gameenvironments

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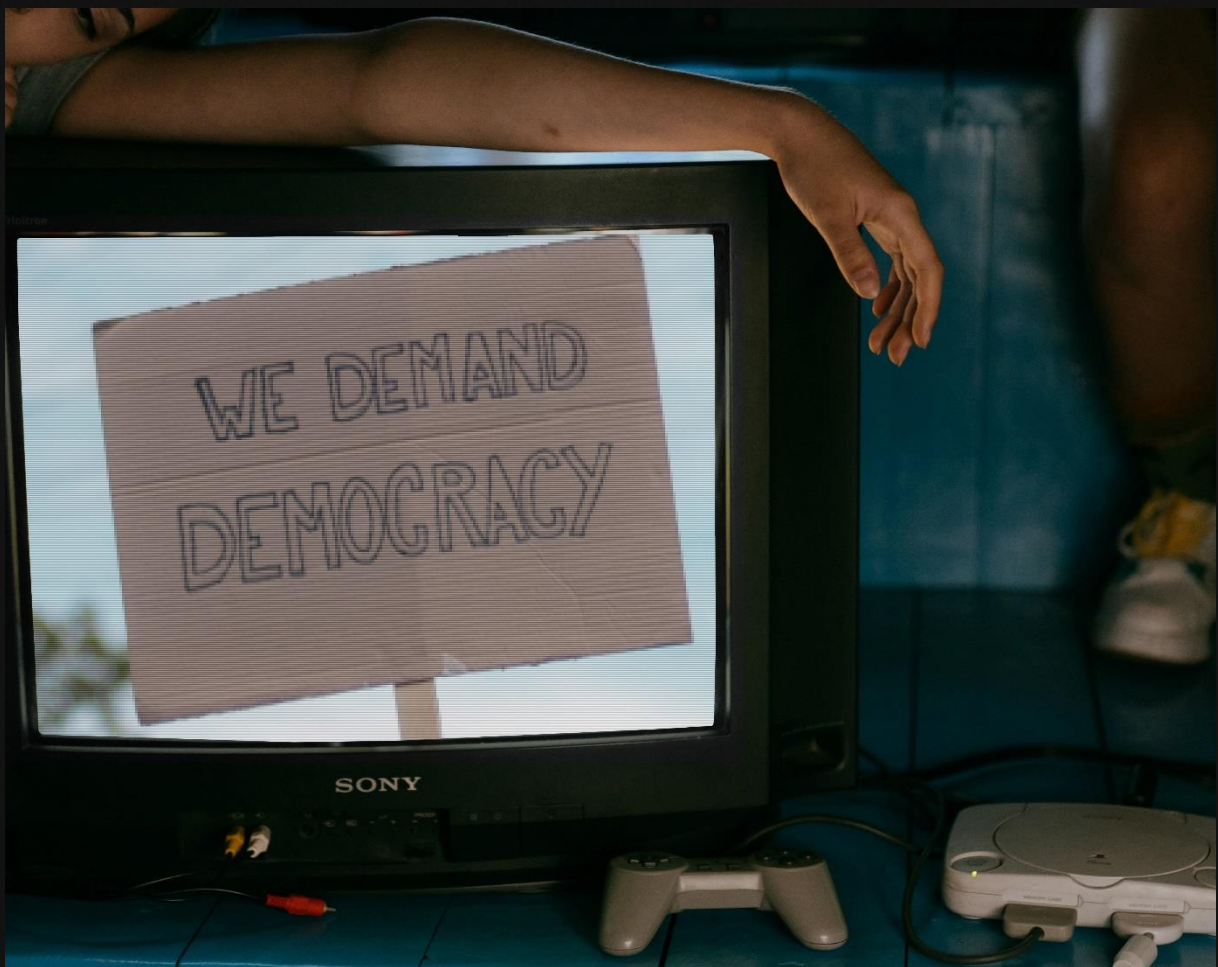
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Special Issue

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

edited by

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann

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report

interview

review

Democracy Dies playfully. Three Questions – Introductory Thoughts on the Papers Assembled and Beyond

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann

Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue, we trace the digital game's potential to represent (un)democratic political systems. We pose three central questions: Is the digital game an undemocratic medium? Is digital game development undemocratic? And: Are digital game communities undemocratic? By answering these three questions, we engage with the implications of different digital games' narratives and game mechanics, with common concerns about working conditions in game development as well as with group dynamics in game communities. In every section, the contributions to this special issue are presented and linked to these overarching themes.

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> "While freedom of speech, freedom of political expression, freedom of belief, and freedom of the press all sound wonderful, these can bring discord, instability, apathy, paralysis, and violence in the face of national challenges. On the other hand, such individual freedoms can lead to bursts of artistic and scientific creativity, economic abundance, and cultural benefits … assuming the bureaucracy doesn't overwhelm the said individual." (Civilopedia 2019)

Thus begins the *Civilopedia* entry on the lemma "Democracy" in *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*: *The Gathering Storm*[i] (2019). The entry concludes with a slightly more positive if not exactly optimistic note: "Like most types of government, democracy

has both flaws and benefits ... but it has proved the most enduring" (ibid). Consciously or unconsciously, Churchill's much-cited parliament speech from 1947 is recalled here:

> "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." (Churchill 1947)

In contrast to autocratic forms of government, democracy requires constant self-criticism. The irony, however, is that we are talking about a game that puts the players in the role of a quasi-omnipotent ruler. Here, analogous to the analysis of Wendy Brown, democracy becomes an "empty signifier" (Brown 2012, 55), a shadow of what democracy was meant to be, not the *rule* of *the people* but a game-function that allows godlike players to reach their goal more efficiently and faster: beating the game (de Zamaróczy 2017, 164). Even though democracy is praised in the Civilization series as the "most enduring" form of government and de facto is often the most rewarded by the game mechanics, what we experience in the game is nonetheless a hollow democracy, the ghost of an idea.[ii] The democratic idea has no equivalent in the mechanics of the game, it remains a narrative statement.

It is noteworthy that a historical look at digital games shows us that thirty years ago democracies were generally understood to be far more resilient forms of governance. When we take a look at the first incarnation of *Sid Meier's Civilization* from 1991 for instance, we read a slightly different description of democracy: "Democracy made possible unprecedented personal and economic freedom, and the world's strongest economies to date" (Civilization Wiki n.d.). Only thirty years ago, after the end of the Cold War, the worldwide triumph of democracy seemed unstoppable. Today, however, we regularly read about the decline of democracy in essays and in the feuilleton. How could it come to this? How was it possible that in recent years

autocratic leaders around the world have been trimming away at basic democratic rights seemingly without restraint? In a detailed historical diachronic analysis, the two American political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have examined this process of de-democratization in the USA. They called their book, published in 2018, fittingly: "How Democracies Die." In their comparison with other contemporary and historical autocratic regimes, they identified four indicators that point to processes of de-democatization taking place:

> "1. Rejection (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; 2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; 3. Toleration or encouragement of violence; 4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media." (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 23f.)

Levitsky and Ziblatt speak of global democratic backsliding and "democratic recession" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 205).

In 2020, their analysis seems more relevant than ever before. In reality, however, the democratic crisis came as no surprise. Colin Crouch had already recorded the phenomenon of "post-democracy" in 2003 (Crouch 2008, 8-11). Giorgio Agamben has been denouncing an emptied popular sovereignty since 2009 at the latest (Agamben 2012, 11). This publicly perceived decline of democracy is mirrored in digital games. Our democratic governments are apparently under constant threat, if they have not been destroyed in the first place, whether by zombies (*The Last of Us*, 2013) or eco-terrorists (*Tom Clancy's The Division 2*, 2019). Parliaments are rarely trusted to respond accordingly to crises in games. Rare are the games in which we are dealing with resilient and well-fortified democracies. Indeed, even *Democracy 3* (2013), a game that aims to simulate democratic political processes, seems to have only limited confidence in people's capacity for democracy, as we can read in its

advertisement on Steam: "Each voter's income is modeled, along with their levels of complacency and cynicism. This is the most sophisticated political strategy game ever created" (Positech Games 2013).

Digital games are not simply historical reflections of a political and social reality that exists separately from them. They are themselves components and motors of this reality, they communicate and construct world views (Pfister 2018a). They are products of their time and make visible – and playable – what was considered socially acceptable and thinkable when they were created. They communicate discursive statements and are therefore sources for game researchers to make sense of a popular understanding of democracy. If we want to better grasp this widespread loss of confidence in democracy – apart from political essays – we must turn to a history of political ideas in popular culture and also in games. In order to better understand how digital games ludify democracy and in light of our preliminary observations about the decline of democracy in games and worldwide, we want to ask three questions about the complex interrelations between the understanding of democracy and digital games:

1. Is it perhaps in the media *nature* of digital games that they do not allow democratic processes to be transformed into fun?
2. Do the production conditions of digital games make democratic processes impossible?
3. Do the gamer communities that have emerged away from the public eye testify to a fundamentally anti-democratic mood?

Question #1. Is the Digital Game an Undemocratic Medium?

The question naturally arises whether perhaps the medium itself is to blame for this negative representation of democracy. Whether it is the predominance of violent conflict as a game mechanic or the fetishization of the individual and his agency, a common explanation for both is the nature of the medium. This opens up a plethora of avenues to pursue, some of which we will elaborate in the following and some of which will be treated in the different papers. To analyze if digital games are per se an undemocratic medium we have to deconstruct some of the specificities of games, i.e. game rules, game mechanics and gameplay. Are they really intrinsically undemocratic?

Alexander R. Galloway defined the digital game as an "*action-based* medium" (2006, 3) although not only in the sense of a player using their hands to give input to the machine but also in the sense of the machine acting upon the player (Galloway 2006, 5). Accordingly, we should ask which operator actions a specific game allows for and which machine actions the game performs by itself. And in a next step we must ask if and to what degree these actions could be understood as democratic or undemocratic actions. In his analysis of *Sid Meier's Civilization*, Galloway for instance claimed that "video games do nothing but present contemporary political realities'' and by that "solve the problem of political control [...] by *making it coterminous with the entire game*" (Galloway 2006, 92). In other words: Political reality is represented in games – digital but also analog – by means of allowing and/or prohibiting and/or encouraging certain actions. The game does this by way of its rules which "provide the structure out of which play emerges, by delimiting what the player can and cannot do" (Salen and Zimmermann 2004, 11). Tobias Bevc has argued that through the prerequisite reduction of complexity games offer the player frames for reality,

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thus easing cognitive load, explicitly in regard to the political (2009, 142). They give us a glimpse of dominant political discourses by framing, for example, some political actions as *positive* and some as *negative*.

A simple example of this is the depiction of wars of aggression, which are generally – here in accordance with UN Resolution 3314 of 1974 – also frowned upon in games. That means actors who start a war of aggression in games without justification are usually depicted as villains. For example, in *Civilization VI* there is a so-called "Warmonger Penalty" for declaring a "Surprise War" ("Heavy" penalty) or a "War of Territorial Expansion" ("Egregious" penalty), however no penalty for a "Liberation War" (Gamepedia 2017). There are exceptions to this rule, though. *Europa Universalis IV* (2013) is very outspoken in its manual about military actions of dubious ethic quality, although it tries to frame this advice as satirical in tone:

> "If your forces find themselves on unclaimed or colonial lands, you can also order they attack any pesky natives. You can burn some other country's colonies to the ground, or thrash your own provinces in a Scorched Earth plan to deny your enemies the spoils of war. You can also directly seize another country's lands, which is surely the most direct way to avoid all the trouble of a peace process… so long as they are pagans." (Paradox Interactive 2013, 68)

Now as these questionable types of military conduct are embedded in a game taking place within a historical context where full democracy was hardly found anywhere on the globe, they may appear to be somewhat off the topic here, but the point is that they may serve to normalize such actions conceptually as parts of everything that is fair in war.

It is important not to forget that games are only valuable sources for their time of origin (Pfister/Zimmermann 2020, Pfister 2018a, Kerschbaumer/Winnerling 2014). In other words, as Historians we do not learn anything about the political systems

Civilization or *Europa Universalis IV* claim to display, i.e. of the past, but rather a lot about the political realities of the game's creators (Köstlbauer and Pfister 2018, Winnerling 2020). In this sense, *Civilization* is an interesting source for political discourse in the early 1990s in contrast to *Civilization VI*, which is an exciting source for immediate contemporary history. Unlike other media, the narrative in the game arises from interactivity. Andrew B. R. Elliott and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell (2013, 18) or Adam Chapman (2016, 119), among others, therefore speak of the ludonarrative. Ian Bogost has shown that games communicate discursive statements also via *procedural rhetoric* which is "the practice of authoring arguments through processes" (2007, 28). Following this line of thought, we want to argue that digital games construct *discursive political statements* through their different processes – via rules and being enacted in the form of gameplay. These are part of a discourse creating political realities of a given time. Asking about (un)democratic tendencies of digital gameplay therefore requires engaging not only with the story and iconography, but also with the procedural rhetoric of games, with their processes, rules and gameplay. Such arguments about democracy in games are at the same time inextricably tied to the creators that make them, but also to the players that enact them and their respective political socialization.

Jörg Friedrich, one of the developers of *Through the Darkest of Times* (2020), very consciously engages with the potential of procedural rhetoric to "contribute in a positive way by making a game" (Friedrich 2020, 260) to a fight against revitalizing fascism. In her *Interview with Jörg Friedrich on Procedural Rhetoric in his Game Through the Darkest of Times* Elisa Budian shows how political activism translates into game design. In the game, players have to manage a resistance group in Berlin under the national-socialist regime. The game is insofar a *democratic game* in that it translates anti-fascist activism into game mechanics and thereby communicates a

statement about the individual's responsibility to fight for a pluralistic society. Such a positioning – a sense of mission – as a democratic game is however still the exception in the context of digital games and is most readily found in the context of small-scale productions, so-called indie games such as the work of Molleindustria with its *Socialist Democracy Simulator* (2020). With this in mind, two other well-received indie games are featured prominently in papers in this special issue: *Papers, Please* (2013) and *Frostpunk* (2018).

In his paper *Discrepancy Detected. Operationalizing Immigration and Borderzone Policy in Papers, Please* David Kocik compares the gameplay of said *Papers, Please*, a simulation putting players in the place of an immigration officer at border control of the fictional Eastern European state of Arstotzka during the Cold War, with the actual situation at the US-Mexican border zone. The game forces players to prioritize papers over people and respectively regulations over sanity and reason. This dehumanizing process, Kocik argues, successfully impresses a sensibility for such phenomena on its players. He also argues that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish autocratic governments from democratic governments solely on the basis of their actions as these dehumanizing practices appear to become more and more common. The current extremely restrictive border protection policy of the European Union is but one example.

Lars Dolkemeyer continues this train of thought in his paper *Autocracy for the People. Modes of response-able Action and the Management of Demise in Frostpunk*. The game puts players in the role of the leader of a small community of refugees in an alternate history Ice Age, trying to survive the cold and to uphold civilization. The game frequently forces players to take draconian measures and to choose between morally equally problematic policies for a greater common good, creating a continuous

ludified *trolley problem*[iii]. Although the players take on the role of an all-powerful autocrat, Dolkemeyer argues from a phenomenological perspective that *Frostpunk* forces the players to permanently reflect whether the price for survival as a community might be too high in the end. This in turn creates a feeling of resonance and shared responsibility between the players and the imagined diegetic community of people they lead, which should heighten players' awareness of the necessity of individual political participation as responsible parts of the community.

While not per se inside the scope of this journal we purposely decided to incorporate three papers about board games that transform political systems into game mechanics. While different from digital games in how they represent game rules, how they enforce them and how they let players interact with them, there is also a central consistency between analogue and digital games: the basic premise of being a "system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 11). In *Turning Votes into Victory Points. Politics in Modern Board Games* Torben Quasdorf consequently applies Ian Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric* to two different board games. He thus follows Bogost's assertion "to see *procedural rhetoric* as a domain much broader than that of videogames" (2010, 46). Quasdorf demonstrates that the two games he analyses, *Die Macher* (1986) and *Bloc by Bloc* (2016), chose very different approaches in how they make political processes playable. *Die Macher*, Quasdorf assesses, displays problematic ideologies very common in modern board games while Quasdorf sees *Bloc by Bloc* as a promise for the future of a maturing, increasingly self-reflective medium.

Wir sind das Volk! (2014), a board game that puts players into the role of either the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) or the German Democratic Republic (GDR) post

World War II, is reviewed in this issue by Anton Oehmsen-Clark. According to him the game stands in the tradition of the so-called *eurogame* genre while also incorporating some interesting aspects of other board game genres. This becomes visible in how the player is asked to manage the living standards in East and West Germany. *Wir sind das Volk!* engages playfully with the contingency of past events and thereby allows players to produce alternate Cold War histories of a divided Germany and so, finally – Oehmsen-Clark argues – about historiography itself, and implicitly also about the teleological reading in which (West German) democracy was bound to triumph over (East German) real socialism.

All of the games quoted so far are political insofar as they communicate ideological arguments about democracy through their rules and gameplay. They contain conscious and intentional political messages, openly announcing their particular structural character. While political statements by authors are usually accepted in novels, films and even comics, some self-proclaimed gamers and above all big publishers still resist the idea that games should also be allowed to make conscious political statements (Pfister 2018b). The prevailing attitude amongst the larger share of actors involved – publishers, developers, designers, players, among many others – still is that digital games, as games and therefore a non-consequential pastime, "primarily experienced as trivial, commercialized leisure" (Hong 2015, 37), are intrinsically apolitical. This defensive attitude when confronted with the idea of political content in video games is the result of a deep and widespread mistrust towards everything political. On the part of the publishers, this statement is clearly due to the fear of scaring off potential buyers with controversy. On the part of the gamers, on the other hand, the reasons for this defensive attitude are not entirely clear.

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The *Civilization* series cited in the beginning is known to have produced the first games which incorporated prodemocratic and procapitalist preferences modelled in their program code and victory conditions, painting a picture of an inevitable triumph of societies of this kind in the history of mankind. They are thus a good example for how discursive political statements – apart from the clearly visible representational layer of the game – are inscribed in and passed on through game mechanics. Ruth García Martín, Begoña Cadiñanos Martínez, and Pablo Martín Domínguez trace the development of these built-in models in successive *Civilization* titles in *The Face of Authority through Sid Meier's Civilization Series*, concluding that the series watered down its bias regarding a certain form of political system in the more recent issues only to strengthen the still remaining focus on (violent) expansionism. Fashioning the games in a seemingly more apolitical way only helped to hide an increasingly undemocratic message as a natural part of these games.

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Joseph Meyer criticizes *Tom Clancy's The Division 2* (2019) in his *The Missing Memorial. The Division 2 and the Politics of Memory* along similar lines. The publisher, Ubisoft, famously claims the game to be apolitical. Meyer therefore asks why the otherwise scrupulously detailed recreation of Washington, DC in *The Division 2* misses one important element, namely the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He argues that this omission has ideological reasons, that it happened to obscure the reminder of the consequences of violence and war embodied in it, as not to disturb the game's celebration of violent combat and force of arms in its focus on US American patriotism seen through an American Exceptionalist right-wing lense. All of this combines to lend the game a distinctly authoritarian impetus.

This recourse to what is understood as US American greatness is a recurrent theme in many games framed apolitical by their producers and distributors. This can be seen

from the examples used by Regina Seiwald in *Play America Great Again. Manifestations of Americanness in Cold War Themed Video Games*. She argues that by alluding to or incorporating stereotypical notions of *Americanness* games which are staged against the historical background of the Cold War implicitly allude to perceptions of the US as standard bearers of (individual) freedom and (collective) democracy, much in the same way as board games such as the above mentioned *Wir sind das Volk!* do. What becomes clear is that framing and marketing games – be they digital or not – as apolitical means little more than putting up a façade to consciously or unconsciously hide the political statements inscribed into them as traces of the circumstances of their makers and making. They may offer more or less explicitly pro- as well as antidemocratic affordances to the players.

Yu Hao takes this reading of digital games as politically ambiguous artefacts in *Videogames about Politics as States of Exception* to a conceptual level. Based on Giorgio Agamben's theories of *states of exception* she interprets digital games as media which may be – and often are – political concerning the content but which by virtue of their specific mediality render such political contents inapplicable, at least in a direct way, to real-world issues concerning the form. Following Hao, digital games may contain political and even democratical affordances for their players, but these, much as Dolkemeyer contends for the example of *Frostpunk*, need to be consciously rendered operative by a transfer from the sphere of the game, where everything is only *as if*, to everyday life and practices.

Illuminating as all these reflections are in themselves, they do not seem to have brought us much closer to an answer to the question we posed. There are games that successfully translate democratic principles into gameplay: The *Democracy* series for example or the *Tropico* series, which simulates a Caribbean banana republic.

Ironically, it is the latter in particular that succeeds quite convincingly in making elections – but also their manipulation – a thoroughly entertaining moment in gameplay. We may conclude: The nature of medium itself is not enough to explain the increasing fatigue with democracy. Perhaps this should be taken as an indication that the question itself – Are digital games an undemocratic medium? – is too vague to allow for one simple answer. Therefore, we could try to find our answer by focusing on the two poles of what has come to be called a process of "prosuming" (Ozturkcan 2018) in game studies, which is to say, those who produce these games on the one hand, and those who consume them on the other hand, and how these poles are positioned towards democracy.

Question #2. Is Digital Game Development Undemocratic?

Almost all of the digital games mentioned in this issue have originated in democratic states and thus democratic societies. This is partially due to the economic concentration of capital in the hands of a few global publishers, partially to the ongoing – and problematic – focus of the discipline of game studies on Western and Japanese products but of course also to our personal biographical background as well as that of the scholars assembled here. We have to keep this bias in mind when approaching democracy in the games under scrutiny in the following articles. Taking this into account, let us take a closer look at those games produced in (western) democracies: what can they tell us about the social and political circumstances of their own production and consumption?

Almost all of the games under scrutiny in this issue were developed and published in democracies, all of them however under the conditions of capitalist economies. One especially successful master narrative of the 20th century was the apparently perfect

match of democracy and capitalism, which was also anchored in political theory – as displayed, for instance, in the Civilopedia entry of 1991's *Civilization* quoted above. Looking back, of course, we can easily conclude that this was a historical exception, a coincidence: At least one of the dominant totalitarian regimes of the 20th century stood not only in opposition to democracy on a political level but also ideologically to capitalism on an economic level. The recent development of the *People's Republic* of China however shows that this particular opposition no longer exists in the 21st century, which demonstrates that there is in fact no inherent opposition between totalitarian regimes and capitalism. Capitalist economies predate democratic government in Western countries and China's current expansionist policies give Lenin's thesis that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism a tragic twist ([1917] 1946). As far as we can tell, in view of their around 70 years of history, digital games appear to thrive as a medium in capitalist economies, but this might not necessarily extend to a democratic environment as well.

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There is the seemingly inevitable omnipresence of so-called *crunch* practices, a term referring to overtime, which is far too common and excessive. In the words of Jason Schreier, a journalist frequently uncovering crunch practices in big video game companies, crunch is "the colloquial term for extended periods of overtime that can last for weeks or months on end" (Schreier 2020). 60h-80h working weeks are not uncommon, especially shortly before the release of a game. In this context, Vanderhoef and Curtin speak of "sweatshop conditions" (2016, 196). While most developers voluntarily commit to overtime, social pressure and fear of unemployment soon relativize this appearance of voluntariness. Recent reports on games like *Fortnite* (2017) (Campbell 2019), *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) (Schreier 2018), *Anthem* (2019) (Schreier 2019), or *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) (Schreier 2020) suggest that crunch practices are not uncommonly ingrained into company culture.

There has also been an alarming number of reports about misconduct in the higher ranks of game developers. Recent allegations against studio heads of big developers and publishers like Ubisoft (Gach and Parrish 2020) as part of what has been called the game industries "#MeToo moment" (BBC 2019) point towards systemic power imbalances in the development of games. As Megan Farokhmanesh (2020) writes: "As more dangerous men are outed, it is impossible to ignore how many held powerful positions within games." Of course, these incidents and the examples given here do not allow to make statements about the gaming industry as a whole. For example, as Drew McCoy (n.d.), Executive Producer for *Apex Legends* (2019), states in an official blog post on the website of games publisher Electronic Arts: "we want to maintain our culture as a development team and avoid crunch that can quickly lead to burnout or worse". However, such promises need to be taken with a grain of salt as the developers of *Cyberpunk 2077*, CD Projekt Red, also frequently stated that they will refrain on utilizing crunch practices but in the end still forced overtime on their employees (Plunkett 2020). In any case, what is evident here is that game development, as is the nature of most free market economies, is not normally based on basic democratic principles but is usually organized in a strictly hierarchical and plutocratic manner.

Ryan House analyses the resonance of working conditions in *real life* and in games in *Likers Get Liked. Platform Capitalism and the Precariat in Death Stranding*. He sees the working conditions of the precariat of the 21st century reenacted in the game *Death Stranding* (2019) in form of an algorithmical allegory or – in the words of Alexander R. Galloway (2006, 91) – "allegorithm." In this sense, House is not talking about the working conditions of game developers in particular but about insecure labor in general of which the game's core gameplay loop, he claims, is an allegorical representation. House formulates the thesis that by playing the game players

undergo a process of unification with precarious workers and are therefore, ideally, enabled to critically assess power structures outside the game world.

There, this process of unification historically leads to trade unions. However, as Ben Gilbert points out: "Unlike other entertainment production mediums, like TV and film, the video game industry has no real union options" (2019). The organization *Game Workers Unite!,* while not a union in a legal sense, aims to change this current state of affairs but it remains to be seen if organizations like this can stimulate more democratic work environments in the industry.

Emil Lundedal Hammar is rather pessimistic about such an outcome, though. In *Imperialism and Fascism Intertwined. A Materialist Analysis of the Games Industry and Reactionary Gamers* he reads both the production processes within the globalized gaming industries with their multinational companies and cross-platform products and the gaming culture of those who play these games with its multinational websites and social media channels through classic Marxist theory. Thus, he arrives at the conclusion that 21st century gamers are reaping the benefits of the labor of programmers and other game workers, mainly from the global South, who are exploited by what might be called a postmodern manifestation of economic imperialism. And to be able to do so with a clear conscience, Hammar concludes, they need to enact reactionary, authoritarian, and discriminating behaviors and worldviews implicitly directed against those whom they indirectly exploit in their gaming practices.

It may not come as a surprise at this point but too little thought has been given to this so far: most games are not created as part of a democratic creation process. While democratic working environments may still be the case for smaller ambitious

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indie games, AAA game productions are strictly hierarchical. Worse still, the comparatively young industry denies its workers most of the social policy achievements of the last century: 40 hours a week, paid holidays, collective bargaining. Now all we have to do is look at the other side of the screen: the players. After all, unlike other media, the game is only created in the moment it is played. Perhaps it can be seen that here the games are repurposed democratically within the framework of an original democratic digital culture?

Question #3. Are Digital Game Communities Undemocratic?

Christopher A. Paul (2018, 2) in his recent monograph *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games* brings forth an argument similar to what has been developed in this introduction when he states that "[v]ideo games, like all technologies and media forms, express ideologies." He continues by saying that "many of their ideological implications are not openly discussed" (ibid.) and points out that "[m]erit is a key part of the code within games, effectively becoming a central ideology that shapes what games get made and how they are played" (ibid.). In this sense, it can be said that the procedural argument of many games is one of improvement by hard work, of reaching a position of power – in the game – through sheer effort and sheer effort alone. In how it emphasizes the achievement of the individual and diminishes the value of support received from others, meritocracy in games is very much compatible to the myth of the lone wolf.

Few media celebrate the cult of the lonely hero as successfully as digital games. It is often claimed that games have to allow a high degree of agency[iv] because else nobody would want to play them: accordingly, the heroes in games are legion. They save the world by the minute, without the help of allies, and they certainly do not

need lengthy decision-making processes, parliaments, juries, courts of law and such (Hess 2007). They alone recognize the real danger where classical political structures have failed, and they are not afraid to make unpleasant decisions. Sounds familiar? The omnipresence of this enticing narrative in popular culture is one of the reasons for its success in real-world politics. Games that cater to this myth usually are located in the third tier of the player typology proposed by Kallio, Mäyrä and Kaipainen (2011, 335), which consists of games intended to be played on a high intensity level, and for a long time. Such titles are usually aimed at those who see themselves as *hardcore gamers* – as opposed to *casual gamers* which, allegedly, only play *non-real* games. As catering to this player base appears to be a very successful strategy of the games industry, it remains an open question whether these very dedicated players are especially attracted to Lone Wolf narratives, or if the kind of games they prefer are consciously crafted to accommodate such narratives.

The myth of the lonely hero is now so widespread that it can be found in almost all single-player campaigns from *Bioshock* (2007) over *Mass Effect* (2007) to *The Last of Us* (2013) (Pfister 2021a). The player characters may have important secondary characters as companions but the final decision on whether and how the world can be saved always depends solely on the playable protagonists (Pfister 2018c). They have no need to rely on any substantial support and are not an integral part of any community. Rather, they are single decisive individuals, in accordance with a central message of neoliberalism, which consistently wants to see the individual valorized to the detriment of the state (Pfister 2021b). And yes, more often than not, this lone wolf or lone hero is a male character, signifying the long-standing tradition of "heroic masculinity" (Buel 2013, 53), very much common, for example, in imaginations of the American West. However, we can also see more and more female protagonists in games who, mind you, usually do not challenge the prevalence of this myth. In this

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sense, a Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series (1996-2018) or an Ellie of *The Last of Us 2* (2020) is also very much a one-*woman*-army, alone against the world.

These games may, however, also be played against the grain. Espen Aarseth (2007, 132) has described this as the "implied player", that is "a role made for the player by the game, as set of expectations that the player must fulfill", and the practice of "transgressive play" (ibid.). This "symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game" (ibid.) is always possible. Still, the question remains how common such acts of rebellious and transgressive play really are, and how often these games and their lone wolf attitude rather serve to normalize certain assumptions about individual and collective agency, relations between the individual and society, and collective responsibility and representation which do not align well with democracy.

Such ideological expressions – in the form of procedural arguments – indicate dispositions of the culture they are the product of. In the same vein, Christopher A. Paul connects the actions afforded by many games to the communities that gather around them. "The prevalence of meritocratic myths", as he calls it (2018, 4), led to a "videogame culture […] heavily policing the notion of what constitutes a 'game'" (2018, 163f.) and, building on that, a "constant policing of who 'belongs,' as dominant norms are reinscribed to make women feel less welcome" (2018, 74). Paul also shows that it is impossible to understand democratic or undemocratic tendencies in digital game communities separate from the games that are played inside these communities. "In other words, gazing into the mirror of digital games helps us better understand ourselves," as Nicolas de Zamaróczy (2017, 168) has recently put it, and this might also entail revealing parts we perhaps never wanted to understand.

Not uncommon are highly normative discussions about what is even deemed a *real* game and what is rather, often derogatively, called a *Casual Game* or a *Walking Simulator* (Zimmermann and Huberts 2019). Those who are unable or unwilling to comply with the demands of what a *real* game asks of them, are in danger of being expelled from such communities. The in- and outgroup-building achieved this way operates by defining group characteristics through faulty implicit syllogisms stating *We are gamers*; *This is what gamers are like*; *Who is not like us cannot be a gamer* (Pfister and Winnerling 2020). The mere existence of everyone these people perceive as a threat to their gamer identity makes them – mainly "men who felt themselves despised and dispossessed except when they sat at a keyboard" (The Guardian 2019) – lash out in the most nefarious ways. What is now called *GamerGate* – an event or rather an excess of disinformation and harassment that shaped gaming culture as we know it today – was the most vicious example of that (Keinen Pixel den Faschisten 2020). The implications of this event not only for democratic attitudes in gaming culture but also for online communication in general and therefore for real-world democracies as a whole are significant (Warzel 2019).

Jacob Euteneuer and Josiah Meints dive deeper into group formation among gamers in *It Was Just a Joke. Demagoguery, Humor, and Video Game Streaming* by showing how live streamers – here exemplified by PewDiePie and Dr DisRespect – play along with these processes and deliberately use offensive language as performance, what Euteneuer and Meints call *demagoguery*, to give them a cynical spin. In using racist and misogynic tropes to build and maintain a devoted fan-base open for commercial exploitation, these streamers boost gamer culture's inherent toxic potential. The worrying outlook is that demagoguery, once adopted as a group-constitutive model

of thinking and acting, will not be abandoned quickly independent of what becomes of its initial users, and will continue to instill undemocratic practices into gamer culture.

Thiago Falcão, Daniel Marques, Ivan Mussa, and Tarcízio Macedo try to tackle these phenomena from another angle by focusing on E-sports in Brazil in *At the Edge of Utopia. Esports, Neoliberalism and the Gamer Culture's Descent into Madness*. This provides a valuable counter-perspective to the predominant analyses of a Global North in this issue. They analyze the statements of gamers in Brazil discussing a proposition for legal regulation of E-sports in Brazil via Twitter. Although there apparently was a strong impulse to oppose a regulation of E-sports shaped to serve the interest of the multinational companies behind the games, this movement relied heavily upon those narratives glorifying Lone Wolf mythemes as pointed out above. Thus, it served a neoliberal worldview rather than an emancipatory, democratic impulse. What to do? The last two questions asked about the conditions of production and reception have shown that widespread undemocratic processes also take place here.

Question #1, Reloaded. Is the Digital Game an Undemocratic Medium?

What about the digital game? Is it undemocratic in its very essence? Naturally, the undertaking is far too big for a collection of scientific articles. But in the service of scientific knowledge it is sometimes necessary to overreach oneself. As is so often the case, we started with a few questions and instead of answers we end with even more questions. What the different works have shown is that in and around digital games a growing fatigue for democracy manifests itself. This is in line with findings from

historical discourse analysis and the history of ideas. After all, our social and political reality also originates in popular culture. This is a basic prerequisite for the functioning of our hyper-complex societies. But is it true that games do not allow democratic content and, above all, game mechanics? As we have already shown with the example of *Tropico*, this is not necessarily the case. That there are few attempts to turn democratic processes into fun does not mean that it is impossible, only that we are simply not accustomed to it yet. One aspect which also would have deserved coverage is that especially in multiplayer games at least somewhat democratic structures develop very quickly within the player base, no matter if they are called guilds or clans.

But there are other signs also that things are not as bad as they may seem at the moment. Michael Laumer and Marcel Kabaum provide in *Code of Resistance. On the Potential of Digital Games and Game Jams for Civic Education* insights on what might be called the grassroots movement of game development, *Game Jams*, and their potential for political education. These are short events that bring together developers, designers and other interested parties in order to create small games in a set amount of time. Laumer and Kabaum analyze five games developed at the so-called *#ResistJam* and trace their potential uses for creating political awareness and raising democratic consciousness. Laumer and Kabaum see these titles as valuable tools for civic education as they allow for easily accessible play experiences even in light of limited time and hardware capacities.

In addition, in recent years there have been more and more attempts by serious games to educate players about the functioning of democracies. Such an example can be found in the research report *Projekt CH+ Games for Democracy. User-Friendly Political Self-Education through Entertainment Design* by Sophie Walker. She presents

a gamified solution to inform Swiss voters about the candidates for upcoming local elections. By running a study to collect feedback on elections and possible solutions to overcome democratic fatigue, she participated in creating an application which consciously uses mechanics and structures known from game design to bring people into contact with their local candidates in a playful way, and to facilitate gathering information about their election programs. A second feedback loop study conducted after testing a prototype tentatively suggests that the application may indeed reach its goal of drawing more voters to the ballot box. It is probably no coincidence that the game *Democratia – The Isle of Five* (2020), developed by Blindflug Studios, also comes from Switzerland asking this central question: "Will the players work together and let the island flourish, or will political intrigues and conflicts of interest in the fight for victory mean its demise?" (Blindflug Studios 2020).

As we all have been shown over and over again in the last months of 2020, free and fair elections are the core of the democratic process. If they fail, everything fails, and democracy, though still standing in name, becomes an empty signifier as in *Civilization VI*. But if digital games – or for that matter, other games or gamified applications – are capable of supporting the electoral processes, all is not yet lost. If democracy has died in digital games, it was in play only. We may still respawn, beat these bosses and ascend to the next level.
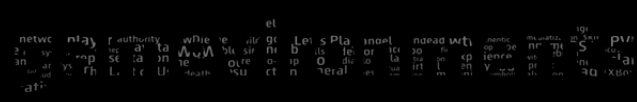
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[i] The second major expansion to *Civilization VI*.

[ii] Players might console themselves with a look at the Civilopedia's copyright, where it says at the end that "[t]he content of this videogame is fictional and is not intended to represent or depict an actual record of the events, persons or entities in the game's historical setting" (Civilopedia 2020).

[iii] The *trolley problem* is a popular ethical thought experiment, asking the question: When you are faced with the choice of saving one or more people by your own hands, how should you choose? There are several variations to discuss basic ethical problems.

[iv] Agency, according to Janet Murray, "is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" ([1997] 2016, 123).