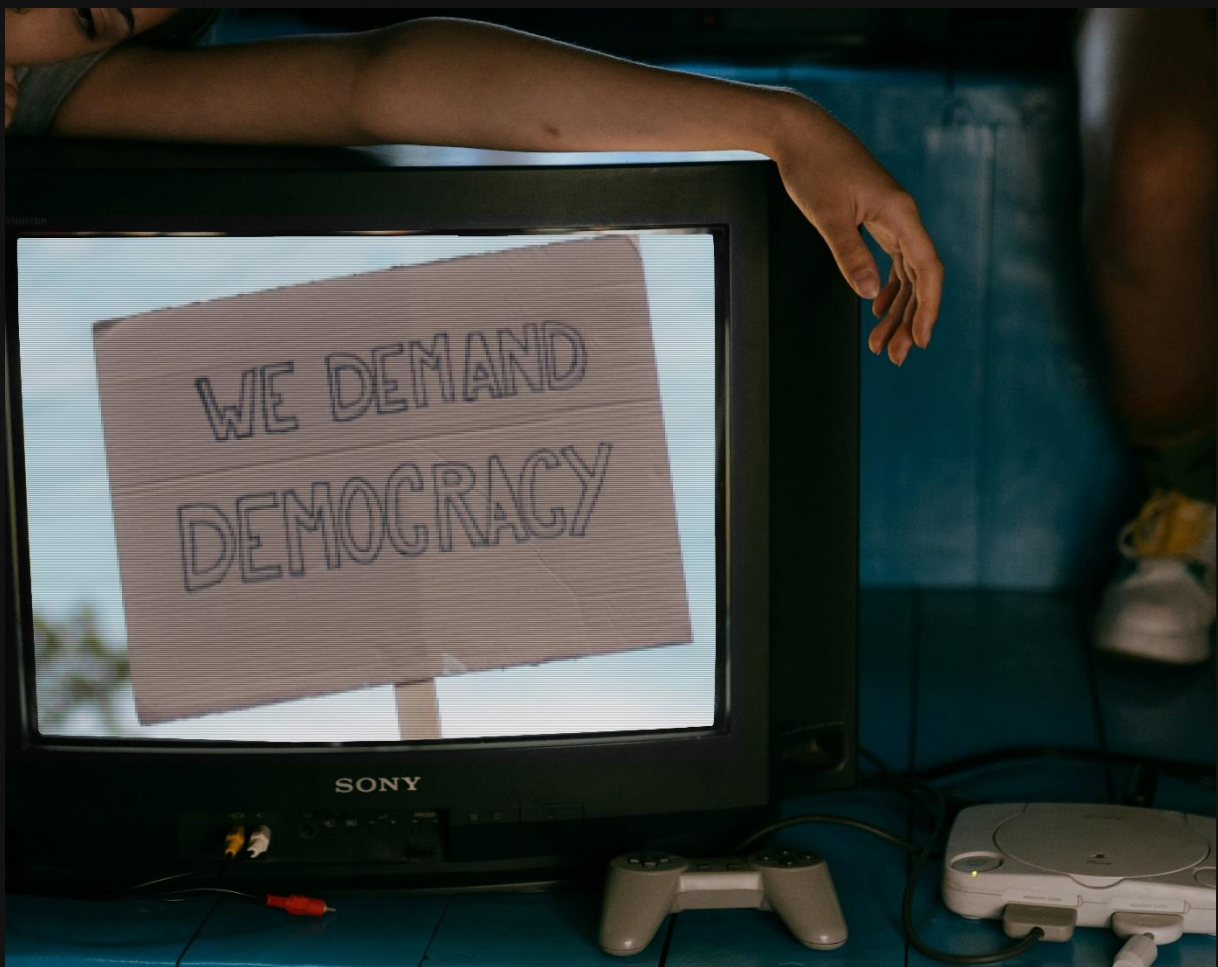


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Special Issue

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

edited by

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann



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Autocracy for the People. Modes of *response-able* Action and the Management of Demise in *Frostpunk*

Lars Dolkemeyer

Abstract

In the post-apocalyptic construction simulation *Frostpunk* (2018) two modes of action are confronted with each other. On the one hand, the player-leaders' decisions concern *their* people. The players are, in Donna Haraway's terms, *response-able* for and to the survivors of a global climate collapse in a situation of co-presently "living-with and dying-with each other" (Haraway 2016, 2). The complex interdependence of social conditions and player choices in *Frostpunk* thus problematises any notion of winning. What is at stake is the possibility of forming a community itself by acting precisely as that community, experienced through simultaneously sharing and leading it. The second mode of action lies in the decisions that oppose the perceived well-being of the community: The players are forced to manage an inevitable demise by constructing buildings, saving resources, and advancing technologies in view of the next drop in temperatures or the next storm that will deplete all depots and diminish hope. Departing from the modes of similar *dictatorship simulations*, *Frostpunk* reconfigures the genre's autocratic gameplay (Dor 2018, Wiemer 2008, 2012) to open new political perspectives.

Keywords: Community, Construction simulation, *Frostpunk*, Genre, God game, Interface, Management, Post-apocalypse, Subjectivity, Sympoiesis, *Tropico*, gameenvironments

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Players are *response-able*. Donna Haraway's (2016) insistence on the ability to respond to catastrophic ecological and economic situations, inherent as *response-ability* in *responsibility*, also opens a new perspective on modes of gameplay in game scenarios of catastrophe. While gameplay may always be structured around players'

abilities to respond to specific situations,¹ the specific relation between an experience of response-ability as fundamental to “living-with and dying-with each other” (Haraway 2016, 2) in catastrophic worlds and autonomous player action can be described as a key tension in construction simulation gameplay in particular. Players simultaneously experience a community as a shared space and time of mutual response-ability and act in autocratic modes of gameplay to create this community in the first place.

Frostpunk (2018) offers a uniquely devastating experience of this relation: In an inhospitable landscape of eternal winter after the end of the *world as we know it*, in an alternative Victorian era, a small community of survivors lives in a relatively protected crater north of London where they try to fight cold, illness, resource scarcity and ever more harrowing challenges. The player is their leader, sometimes referred to as *captain* or addressed as *Sir*, and has to take increasingly drastic measures to ensure the survival of the community by building a city inside the crater, collecting resources, managing the workforce and sending out expeditions into the surrounding *Frostland* of seemingly endless ice and deadly blizzards to find any last remnant of hope or humanity. Players are thus responsible for the community as well as a part of it. They experience the hardships of the survivors not only as statistical information to be evaluated in order to make abstract decisions but through the expressive qualities of the game world as well as the game’s interfaces. An aesthetics of coldness, which pervades all expressive layers of the game will be at the centre of a close analysis of *Frostpunk* to show that players inhabit the game world not only as an abstract collection of values, but experience the world and its conditions as a concrete place.

These conditions, the temperatures and the hardships, the illness and the frostbite, are experienced *with* the players' fellow non-player survivors. Players are responsible for them and as such, they are also, in Haraway's term, *response-able*, they are *capable to act* in a way that secures the survival of a community in a situation that requires decisive action. Response-ability is the capacity to act in this situation not only for the sake of one's own survival, but because the survival of all members of a shared community is at stake as well. For Haraway, a sense of responsibility for those *with* whom we live – and whose death may thus also be a very real part of our experience – is the foundation for the emergence of action in response to a situation which threatens the *ongoingness* of life as such. In Haraway's terms: *Living-with* and *dying-with* describe the experience, which, in a catastrophic and drastically threatening world, generates not only a sense of responsibility for each other but, more importantly, also the capacity to act according to this responsibility as response-ability.

How then does *Frostpunk* create these experiences of living-with and dying-with each other in a community, which comes into existence and is preserved only by the autocratic actions inherent in construction simulation gameplay? And how does this tension between a shared response-ability and the emergence of modes of player subjectification as autocratic leaders relate to broader discourses surrounding questions of democratic and ecological crises on a global scale, which require new ways of thinking community, too?

To answer these questions, it is first of all necessary to understand the fundamental dynamics of autocratic gameplay in classic construction simulations with autocratic player roles, such as *Tropico* (2001), as well as *Frostpunk's* distinct diversions from their generic paradigms. The specific subject positions emerging in gameplay can be

connected to Haraway's concepts of response-ability and "sympoiesis" (Haraway 2016, 58-98). Sympoiesis, as opposed to autopoietic systems that only act within clear and individuated boundaries, in Haraway's (2016, 58) terms

"means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. [...] *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company." (emphasis in original)

This concept of creating shared worlds as a co-productive process of a fundamentally intertwined *making-with* then opens productive paths for a theory of inherently unified human-machinic action in video games as developed by Alexander R. Galloway (2006, 1-38).

In this perspective, *Frostpunk* can be described as a game creating the unique gameplay experience of subjectification entirely located within a community itself, generated by processes of making-with or sympoiesis which create communities always already *as* these communities, enabled by the modes of action generated in the game's aesthetic interface arrangements. The politics of *Frostpunk* lies in the creation of communities capable of action in times of unavoidable demise, generated by specifically ludic processes of sympoiesis, i.e. processes of generating and shaping game worlds, of worlding not only *with* but at the same time *as* a community.

Constructing Subjectivities

The first chapter of *Frostpunk*'s loosely connected storyline, *A New Home*, opens with a short introductory sequence of animated shots narrated by a sonorous voice. It sets the stage for the survival of the *last city on earth* in the aftermath of a sudden global

climate collapse, caused by a volcanic eruption in 1887 that led to a new catastrophic ice age:

“It feels as yesterday [sic], we were turning the wheels of progress. Until the frost... stopped it all. [...] We have lost our world to snow and with it, our last traces... ..of humanity. We bid farewell to plenty. And for those who remained, came the time to adapt. We decided to leave our homes and head north. [...] Finally... the time has come. To build the last city on earth”ⁱⁱ (Frostpunk 2018).

The accompanying visuals of soft transitions between shifting image layers show cities descending into chaos, large steam-powered vehicles ploughing through deserted landscapes of endless snow, sunken ships underneath the icy surfaces of seas and oceans, frozen beetles in once-vibrant blades of grass, survivors fighting their way through storms, finding shelter at last in an abandoned crater with a still functioning coal generator. The mission screen for *A New Home* finally appears and summarises the survivors’ flight from a sudden blizzard into the crater, setting the guiding principle for all future player actions: “Whatever we do, we should expect the worst now that the world as we know it has crumbled” (Frostpunk 2018). The only available response to this introduction into the world of *Frostpunk* comes in the form of one single button: “We will survive” (Frostpunk 2018). The game view then descends onto the main map of the crater. In its centre, a small community of people awaits instructions, huddled near the deactivated generator. Players need to collect coal, wood and steel, build tents to house the people, medical posts to care for those who fall ill in the freezing cold, hunter’s huts to gather food and a cookhouse to prepare meals. They will have to research advanced buildings and improve the existing ones, sign laws to set guidelines for the people and above all: they will have to keep the community of survivors alive, hopeful and content.

This set of actions and parameters can be described as an example of a *god game*, a *dictatorship simulation* or *government simulation*, or, more technically, a *city-building construction simulation*. Which label applies to a game like *Frostpunk*, or which collection of labels for which aspects of the game, is a question that only underlines the necessity for close analyses of individual games and their respective, heterogeneous forms of expression. Serjoscha Wiemer’s (2012, 80) tabular overview of “Subgenres of Computer Strategy Games” lists the different categories of “Wargames”, “Realtime-Strategy-Games”, “Management-Games” and “God-Games.” These genres are differentiated by respective “main objects of strategic action” (Wiemer 2012, 80): military; economic and military; financial and industrial; and social, economic, cultural and military. More important than assigning specific games to these categories, however, is the analysis of each game’s interfaces as “a key element of computer-mediated experience and digital aesthetics” (Wiemer 2012, 76), which “create[s] a semiotic space in which perception, action, and technology are linked together in an interconnection of man and machine” (Wiemer 2012, 79). To understand the specific modes of meaningful strategic action in a game, it is therefore necessary to analyse its functional and aesthetic interface arrangements which also “include all forms of meaning production and all actions of players in relation to the structural and aesthetic organisation of the inputs and outputs of a game” (Wiemer 2012, 80). Wiemer consequently argues for close interface analysis as a way to understand the production of meaning through specific player actions as these emerge in and relate to the spatial and visual logics of the interface. This generates “structural homologies” and creates “family resemblances between different games” (Wiemer 2012, 78) without making it necessary to link these to a fixed genre taxonomy.ⁱⁱⁱ

Wiemer focuses on the general structure of different “scopic regimes” (2012, 85) as different fundamental perspectives of worlds in strategy games. He describes the resulting gameplay experience as an “oscillation between the logic of the map and the territory, between smooth and striated space, between the disembodied gaze and subjected agency” (Wiemer 2012, 87). This oscillation is realised in the different spatial modes of territorial main-maps and deterritorialised, abstracted mini-maps in most strategic games’ interface structures. It is the general temporality of visual and spatial oscillation, which produces meaning as well as player subject positions (Wiemer 2012, 89). The analysis of interfaces is therefore not just the analysis of static spatial arrangements but the analysis of shifting modes of action and subjectification as they emerge in the concrete playing of a game, unfolding in time.

In a recent study on digital subjectivity in video games, Rob Gallagher (2018) emphasises the necessity to understand gameplay experiences and the ways they create and reflect subjectivity and identity in terms of the dynamic creation of “game-fictions”, a term he borrows from Barry Atkins (2003). Gallagher (2018, 10) understands games “as fictions in which to play is to affect not merely the balance of a ludic system but also the conditions of a fictional world.” He thus highlights an important aspect for the interface-based analysis of strategic gameplay: the dynamics of action and subjectification only become meaningful in their reciprocal relation to the specific fictions a game produces. To analyse the gameplay experiences and emergent modes of player subjectification in strategy games also means analysing the dynamics of the games’ fictional worlds. It is important to note that the concept of *fictions* should not be limited to narrative constructions; it rather extends to a broad range of audiovisual and (co-)productive world-making.^{iv}

Examples of autocratic player subjectivity, from which *Frostpunk* departs in its shift towards the emergence of an experience of community, can be found in games like *Tropico*. The game is the first part of an ongoing series of games and serves here as a classic example of construction simulations, which interlace social, economic and political management across multiple layers, feature the (often vague) player role of a political leader and do not include military control in their fields of action.^v Other prominent examples like the *SimCity* games (1989-2014) or their recent successor, *Cities: Skylines* (2015), follow similar patterns. However, since they usually do not feature fictional autocratic player roles in ways that are as prominently addressed, *Tropico* presents a particularly suitable example for the gameplay modes of autocratic construction simulation.

Addressed by a loyal aide as *Presidente* in voice-overs and letters that appear on-screen, guiding through the depths of successful autocratic rulership, the players in *Tropico* are featured as dictators of small tropical islands and are tasked with creating a flourishing island economy while not being voted out of office. This, however, is rarely a threat as the means with which to achieve economic and political success are not limited to constructing buildings, setting wages and controlling resource extraction but also include *edicts*, enabling a variety of measures on a wide spectrum ranging from *bread and circuses* to clear-cut political oppression in the forms of bribes, arrests and eliminations. Structured by the general paradigm of strategy interfaces described by Wiemer, *Tropico's* interface, as shown in Fig. 1, consists of three main sections: the territorial view taking up most of the screen; the mini-map in the lower right corner; and different configurational panels taking up the lower part of the screen, stylised as a crumbling brick wall with flaking plaster, which give access to construction, issuing edicts or activating different informational views.



Figure 1. The main interface structure of *Tropicico*. Screenshot taken from *Tropicico* on Windows PC. © Kalypso Media Group.

If strategy games, as Wiemer (2012, 87) points out, oscillate between a disembodied informational vision and the embodiment of “subjected agency” in representational units, construction games show an important difference in their formations of subject action. Most real-time strategy games feature the embodied control of units on a territorial map, whereas construction and management simulations usually do not allow the control of individual units like troops or workers.^{vi} Embodied experience, however, is neither limited to representational figurations of human bodies, as demonstrated, for example, in relation to gameplay experiences of car racing by Melanie Swalwell (2008), nor to bodily representations at all (e.g., Bakels 2019, or similar phenomenological concepts in film theory, e.g., Sobchack 1992). The means of player subjectification can therefore be located entirely within the figurations constructed in the interface structure of political, economic or social management:

embodied agency becomes the embodied agency of power itself. Subject positions only emerge in the meaningful relation between enacted power and the world in which this power is enacted, a world created and constantly shaped by it.

This allows to see how player subjectification in *Tropico* lies in entirely autocratic modes of gameplay: *Presidente* is not part of the people on the island, the players do not share the lived time and space of a community whose opposing force is precisely the oppressive rulership of a dictator. The main opposing force to player success, usually defined as some form of economic gain in the pre-designed island missions, are the people and their needs. *Tropico* stages a conflict between values essential to the measured *happiness* of the citizens and the absolute rulership over the islands. These are available to the players in their entirety with all their natural resources in a variety of color-coded informational views, which can be activated as overlays in the main view; even the people are similarly available to the autocratic player action as each person can be selected for a detailed informational overview of their current status, needs – and thoughts.

The interface of the game stages modes of player action which are as absolute as the power of the players' autocratic subject positions as rulers within the island worlds. Nothing on the island escapes the players' gaze and the range of their actions. A lack of happiness can be solved either through expanding the economy, by exporting goods or attracting tourism, thus offering higher wages and standards of living, or by removing or threatening dissidents, manipulating elections, controlling media for propaganda and employing other dictatorial strategies. In any combination of the various possibilities for shaping and ruling the island, absolute power itself remains the location of embodied player action and experience generated through informational interfaces.^{vii} The island as a natural and social space, the inhabitants as

private and political subjects, the economy as a network of values, demands and production capacities, tourism as the result of appealing entertainment and environment, even political factions as clusters of measurable interests are all part of the deterritorialised modes of autocratic configuration. Nothing in *Tropico* exists outside of informational overlays or line graphs which present all data on all aspects of the game world, always accessible in the *almanac*. The key element in any mission as well as in free play, where island parameters and conditions can be set by the players, is the exercise of power as an end in itself: increasing informational values of different kinds, e.g. economy, tourism or infrastructural coverage, in order to increase informational values of different kinds, e.g. happiness or political satisfaction. There is no place in this reciprocal relation for any notion of shared well-being in a community. *Happiness* might be one of the affected values and it represents the well-being of the people, but it remains a mere value nonetheless which never translates into or even tries to reflect concrete experiences of living and suffering in an autocratically ruled society. Gonzalo Frasca (2003, 234-235) comments on the "colonialist attitude" in *Tropico*:

"I would not object to a simulation that dealt with issues such as torture or political imprisonment if it aimed at understanding politics and sociology. In this case, however, it is simply used for entertainment, which is nothing short of disgusting."

Tropico thus serves as a paradigmatic example of the modes of autocratic subjectification in construction simulation gameplay. Specific goals like expanding certain economic branches, remaining in office for a number of decades or even increasing *happiness* are all carried out within an interface structure which produces a dynamic of constantly switching between different modes of informational overview. These modes transform territory and polity entirely into objects of action for a player position of absolute power that is entirely located within these informational modes

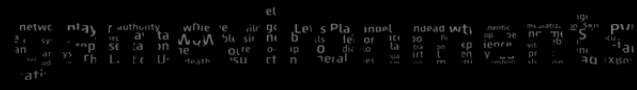
of presentation. The gameplay experience of management and construction simulations like *Tropico* is structured by a clear division of the embodied action of power and the spaces transformed to serve its needs, for example when placing farms to extract resources where they are most available, providing tourist accommodation to cover the highest rated spots of beauty and tranquillity on the island, or trying to reach the optimal coverage of electricity or availability of nightlife. The island as a concrete space vanishes behind informational transformations into abstract color-coded views of density. Any relation to the island worlds of *Tropico* and its inhabitants is mediated by interfaces, which create an informational availability of territorialised time and space for deterritorialised action upon them. The subject position created in the gameplay of *Tropico* can be described as that of a deterritorialised autocratic state apparatus itself, constantly transforming the shared time and space of a community into values to be manipulated at will.

Playing *response-ably*

In order to analyse *Frostpunk* as a shift from these paradigmatic modes of construction simulation gameplay grounded in autocratic player action, a different perspective on community and acting *in* or *as* a community can be developed here with Donna Haraway's concepts of response-ability and sympoiesis. Haraway's publication *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) calls for new ways of "living-with and dying-with each other" (2016, 2) in order to *stay with the trouble* in a world neither certainly doomed nor about to be miraculously saved but in dire need for urgent and decisive action to avert the numerous threats to survival on the planet: "to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures" (2016, 1). New practices and ways of thinking are necessary to realize entirely new formations of response-ability for one another. Crucially, any ability to

respond to a time and space of global extinction can only be realized in a mutual process of being present in precisely this shared time and space. Haraway’s notion of *living-with* and *dying-with* can be understood not only as a set of temporal terms to describe passive co-existence, but as the ground for mutual response-ability. This understanding of a shared world does not refer to a time and space merely arbitrarily inhabited with others, it rather means a world in which relations among innumerable beings and kinds of beings are continuously realised – and in continuously surprising and unexpected ways. Only then can responsible action for this world as well as for each other arise: in sharing relations to others that are grounded in the care for a shared world which makes these relations possible in the first place. *Response-ability* thus refers to the *responsibility* of such intricate relations with a multitude of others on the one hand as well as to the *ability to respond* that arises from this densely related perspective of sharing a space and time in meaningful and productive ways. Communities are capable of action precisely whenever and wherever they are rooted in *being-with*, in the full extent of what it means to *live-with* and *die-with*, i.e. not only to co-exist in ignorance, but to share a world and its capacities to weave relations in a common present.

What is at stake in the practices that arise as response-able actions is a temporality of ongoingness, threatened by the “double death” of the Anthropocene – not only the death of myriad beings and entire species but the “killing of ongoingness” (Haraway 2016, 44) as such. The Anthropocene has made ways of thinking grounded in neoliberal individualism fundamentally impossible, it is an age of “severe discontinuities” (Haraway 2016, 100). Ongoingness is threatened in that sense as the vanishing ability to think and create worlds of ongoing presence on this planet at all, offering conditions not only for bare individual survival but for “living and dying well together”, for sharing times and spaces, enabling “multispecies flourishing” (Haraway



2016, 29). While *Frostpunk* presents a world that also constantly threatens the effectiveness of productive action – albeit through freezing rather than rising temperatures – it is precisely in the game’s notion of a community capable of acting that these limits to what can be effected in a frozen world are expanded on the level of creating a shared world nonetheless.

These sympoietic practices are practices of thinking-with and making-with to create different worlds which “reconstitute refuges” and “make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition” (Haraway 2016, 101). They are always about the relational creation of shared worlds which realize the inherent relationality of being-with and the response-abilities of an ongoing becoming-with. Sympoiesis, as opposed to autopoiesis, allows to move away from notions of individuality that can never translate into a shared sense of responsibility and the inherent response-ability: Only when *being-with* each other is understood as a process that cannot rely on closed and clearly demarcated boundaries of the *individual*, but rather always already includes myriads of beings and biological processes, can this concept also be extended to relations between humans and other beings and even to humans and technological processes as well.

While Haraway mentions the video game *Never Alone* (2014) as one example of sympoietic practices (Haraway 2016, 86-89), her perspective is not interested in a general theory of video games as sympoietic ways of creating worlds, telling stories, sharing times and spaces, generating experiences of response-ability. Her concept of sympoiesis nonetheless points to a theory of video games as specific sympoietic assemblages of users and machines, presenting only a slight shift in vocabulary from the way Alexander R. Galloway (2006, 5) understands video games as “cybernetic software systems involving both organic and nonorganic actors.” His argument is

based on the fundamental action-based nature of video games which is central in gameplay prior to any semiotic signification:

“[...] an active medium is one whose very materiality moves and restructures itself – pixels turning on and off, bits shifting in hardware registers, disks spinning up and spinning down. [...] I avoid the word ‘interactive’ and prefer instead to call the video game, like the computer, an *action-based* medium” (Galloway 2006, 3, emphasis in original).

Video games, in Galloway’s terms, are not structured by reciprocal relations of action taking place in a back and forth between users and machines. Instead, “the two actions exist as a *unified, single phenomenon*” (Galloway 2006, 5, emphasis in original). This leads to a radically action-based perspective for the analysis of the specific ways in which games generate meaning: “The activity of gaming [...] is an *undivided* act wherein meaning and doing transpire in the same gamic gesture” (Galloway 2006, 104, emphasis in original) which means that the critical analysis of these undivided acts in each game has to be concerned “with the interpretation of *polyvalent doing*” (Galloway 2006, 105, emphasis in original).

Sympoietic practices of making-with and thinking-with can be found in video games precisely in this fundamental fact of their coming into being as unified actions of humans and machines in inseparable assemblages of *polyvalent doing*, as a process that is never just inter- but *intra-active*.^{viii} Sympoietic gameplay action always already integrates the players’ experience within the *entirety* of a game’s world. The irreducible gameplay experience, grounded in the undivided act of user and machine action, creates a player position which can be at once that of an autocrat and of those ruled by this autocrat. This is precisely the experience shaped by *Frostpunk’s* gameplay. It presents an important shift away from the autocratic modes of classic construction simulation gameplay described earlier. With Haraway’s concept of

sympoiesis as a specifically political way to acknowledge the human-machine *intra-actions* described by Galloway in new and original ways, the sense of community shaped in *Frostpunk*'s gameplay experience can be described in a concrete analysis of the game's aesthetic dynamics.

Managing Demise

Frostpunk presents a reconfiguration of the autocratic construction simulation paradigm not by departing from it entirely but rather by carrying it into a different gameplay experience with entirely different political implications that ultimately subvert autocratic action. The analysis of *Frostpunk* will mainly focus on the already mentioned first scenario *A New Home*. The core principles of *Frostpunk*'s gameplay are condensed in *A New Home* within one fictional setting and although other scenarios depart slightly from these principles, the key interface structures and modes of subjectification are similar in all of *Frostpunk*'s available scenarios so far.^{ix} As Wiemer, Gallagher and most recently Rudolf Inderst (2020) remark, analyses of individual games pose an important object of critical video game research, and the analysis of one of *Frostpunk*'s scenarios alone, with its roughly four to six hours of play, presents just such an object of close analysis.

To untangle the complex relation between interface structures, modes of action and gameplay experiences, it is helpful to start with the general aesthetic and functional arrangement of the interface elements in *Frostpunk*'s main view. Similar to other examples of construction and management simulation and the general structure of strategy interfaces, as described above with the example of *Tropico*, *Frostpunk* features a main territorial map, which, in the case of *A New Home*, shows the inside of a crater. After researching the *Beacon*, a tethered hot air balloon rising above the

crater, it is possible to explore the surrounding Frostland to look for survivors, resources, or information on the fate of other settlements. The most important of these is *Winterhome*, a city whose supposed success in fighting the cold and creating a functioning society gives the people a faint glimmer of hope – only to be devastated after discovering the city’s fall into chaos due to mismanagement and revolution.^x The Frostland map is presented as a distanced view over an icy desert with abstract markers for points of interest, waiting to be discovered by scouts sent out from the crater city. *Frostpunk* shifts the key tension between territorial map and deterritorialised abstraction in two ways: Firstly, switching between Frostland and crater possesses a different quality than switching between the gazes of usually co-present mini- and main-maps, since the Frostland is not an abstracted representation of the crater but rather a spatial expansion presented in a different visual mode, as demonstrated in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3. Secondly, the dynamic between territorialised and deterritorialised action is shifted on another level towards a much more interwoven dynamic of deterritorialised action taking place *within* or *through* the territorial space of the crater city itself.



Figure 2. The territorial view of the crater and the main interface in *Frostpunk*. Screenshot taken from *Frostpunk* on Windows PC © 11 bit studios.

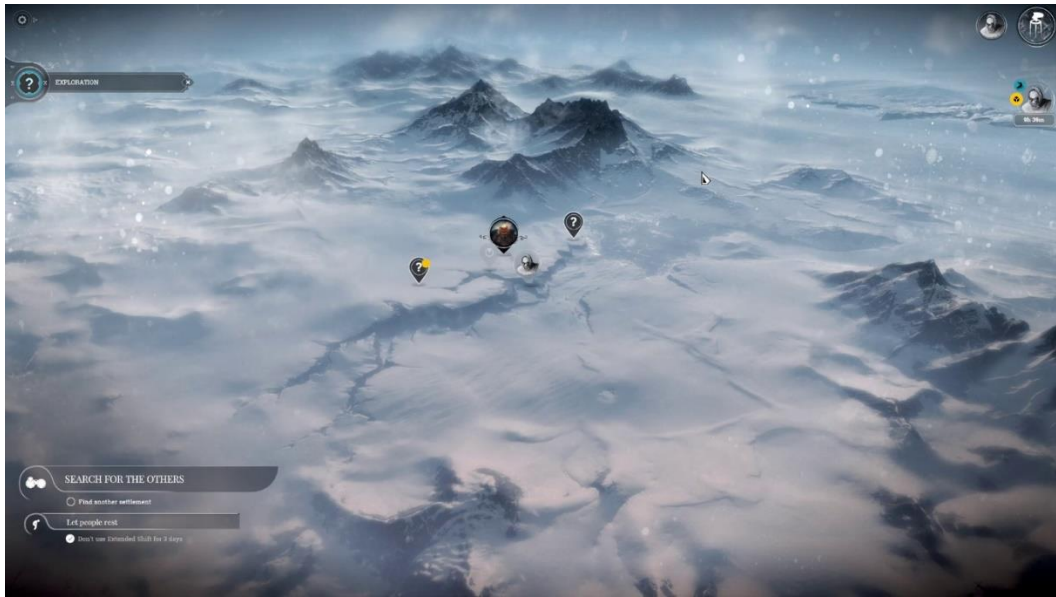


Figure 3. The abstract map of the *Frostland* in *Frostpunk*. Screenshot taken from *Frostpunk* on Windows PC ©11 bit studios.

Unlike *Tropico*, whose configurational interface design with backgrounds of crumbling brick walls presents a rather half-hearted attempt at critically or satirically creating a link between autocratic power and a lack of public well-being, *Frostpunk's* general interface design follows a different approach. Depending on the world's temperature, one of the most important variables in *Frostpunk*, the *lens* of the player view is covered with an expanding or retracting layer of cracked ice, edging closer from the fringes, infiltrating the spaces of player action. This basic interface design marks the player position as always already integrated within the game world. The ice on the screen constantly enables an experience of the changing weather as the defining state of the world within the expressivity of the interface itself, accompanied by intense sounds of crackling ice or steaming evaporation. This experience transcends any merely informational value: Colder or *warmer* weather (*warm* is a very relative term here, considering -30°C would classify as quite pleasant in the game) presents a key parameter for deciding to which level the generator should be set, which buildings need extra heating, and how many resources increased insulation and higher generator power might require. At the same time, the narrowing field of

vision directly affects the experience of making these decisions far beyond cognitively taking in numerical values of -80°C or -110°C. Being able to feel the cold world as a change in the general aesthetic quality of the interface, not merely knowing how to deal with different levels of coldness but experiencing them as a qualitative change of the world in its audiovisual expression, generates a forceful experience of sharing the dire conditions with the people in the crater. The players' view creates a subject position which emerges from a reciprocal relation between the shared game world and the space of autocratic interface action. The freezing and thawing of the screen as well as the change in soundscape depending on the relative *height* of the point-of-view – increasing wind in the higher zoom positions and more specific human and mechanical sounds closer to the ground – are structuring the actions taking place precisely through and within these expressive dynamics.

All actions as the leader of the survivors are performed with buttons and menus which are similarly presented in an aesthetic of cracked ice and a palette of bluish-grey frostbite. On the opposite side of a conventionally coded spectrum of correspondences between colours and temperatures, as it might be familiar from thermographic images, the game presents only a few elements in glowing red or yellow tones. The world itself is kept entirely in the bleak colours of the shadows inside the crater walls, the blinding white of ceaseless snowfall, the dark piles of coal, the dirty clothes of the people and their grey-brown homes. Only the generator furnace is glowing intensely in red and orange, only at night a few streetlights are lit, dimly white and orange. The interface associates red and yellow with the level of the generator, represented in bars showing its temperature as well as its stress level. It also presents efficiency and a number of building statuses in red icons or bars as well as the peoples' *discontent*, one of the two most important parameters measuring the condition of the community, which is shown as a bright red bar at the bottom of the

screen, right above the complementary condition of *hope*, presented as a bright, icy-blue bar. Like the freezing of the screen, these coloured parameters do not present polar opposites but rather generate a continuously shifting spectrum, most clearly visible in one of the few informational abstract views available in *Frostpunk*: the temperature overlay. By clicking on the large round temperature display at the top of the screen, players can activate the kind of thermographic view inspiring the colour-code of the aesthetic interface structure in general. It represents levels of temperature as areas glowing in a range from red and yellow to purple, before running out in the blue background.

The temperature view, however, never presents static conditions: changes in heat levels or changes in temperature constantly translate to changing colours, emanating from the heat sources. On another level, the movement of the people, faintly visible underneath the heat map, constantly traverses the different temperature zones, connecting them as a continuum of experienced cold or warmth, not merely as informational static conditions. The most important purpose of the heat map is to control temperature levels throughout the crater to keep people from getting sick and to secure working conditions in most of the buildings. Similar to the red of discontent which is only meaningful in relation to the blue of hope, both of which are connected in a continuous change according to adjustments in the world, the heat map is also only meaningful as a part of that complex overarching relation. Whatever actions take place in *Frostpunk*, they take place through and within interfaces whose aesthetic structure always already emerges from the dynamics of the game world: its temperatures, the movements of its people, and not least the dynamically changing states of their well-being and confidence, their *discontent* and *hope*.

Alenda Y. Chang (2019, 23) writes about the *god game* as a genre of "mastery of the external environment" against which she proposes "entirely new sets of relations, outside of those based on dominance or manipulation", which could then lead to a new form of environmental realism in games. This realism is understood in terms of "an accuracy regarding the kinds of relationships that inhere between humans and their environments and between elements within those environments, whether or not humans are present" (Chang 2019, 47-48). *Frostpunk* presents an example of just such a realism, insofar as it refers to a degree of complexity and interwovenness of game worlds and player actions, neither of which can be separated or positioned in a distinct hierarchy. The game itself constantly formulates this interwoven relation as a logic of *adaptation*, a logic of the need to negotiate player action against world conditions. This logic becomes clearly visible when the intro to *A New Home* (Frostpunk 2018), for instance, mentions the "time to adapt" in an age of eternal ice, when the main path of available laws to sign is titled "Adaptation", or when the scenario ends in a video summarising the players' efforts which always begins its retelling of the struggles with "so we adapted." Instead of following the game's term *adaptation*, however, the key logic of *Frostpunk* could be described more precisely as a logic of constant deferment, of only avoiding certain doom from day to day, or: as the management of demise. This main logic is central to *Frostpunk's* gameplay experience, as the complex relation in which fictional worlding, aesthetic and functional interface structures, and the emergent ways of player subjectification are interwoven.

To analyse this experience of managing a constant demise, which lies at the heart of *Frostpunk's* gameplay, two audiovisual and spatiotemporal modes of expressivity and functionality can be described throughout all dimensions of the game. The general parameter of the thawing and freezing interface appearance presents one aspect of a

broader range of elements contributing to dynamics of swelling and shrinking, rising and falling, expanding and retracting, which can be described through respective aesthetic and functional aspects of the game. One of the most prominent elements in this regard is the soundtrack design in its constant rising and falling of depressing strings, accompanying the whole course of the game, at times rising to desperate crescendos, during the final storm in *A New Home*, or descending into an oppressive silence in moments of utmost despair.

More subtly, however, a dynamic of alternativity running through the autocratic modes of player action contributes to the general tension of shifting oppositional forces. This alternativity is already emblematically present in the small detail of a two-coloured mouse pointer consisting of a white and black triangle, with which to choose between the often equally devastating alternatives. In one of the first messages which appear during the game as hovering dark ink blots, containing requests, suggestions or complaints from the people, the players are asked to decide whether or not to sign the *Child Labour* law to be able to assign children as workers. This moment early in the game sets the stage for the despair to come and has been widely discussed, among other terrible alternatives the game offers, in the broader discourse surrounding *Frostpunk* (e.g., MacLeod 2017, Purchase 2018). The alternative law *Child Shelters* requires the players to build the corresponding child shelter, making it impossible to assign children to workplaces and lowering the overall productivity but also keeping children safe from the most extreme conditions of sub-zero survival. It is a difficult choice to make indeed, as the children contribute greatly to securing basic conditions for survival, but one that is quite clear in its moral implications. More complex and no less difficult are considerations later in the scenario, for example when several groups of refugees from the incoming storm arrive at the crater. Many of them are ill and all of them require housing and food – it

is up to the player-leaders to decide their fate, to gauge whether or not the community of survivors is able to support more people, but also whether the community can survive without the help of more workers and engineers at all.^{xi} Most importantly, however, these decisions also force a decision about the kind of community the players want to shape, making the alternative far less mathematically inhuman as it appears at first glance. At the heart of these decisions, players constantly have to question the future of the community of survivors in the crater in a fundamental sense, realised through a series of interrelating alternatives. There are never enough resources to research all possible technologies, there is never enough time and space to create all buildings and improvements before the storm arrives, there is never a perfect balance between the offered alternatives in the *Book of Laws*. There is, instead, always the need to weigh certain kinds of destitution, certain kinds of scarcity and certain kinds of suffering against others.

This becomes even more clear when, after the fall of Winterhome is discovered, the players are offered two new paths in the *Book of Laws*, introduced by a single available button in response to the peoples' radical loss of hope: "I must give them purpose" (Frostpunk 2018). The two paths offered after the fall of Winterhome would lead the crater community in, again, two equally undesirable directions: Do we want to form a fascist society of *Order and Discipline* or a fanatic society of *Faith and Spiritual Strength*? Both paths, in turn, open up new decision trees of laws with several more mutually exclusive alternatives to shape the community. As in the first screen at the beginning of the scenario, with its single, determined answer-button "We have to survive" (Frostpunk 2018), the only action without alternative in *Frostpunk* is having to choose between alternatives from an autocratic player position.

Although only a few examples can be given here, the underlying structure of tensions between alternatives is present not only in the ways of making these decisions autocratically within functional interface structures of constantly negotiated alternativity but also in the aesthetic qualities, described above, which present these interfaces in the first place. The dynamics of rising and falling or freezing and thawing, as audiovisual and spatiotemporal configurations, translate into a constantly unfolding affective dynamic of hope and despair, in which the mechanical value of *hope* only presents one part. Although momentary punctuations of choice actualise specific alternatives in singular actions, their meaningful relation to the world can never simply be associated with experiences of either hope or despair, with a better or worse outcome. Just like the constant shifts in freezing and thawing, the constantly rising and falling melodic lines or the shifting colours of the temperature overlay and informational bars never present static conditions. Rather, the tension of hope and despair structures the experience of managing demise precisely as an unfolding affective dynamic – rising and falling, thawing and freezing, only dealing with an unavoidable demise one negotiation at a time, always having to balance compassion against effectivity. The unstoppable flow of time towards a future which promises no relief from the catastrophic condition of the world is also present in the linearity of *Frostpunk*'s temporal structure. Each day marks a unit of action, temperatures rise or drop only at the beginning of a workday, long shadows from the steep walls of the crater creep slowly across its white snowy surface as the day progresses and a timeline in the upper right corner, with small preview icons of predicted temperature changes in the days to come, moves along at the same speed. Players can pause the game or accelerate the flow of time in order to consider decisions or wait for the extraction of more resources or for scouts to arrive at new landmarks, but this only

accentuates the underlying temporal configuration. Time is running unstoppably forward, as the moving shadows and timeline constantly make clear, but it is also interspersed with moments of action trying to deal with the evolving events within that linear and unavoidable progression of time towards an ever bleaker future.

The gameplay in *Frostpunk* is structured by constant preparation for an uncertain but certainly catastrophic future, constant negotiation of scarcity and suffering in slim spaces of possibility where autocratic action is meaningful only in relation to continuous dynamics of freezing temperatures, varying states of common well-being, as well as a broad range of expressive qualities in the movements of the music, the freezing aesthetic of the interface, and also the slow movements of the people through the snow. Rarely have games managed to generate an experience of compassion as hauntingly as when, after signing the *Child Labour* law, players can see the jumping children close to the warm generator set out into the snow to work, huddled together, slowing their movements as the snow rises almost to their shoulders. It is a decision for sacrifice not in abstract informational views but in the concrete quality of the children's movements within a freezing world which affects them just as it affects the autocrats taking their childhood. After signing the law *Child Labour* and seeing the effects of the decision in the world of the crater, the abstract gain in productivity becomes meaningless in a fundamental way: This is not who we, as a community, want to be. And if, in fact, it is – then what does that say about us? This is a confrontation *Frostpunk* forces the players to endure. Acting autocratically is always located within the world in which these actions play out, a world which is itself, in turn, integral to the experience of acting autocratically in the first place.

Returning to the triangular relation between modes of autocratic action in construction simulation gameplay, aesthetic and functional qualities of the interface,

and the dynamics of fictional game worlds, the two modes of experience mentioned above, hope^{xii} and despair, can now be classified more precisely in terms of their temporal structure and in the ways they construct specific modes of subjectivity. Hope marks the experience of preparing for an uncertain future in *Frostpunk*, feeling a little more safe and at home with each action in a barren crater which is starting to transform into a liveable city, making the outlook on the days and hardships to come a little less gloomy. It presents a way to describe the temporality at the heart of construction simulation gameplay, as analysed above, in its fundamental relation of player action and fictional dynamics: A given world is accessed through autocratic action in order to construct a city and shape a society to live in that city. These modes of action – informational access, construction and configuration – only make sense in their relation to a future towards which the management of social, economic and political parameters is directed.

On the other hand, *Frostpunk* introduces a deeply affecting experience of despair through the specific aesthetic relation of interfaces and game world, in whose intricate interweaving any meaningful action is enabled at all. The despair of a world without a future lies entirely in its present, in the day-to-day nature of actions which cannot be related to grand plans for the design and flourishing of a society and economy in a world completely at the hands of autocratic actions, where nothing lies beyond the reach of the players. In *Frostpunk*, on the contrary, every action emerges fully within the shared time and space of immediate scarcity and suffering. Players are not so much concerned with the construction of cities as an activity of building towards an ever more plentiful future; they are entirely occupied with trying to manage an inevitable demise, sharing the living conditions in the crater, being present within the community of their people.^{xiii}

The tension of these temporalities is never resolved into clear states of winning or losing. It is possible to be removed from the crater and banished into the Frostland, when, for instance, the actions lead to an overwhelming *discontent* – but the experience of being part of that community, still visible inside the crater as the backdrop of a short cutscene showing the player characters’ departure into exile, makes it impossible to think of this merely as a game-over. The people live on into an unknown future without the players who need to leave precisely in order to secure this ongoingness. *Frostpunk* creates this temporality of ongoingness beyond the *fail state* of game-over and although the players will no longer be present to witness it, the community that lives on in the crater is clearly present in the staging of the singular player character moving away from the crater into the snow. More fundamentally, however, this problematisation of winning or losing in *Frostpunk* is expressed in the final cutscene after surviving the monstrous blizzard at the end of *A New Home*. *Winning* in this case means the transformation of gameplay into a story told through a time-lapse aerial view of the survivors’ time in the crater, from the first day of their arrival to surviving the storm. But this story is not told in terms of player victory or mastery over the elements. Instead, it is a critical summary of all the actions that were performed and their implications for the shared world – told distinctly as the *we* of a community which can only be described meaningfully as identical with its own decisions and the attitudes these decisions express:

“First we put our children to work. Parents lost their children. And every day was a struggle. So we adapted. [...] And in the fight for survival we crossed the line. Faith became fanaticism. The city survived, but was it worth it?” (The quote is taken from one possible final cut scene of *A New Home*, punctuation was added for readability, Frostpunk 2018).

Accompanied by the evolving shape of the time-lapse city in the background, having just survived days and days of ever decreasing temperatures in the darkness of an ice

storm, these recapitulations thoroughly get under the players' skins as one final accent in the affective dynamics of hope and despair, much like the freezing cold and the shared suffering of the people. The question posed by the game in its final cutscene is the fundamental question posed throughout the course of its unfolding gameplay experience: Is this who we want to be as a community? And it is important to note that this *we* refers to the players *as* a community capable of action, a community deciding to enact certain decisions and refraining from enacting others.

This, finally, leads to *Frostpunk's* most important shift of construction simulation paradigms and autocratic modes of gameplay. What becomes clear in the final cutscene, is a specific mode of player subjectification: Any autocratic mode of player action is always undermined by the fact that it is grounded in a shared world of eternal ice and collective suffering. The hope and despair of a community of people translate into the hope and despair of a gameplay experience which not only locates player subjectivity within interfaces of absolute configurational power, as demonstrated for classic construction simulation gameplay, but rather extends this subjectification towards the experience of a community *as such*. The hope and despair of the people, in other words, are always already part of any action in *Frostpunk*. The constant alternativity of the game as the constant actualisation of possible communities opens the perspective for an embodied gameplay experience of contingent communities. Or, to put it differently: Even through classic autocratic modes of gameplay, *Frostpunk* positions the emergence of a community as the subject of embodied experience. Possibilities of experiencing and thinking community in entirely new ways, genuinely realised in digital games, arise here: not only experiencing oneself as a part of a community, but experiencing a community and the constantly negotiated process of its formation as the subject position of action. Who we want to be as a community in the crater is determined by our actions. Purely

autocratic player action would not be affected in the slightest by deaths, working children and sending refugees back out into the snow. Player actions are only meaningful in their form of existence *as the actions of a community*. Both types of action are intricately interwoven through complex arrangements of interfaces which are always both configurational and located within the world they configure. Players are not only located in autocratic subject positions within the world they share with a community, they are within the world precisely *as* this community in its unfolding realisation.

Concluding Thoughts. Response-able Management

Two perspectives result from the analysis of strategic modes of action in the aesthetic and functional qualities of *Frostpunk's* interface structures. The close analysis reveals new and specifically ludic modes of experiencing and thinking community, which, in turn, can be examined further as a contribution to larger contemporary discussions on the possibilities of living together on a troubled planet. *Frostpunk* demonstrates ways to think communities through their abilities to act and thereby generates a specifically aesthetic idea of response-ability.

Players simultaneously experience a society of people included in processes of decision-making and sharing a common space and time in the crater – but they also share the pain and suffering of those excluded from this shared time and space. I am suffering with the people in the crater as much as with those I send into the snow. This position is constantly formed in every instance where the community and its identity are (re-)negotiated: Whenever a law is passed, whenever a building is constructed, workers are assigned, policies are enacted, but most clearly whenever people arrive at the crater and the composition of the crater community opens up to

new inclusions or exclusions. For that smallest instance, the player subjectivity of a community in a crater opens explicitly to an outside that never was an *other* to begin with: It is always already integrated in the irreducible, undivided experience of being-with.^{xiv}

Sympoiesis, in Haraway’s overarching social, political and technological framework, could describe the specific ways in which games are able to generate assemblages of this kind directed at creating worlds of living-with and dying-with, times and spaces of recuperation and refuge, experiences of being- and becoming-with in worlds that require urgent action:

“It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories” (Haraway 2016, 35).

And more precisely in the case of video games: The ways in which players act to shape communities matter, because it matters what kinds of communities are specifically enacted. It matters what communities enact communities, to pick up Haraway’s poetic cascade; it matters what relations between players and game worlds (as specific human-machinic communities) are realized, in turn, in the concrete form of a community in-game.

This is the insight provided by Galloway: The irreducibly human-machinic action of video games enables the gameplay experience of machinic subjectification to produce a sense of community as the subject of player action. *Frostpunk* enables an experience of response-ability for and within a community which is generated in a specific human-machine-assemblage. This sheds light on the reconfiguration of autocratic modes of action in the gameplay of *Frostpunk*. Everything the player-autocrats do is something that is simultaneously done as the community of survivors

in a crater. The community is never outside the players and the players are never autonomous outside of the community. Autocracy and democracy are radically reconfigured in this experience. Not only is any player action always an action whose autonomous *I* is at the same time the *we* of a community – this community is always that which enables any action in the first place. The player actions do not set off a machinic reaction on the part of the game, in turn leading to a (secondary) experience of community. Rather, the whole possibility of actions, as Galloway points out, is based on the irreducible experience of myself-as-machine, in the case of *Frostpunk*: myself-as-community and community-as-myself. In other words: the entity which is performing any action in *Frostpunk*, making choices for the well-being and against the demise of a community, is precisely this community itself as it emerges in the gameplay experience of response-ability for and entirely with others. *Frostpunk's* gameplay can never be separated into different modes of player subjectification, it presents one single process, continuously unfolding in time.

Haraway (2016, 3) clearly argues against attitudes of either “a comic faith in technofixes” or “a position that the game is over, it’s too late, there’s no sense trying to make anything any better” in times of troubling global crises. Instead, she asserts the importance of acknowledging that

“[...] we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. [...] Alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little, and so we succumb to despair or to hope, and neither is a sensible attitude. Neither despair nor hope is tuned to the senses, to mindful matter, to material semiotics, to mortal earthlings in thick copresence” (Haraway 2016, 4).

Much like *Frostpunk's* temporalities and experiences of *hope* and *despair*, as analysed above, are only meaningful in their constantly renegotiated dynamic relation, it is the emerging experience of *thick copresence* which creates productive reimaginations of

community in the game. *Frostpunk* presents an example of sympoietic practices, generating concrete ways of living-with and dying-with, of thinking-with as well as making-with each other, creating a different, possible world of response-ability. It is a world in which a community is experienced as capable of acting, even in the darkest of circumstances. It is an experience of playing a community, thoroughly being-with, where response-ability is not an exclusively guarded sphere of the living and powerful but necessarily extends to those who are sent into the snow to die as well. Living-with and dying-with are equally part of the actions which shape the face of the community. It is impossible to externalise dying children or refugees in need – they are deeply interwoven in any action which is only realised within the world and through all of its inhabitants. *Frostpunk's* experience of community is an experience of community in which the action of leaving people to die *becomes* who we are precisely as a community that leaves people to die.

This is, again, what Haraway calls sympoiesis: Practices that undermine any notion of autopoietic self-sufficient individuality that only cares for its own interests. Sympoietic gameplay in *Frostpunk* is the experience of being response-able within a community of suffering. It is possible for players to act only because they are part of this community, share the lives as well as the deaths in an icy crater and cannot meaningfully enact anything without acting from the perspective of this being-with, i.e. the living-with and dying-with the other survivors. As the final time-lapse sequence demonstrates: All decisions that would be purely autocratic are woven into a story that is told as the *we* of a community. All actions are thus rendered meaningless outside of the self-image of the community they construct. In other words: Win or fail states in *Frostpunk*, as analysed above, are entirely subverted by the creation and continuous renegotiation of a specific community along with its values and beliefs. Bare survival alone is not a very rewarding experience. What the final

sequences acknowledge as *crossing the line*, i.e. the ultimate establishment of fascism or fanaticism, might help greatly in surviving, but the cost of this style of play concerns the gameplay experience of living-with and dying-with on a fundamental level and it cannot be ignored for the sake of *win* or *failure*. People being sent to work and die as an entirely replaceable resource, suppression of dissent by force, and radical measures to avoid using resources for the care of the ill and disabled – to name only a few – are all measures that will not contribute to an experience of *winning*. Survival is not everything, it matters greatly *how* the community survives and what will become of it.

The politics of *Frostpunk* is structured by an experience of radical connection based on the ontology of gameplay as it is developed by Galloway. It is the specifics of each sympoietic assemblage or each set of user-machine-actions which reveals these actions as meaningful in any given game. *Frostpunk* produces a community which acts autonomously, a paradoxical figure only possible in digital games: the concrete experience of acting not only as other individual subjects (which could be a description of most avatar-based games, for example), but of *acting as a community*. Subjectification in gameplay is a process, as Galloway demonstrates, always inherently structured by plurality. As such it has to be analysed specifically in each game. While *Tropico* produces the subjectivity of an autocratic state apparatus with absolute power over people who become part of player actions only as abstract values, *Frostpunk* creates a process of subjectification which is continuously realised through the experience of living-with and dying-with a community whose actions *are* the player actions. It is a process of being present in a shared time and space, acting response-ably to shape a possible community while facing an unpredictable future, managing an unavoidable demise. The title of this article, “autocracy for the people”, turns out to be somewhat inaccurate as *Frostpunk* generates an experience much

better described as an autocracy *through* the people, the unique experience of acting autonomously and responsibly *as* a community and thus precisely against any autocratic power.

Chang poses a general question for environmentally complex gameplay in times of the Anthropocene which also might be quoted here to sum up *Frostpunk's* gameplay:

“Because games archetypally foreground player agency, the questions posed by collapsing or collapsed game worlds are helpfully not just ‘What is happening?’ or ‘What happened?’ but more important, ‘What am I (or even better, are we) going to do about it?’” (Chang 2019, 190)

Exactly the shift from an *I* to a *we* of creating different, possible worlds in a present which faces not yet certain doom and no miraculous salvation, is produced in *Frostpunk* as a gameplay experience by interweaving construction interfaces and fictional worlding in times of demise needing forceful and determined action as well as practices of response-ably becoming-with other beings and systems^{xv} to secure ongoingness. This is not a process of reaching a static condition, a fixed form of community, but a process that challenges notions of fixed states, playing out precisely as the constant renegotiation of a community's shape through its actions.

Analytical practices of *close playing*, as Inderst (2020) summarises, require a specific focus and can only be productive as analyses built on the personal experiences of the player playing the game. Other perspectives besides a close focus on the aesthetic and functional interface arrangements and their relation to subjectification in gameplay are possible and necessary. The perspective *I* create in *my* actions of *my* playing in *Frostpunk* highlight only one way the game enables player action. It is necessary for every precise analysis to refer these actions back very closely to the game's concrete aesthetic and functional qualities which structure not just the

singular, anecdotal experience of one player but remain open to different actualisations by other players as well. This is what *Frostpunk*'s gameplay experience shows: Every action in the game is part of the process that shapes the way players experience *their* respective communities. It is not just in the decisive moments of binary decisions that the face of the community changes; every action, every aesthetic expression, every experience of a dying inhabitant as well as of surviving inhabitants shapes the experience of community in one respective gameplay setting. The aesthetic arrangements of the game and the modes of player action and subjectification can be described as analytical results of my *close playing* but other communities are always possible – and it matters how we act to shape them.

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ⁱ These abilities and situations might be classified, for example, as genres. A general typology of different *abilities to respond* as modes of player action across different kinds of games cannot be developed here. Tracing these lines of *response* in games historically and analytically might, however, provide an interesting outlook on game genre theory. One approach with a similar interest, developed with the example of different modes of strategic action in mind, is proposed by Simon Dor (2018).

ⁱⁱ Wording and punctuation of the quote are taken from the subtitles of the intro to *A New Home*.

ⁱⁱⁱ In an earlier German version of his argument Wiemer is more explicitly sceptical about the usefulness of genre taxonomies (Wiemer 2008, 241, endnote 15).

^{iv} This corresponds to recent concepts of worlding in audiovisual media, extending beyond cognitive concepts of narration, e.g., in Fay (2018) or Chang (2019).

^v I will refrain, for the reasons mentioned, from labelling these games in any particular way. Different terms like *dictatorship simulation*, *government simulation*, *construction simulation*, *city-building simulation* and others all appear useful and appropriate for different games and different perspectives on them. Only *god game* strikes me as a problematic term: It would either ascribe a certain role to the players, which usually has little to do with the specific modes of player action in the games (with a few notable exceptions like *Populous* [1989] or *Black & White* [2001]); or it creates a pre-existing idea on how to interpret player subjectification (e.g., in terms of omnipotence and omniscience) before analyses of gameplay actually take place, thus flattening the complex and specific constructions of subjectivities.

^{vi} Later games in the *Tropico* series, starting with *Tropico 3* (2009), add a player avatar with which to wander around the island. However, it is not necessary to do so and the gameplay modes of construction and management in the main interfaces do not change.

^{vii} *Absolute Power* is also the fitting title for an expansion to *Tropico 3* that introduces, among other

