called EZIC enter Arstotzka, who claim they will free the country from its corrupt government. In these cases, the player incorporates her own emotions and value judgments within the operative rules and reinterprets political scenarios from a personal perspective.

In examining the game *Not for Broadcast (Early Access)* as another example, the setting in alternate 1980s Britain stumbling towards dystopia is full of political metaphors. The program controlled by the player is called National Nightly News, a news program that features newly elected radical party leaders, award-winning film directors, controversial columnists, etc. Like working as a broadcast operator in real-life, the player has to follow a lot of rules in regard to various aspects of broadcast operating. These include switching screens, censoring bad language, reducing interference, and controlling the multiple cameras' feeds. If the player switches to the live broadcast too early, the audience would see what is supposed to be behind the scenes, such as the news anchor complaining about the program or someone doing his makeup, which will lower the audience rating. Other mistakes like staying at one shot for too long with no interaction in the multicam sequence, not censoring swear words, showing nude or violent scenes will also influence the viewership. If the audience falls to less than 5%, the player would be fired and the game would end. Interspersed in the live broadcasting scenes are some text-based mini-games that allow the player to get to know about the player character and make more informed choices for him and his family. From these text-based mini-games, the player gradually gets a sense of the radical policies of the newly elected Advance party and this will in turn influence her choices while operating the news broadcast. For example, she can purposely choose pictures showing negative contents for the headlines and affect public opinions about the party. Unlike real-life national news

programs that always act as a propaganda machine for the government, the player can ironically show the darker side of the society and play with the idea of news in this game.

In the analysis of the above two games about politics, the player is not only participating in the game, but also intervening in the game by rendering the game rules inoperative. These interventions may not lead to better in-game performance, but only through intervention, the player can directly examine the political rules that are normally taken for granted, then question who defines them, and think about the power relations behind them, which reveals the political transparency and immediacy of considering games as politics in their own right.

The understanding of play as intervention echoes Agamben's argument delineating play as means of profanation. For Agamben, profanation is a political operation that deactivates the prevailing power relations, which is essentially a form of intervention. In the next section, I will elaborate on Agamben's theorization of play as means of profanation and identify its limitations when applied to contemporary videogame play.

Play as Means of Profanation

For Agamben, a real state of exception relies on the devices of profanation to suspend the sovereign violence and emancipate politics from its utilitarian ends of domination and dictatorship. In his book titled *Profanations* (2007), Agamben emphasizes play as "an organ of profanation" (Agamben 2007, 76). This section will explicate this argument in detail and re-evaluate this argument in the case of contemporary videogame play in the era of neoliberalism.

When theorizing play, Agamben (2007, 85-86) uses the example of a cat playing with a ball of yarn and children playing with ancient religious symbols or other disused objects to illustrate how play renders the objects being played with inoperative and thus repurposes the objects. In the case of cat playing with yarn ball, play frees the behavior of hunting from its utilitarian end. Even though the cat playing with the ball of yarn and the cat catching prey are two activities sharing the same logic and form, only the former is emancipated from its relationship to an end, which is, according to Agamben, a pure means that leads to profanation.

Agamben further elucidates the difference between secularization and profanation. Secularization, in essence, is a form of repression, which "leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another" (Agamben 2007, 77), whereas profanation, on the other hand, is a form of intervention which liberates what it profanes from its utilitarian ends. Secularization and profanation represent two different political operations: secularization is a reinforcement of the original power structure, whereas profanation "deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized" (ibid.). Applying this distinction to videogames, if the rules of a videogame are merely a reproduction of the political system in real life, it would be like secularization which does not touch the inherent power relations. Only if the game rules are no longer restricted by the rules in real-world politics will there be more room to play and experiment.

One example of videogames as secularizations is *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), a social simulation game that lets the player escape to a deserted island to live with various anthropomorphic animals. The game implements a series of economic activities such as mortgage and stalk market (an equivalence of the stock market in real life) in the game mechanics, and by doing so, it only allows the players

to repeat the logic of the capitalist mode of production and consumption in the process of gameplay. As an obvious example of secularization, this game reinforces the prevailing economic system of capitalism without providing an alternative imagination. On the other hand, certain government simulation games that attempt to simulate geopolitics and elections can be seen as profanations. One such example is *Democratic Socialism Simulator* (2020), a game that lets the player be the first socialist president of America and make decisions about real public policies in America ranging from tax reform, health care, immigration, the proposed wall on the US-Mexico border, the Pentagon's budget, student debt, etc. For each proposal, there are two opposite options available to the player. Each choice will influence the voters' support, congressional control, financial status, people's power and carbon emissions represented by different icons at the bottom of the game interface. The player can carefully assess the impact of each proposal on these five factors and make reasonable decisions in order for re-election. She can also choose radical left or radical right policies according to her own preference, though there is a risk of being asked to step down or being overthrown. The game does not rate the player's performance, and even if the player loses the game with resignation or worse, she can always start over without being affected by the previous failures. The game itself does not have a strict definition of success, which allows the player to play more freely with the operative rules, and in this sense, the game can be seen as a state of exception of real-world politics to test out different political ideas. In this game, play has the profanatory potential Agamben observes in children's play which frees what has been played with from the sphere it belongs to, be it religious, economic, political, or militaristic.

However, seeing videogame play in general as a means of profanation in Agamben's sense would be too idealist. It resonates with the early romantic play theories,

exemplified by Huizinga's idea of *magic circle* and Caillois's idea of play as a free activity. For Huizinga (1998 [1949], 10), a magic circle is the "temporary worlds within the ordinary world" and following this definition, he points out a "very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order" (ibid.). Similarly, Caillois (2001, 6) defines play as a free and voluntary activity, separated from the ordinary life. However, as Möring and Leino (2016, 145) suggest, romantic play theories

> "emerged in parallel with the philosophy of liberalism and respective socio-economic developments such as the industrialization and the rise of the nation state".

These early romantic play theories do not address contemporary videogames and play which take place in a time considered as neoliberalism. The major characteristic of neoliberalism is that, according to David Harvey (2005, 41),

> "neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split off libertarianism, identity politics, multi-culturalism, and eventually narcissistic consumerism from the social forces ranged in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power."

In this sense, choosing to buy and play certain videogames over others is, after all, an expression of identity politics and narcissistic consumerism. This can be exemplified by the screenshots of variously decorated homes on the deserted island in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* shared on social media. Zhu (2018, 75) differentiates between the neoliberal self-fashioning and "the care or practices of the self." The former is an instrumentally-driven self-improvement, whereas the latter is a Foucauldean concept that calls for a self-transformation that breaks from the dominant power relations. He identifies both neoliberal self-fashioning and the aesthetic practices of the self in the ways in which videogames transform us and proposes to understand contemporary

videogame play in the entanglement between these two patterns. In this regard, play is no longer a purely free and profanatory activity, but has its own ends in regard to self-construction and self-fashioning.

Not unlike early romantic play theorists, Agamben also fails to distinguish between negative freedom (the freedom *from*) and positive freedom (the freedom *to*) as demonstrated by Fromm (2001). In both Huizinga's and Caillois's theories, play frees the player from the responsibility and routine of work. Likewise, in Agamben's theorization of play and profanation, play is an activity that frees what has been played with from its practical end. They fail to address the potential of "the positive freedom for self-realization" (Möring and Leino 2016, 153) which has not been fully achieved in present-day videogames and play in the time of neoliberal capitalism.

In the same article in which he praises play and profanation, Agamben (2007, 76) criticizes modern man for forgetting how to play freely due to the proliferation of new and old games. These games seek the opposite of profanatory play by "reentering the lost feast, returning to the sacred and its rites" and "televised game shows are part of a new liturgy" (Agamben 2007, 77). In the same vein, if we see capitalism as religion, then modern-day videogame play can be seen as a major rite to connect us with capitalism and consumerism, and therefore loses the potential of profanation and intervention.

Conclusion

By investigating videogames about politics within the theoretical framework of Agamben's state of exception, in this article I re-examined the concepts of videogames about politics, game rules, and play under the rubric of political

philosophy. As a general term to describe games that talk about things commonly known as *politics*, videogames about politics in this paper should be understood from two dimensions, one at the representational level and the other presentational. In other words, videogames about politics are not just simulations and simplifications of politics, they also create a complex political experience for the player to participate and intervene in. Videogames about politics are not only "a temporary, a limited perfection" (Huizinga 1998 [1949], 10) of the imperfect world, they can be part of the imperfect world. This partly resolves the "simulation gap" (Bogost 2008, 135) between the player's subjective understanding of the game and the game itself as an objective simulation, between the chaotic real world and the ordered, simplified game world. Considering videogames about politics as an exceptional state and an organic part of politics, this article attempts to dissolve the clear boundary between the game world and the real world, and bridge the gap between simulation and reality.

In the article, I have also rethought the concept of game rules under the framework of political theory and formed a parallel between the rules in videogames and the laws in Agamben's state of exception. Both laws and rules are not completely abstract and fixed, in the process of execution, they will face the intentionality of the subject and the possibility of being suspended, intervened or rendered inoperative. This leads to the juxtaposition of abstract rules and operative rules. The former refers to the rules written in the program code and observed by the experts, while the latter implies the rules experienced by the players in the narrative and the actual gameplay. This juxtaposition allows me to discuss games in relation to Agamben's notions of inoperativity and freedom. According to Agamben, the real state of exception is established based on the inoperativity of law which requires us to play with the law and free the law from its legal end. Along the same lines, if we treat games about politics as states of exception, we, as players, are also required to play with the

operative rules while we are restricted by the abstract rules in the gameplay. The answer to the question raised in the introduction concerning *whether playing with political rules in videogames is liable to create new uses or is it just a reinforcement of existing political orders*, is positive. By playing with the operative rules in the games, we can render them inoperative and create new uses for these rules which may function as an intervention in the game systems. But this does not mean that all games can be states of exception to be experimented with in the same fashion, or that all players can play with the rules and create new uses for them in the same way. The ways in which games are reappropriated as states of exception differ case by case. Likewise, the ability of the players to render game rules inoperative varies from person to person and it also depends on the possibility space offered by the game in question. To what extent can a game become a state of exception, and to what degree can a player reinterpret game rules has the critical potential for evaluating games and play.

I have also re-examined the concept of play by comparing Agamben's theorization of play with early romantic play theories. For Agamben, play is a means of profanation. Play frees what has been played with from its practical end, be it religious, economic, political, or militaristic. Agamben's theorization of play can be seen as a continuation and extension of the philosophies of early romantic play theorists exemplified by Huizinga and Caillois. But in the context of our time characterized by neoliberalism and consumerism, videogame play has its own practical end relating to the neoliberalism identity politics, and therefore lost the profanatory and intervening potential Agamben attaches to play. How to liberate play from the various ends imposed by our society? How to reactivate play as a pure means of profanation? This can be a direction to be focused on and discussed in future research.

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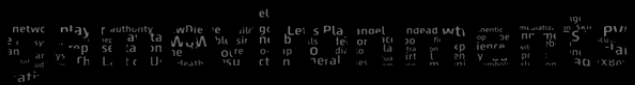

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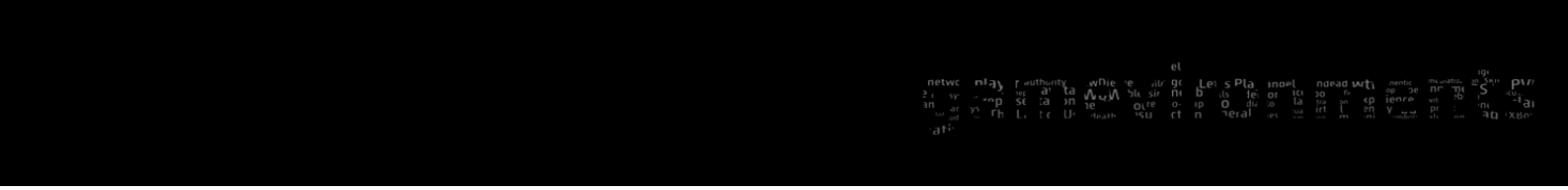

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[ii] For the purpose of this paper, I use *simulation* in Gonzalo Frasca's sense which refers to the act of "model[ing] a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system" (Frasca 2003, 223). Simulation can be understood in contrast through representation: the former models behaviors, whereas the latter only preserves the exterior (i.e., auditory,

visual) characteristics of the object.

[iii] *Unmediated* here should be understood from the player's perspective. Despite the fact that videogame is a media and therefore videogame play is always mediated, the "political transparency" (Galloway 2006, 92) of certain videogames can allow the player to experience some political dilemmas and struggles which are not radically different from those in the real world.