

THE VIOLENT BECOMING: THE COMPLICATIONS OF VIDEO GAMES IN THE ORDER OF CAPITAL

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Abstract: This article examines the status of video games in the context of relations between the subject, technology, and capital. The premise of this exploration is the re-actualization of the critical trend that represents video games as the cause of violence in real life. In response, we suggest that the scope of inquiry should be broader and more complex. Most importantly, we need to understand the medium of a video game not as a destructive singularity but as a human extension that provides the upgrade to the current development modes of the subject. In Deleuzian terms, this medium creates 'dividuals', strengthening subordination to the ideological apparatuses by technological control. In addition, video games provide a simulation of the becoming process that can lead to the creation of the autonomous subject – the cyborg. This allows us to reframe the status of violence in video games, presenting it as problematic, but differently. In particular, we consider the following issues: (a) systematic acts of violence as basic structural elements of the simulation processes, in which the main problem is the glorification of gore; (b) the surge of violence as the direct consequence of the attempt to make the becoming process more realistic, and the problematic state of military video games, which used to support the controversies of modern neoliberal warfare.

Keywords: violent games, ideological apparatus, subordination, becoming, cyborg.

Introduction. Violence in video games as a political problem

Regular, and very vocal, proposals from politicians to place additional regulations on video games rely on quite a trivial reasoning: games



disrupt our good society. The consequences of such a populist approach are rather profound: the video game becomes a legitimate enemy, which also means that it is now fully integrated into the network of current capital power relations. The justification for such rearticulation is the (unproven) thesis that violence in video games causes violence in real life, which, using the terminological toolkit of the left, we can classify as sabotage of relationships between the subject and capital. What we need to argue here is that there is indeed a strong connection between the game, the subject, and capital, but it is much more complicated than the blunt political rhetoric around the technology suggests.

The primary theoretical paradigm of this article is the post-Marxist critique of the subject and technology. The structure of this article is as follows: Section 1 analyzes how and why video games become a political issue, and which status in the circuit of capital it currently holds. Section 2 introduces the critique of the subject and the role of violence in its development. Section 3 explains how the video game becomes a part of the officially sanctioned subordinate relations between the subject and capital, and how it creates a possibility for the simulation of becoming. The last section explains how using the perspective developed in the second and the third sections we can understand the problem of violence in video games, and what controversies it causes when we consider it concerning the order of capital. While this article does not introduce any apologetic rhetoric for the status of video games, it widens the discursive field, in which such rhetoric can appear.

Violence in the media seems to be a normalized problem until a unique precedent takes place. For instance, in 2018 there was a scandal around Lars von Trier's thriller *The House That Jack Built* (2018). The movie included many naturalistic scenes and caused the outrage of viewers, critics ('Lars von Trier is a stupid, arrogant troll [...] writes Justin Chang for Los Angeles Times (Chang, 2018)), and the Motion Picture Association of America (as the distributing company released the unrated director's cut without its permission (Sharf, 2018)). However, the criticism of video games is more radical, as cultural recognition of the legal framework that controls it is different. In the film industry, there is a conventional set of constraints dictating what level of violence is appropriate and for which audience, which both viewers and experts rarely debate (and if they do, it does not reach the political level). While video games do have a similar system of constraints, there are political debates about whether these constraints are sufficient, and whether it is correct to classify games along with films.

The most obvious reason for the fact that the violence in video games makes such an easy target is like the game: not representative, but simulative. The game does not only represent violence but invites participation in acts of violence. As Alexander R. Galloway puts it, the

game is an 'action-based medium' which means that it does not only demand interactions (as any other software application), but also the involvement of the user (Galloway, 2007, p. 3). Due to this fact, violence in films and games is different: the film is a (comparatively) neutral depiction of violence that presupposes only the emotional involvement of the viewer, but the video game is a performance of violence that walks the player herself (quite often quite meticulously) through the acts of violence. Therefore, among all media rated for consumption, the video game is the most provocative and, low-hanging fruit for political technologists.

For this reason, the video games problem is regularly included in political campaigns. One notable precedent occurred during the 2016 elections in the USA; this was the rare instance of agreement between the parties of Democrats and Republicans. They reached the consensus in their wish to re-categorize video games: to withdraw them from the category of general entertainment and to close them up in the section of adult entertainment alongside, as the candidate from democrats Hillary Clinton once described it, 'tobacco, alcohol, and pornography' (Peterson, 2015). While Hillary softened during the elections themselves (she even posted her photo playing a Nintendo, and acknowledged that not all video games are the same), her opponent who eventually defeated her, Donald Trump, continued to stress the fact that 'Video game violence and glorification must be stopped [...]' (Trump, 2012). In his opinion, violent video games are the major cause of school shootings. In this case, the blunt rhetoric about 'the game equaling pornography' did not receive any upgrades: he demanded to rate video games (and sometimes entertainment in general) 'for what they're doing and what they're all about,' which can be interpreted as 'teach to kill' (Hall, 2018). Trump then organized meetings with representatives of game companies, but this eventually did not lead to any noticeable consequences.

We could argue that Trump treated video games in the same way as immigrants or foreign intervention in the elections. They were the problematic externality, which complicated the execution of biopolitics. The major problem with his argument is that there is no scientific evidence that violence in video games is the source of real-life violence. Trump's position on video games can only be classified as a subjective opinion. Moreover, there is a reason to believe that his rhetoric was intentionally misleading. As some critics say, video games received heightened attention because someone or something should take the blame for the persistent problem of gun violence in the USA, and the government was using games to ignore other more evident and essential causes (Sarkar, 2018). Remarkably, the critics noted that the problem behind the gun violence is not the lack of restrictions over the contents of games, but the lack of restrictions over the distributors of weapons (which happens because, as with everything in the neoliberal

history of the USA, weapon companies are private companies, and they operate according to common market rules). Some critics called Trump's actions a 'political theater', in which the video game industry was a 'scapegoat' (see, for instance (Allen, 2018; Ibrahim, 2018)).

It is not even important who was right: Trump or his critics. Most importantly, the status of video games was rearticulated once again: due to these circumstances, video games received a promotion from entertainment to a political issue. However, in the context of a critique of capitalism, we need to reverse this conclusion: video games were no more alien to the political processes of modernity, they became an internal force that can modify the circuit of capital. Stigmatization in this case is not an obstruction but a promotion. There are certain cases when capital absorbs and instrumentalizes the critique because its legitimate claims and transformative potential are recognized as a threat, but this case demonstrates that it can do the same to a phenomenon that under other circumstances would be classified as an oddity. It appeared that video games had discursive connections to the already unstable relationships between the government of capital, the subjects and the regulative and subordination ties that exist between them. This is not because video games are a violent medium, but because everybody plays them. After all, the presence of violence does not necessarily transform into a political issue: nobody discusses the harmful effect of Italian 'giallo'¹, because the target audience of its best-known auteurs (namely Dario Argento and Mario Bava) is relatively small, and nobody argues that the system of regulations of this genre is not sufficient. Given the size of the game industry (it earned 43.4 billion in 2018, which is 17% higher than in 2017 (Minotti, 2019)), and the number of users involved (the amount is 2.2 billion in 2018 (Wijman, 2018) and 67% of USA citizens play (Crecente, 2018)), this political collision was inevitable, as blockbuster games started making more money than blockbuster movies. In other words, the game industry is mature enough to be a scapegoat, as its size is now immense. Therefore, the PG system is suddenly dysfunctional, and we are back to the discussion of what is allowed and what is not.

By being an externality, the game becomes a modifying factor in political economy. Of course, it previously had an affiliation with different aspects of it. The video games industry is a part of capital production by default in a purely economic sense: as every commodity of capitalism, it comes from human labor. It also absolutizes labor, creating the phenomenon of 'playbor' and, therefore, changes our understanding of work (Scholz, 2013). However, with all these scandals around violence, one more connection is established: *the game is not an economic but political force that undermines the subordination*

1 «Giallo means «yellow» in Italian, but in cult cinema discourses the term refers to a group of violent, highly stylized Italian crime films» (Kannas, 2019).

mechanisms. Meanwhile, these two connections are not the only logic that we can apply to the relation between the video game and capital, and later we are going to suggest other ways of how the video game fits into the rotating machinery of capital.

1. Becoming the alternative to subordination

The discussion around video games is a part of a larger narrative using which the government tries to moderate the impact of technologies on the mechanisms of subject development. The subject is important as it is a functional part of the scheme: as Judith Butler puts it, the subject is a paradoxical construct that is both a result and a source of the power execution (Butler, 1997, p. 2). Capital, in this case, is the prerequisite that hijacks and modifies every action of the subject and at the same time delegates it the responsibilities for further autonomous reproduction. To control this configuration, as Gilles Deleuze or William Bogard would point out, capital produces abstract machines, and assemblages, which Louis Althusser calls 'apparatuses' and Michael Foucault 'dispositifs' (Bogard, 2009). What digital technologies in general and video games, in particular, are capable of doing, is altering the development techniques of the subject and weakening the assemblage, which can lead to unintended consequences. In this context, we need to define the status of the subject, the modes of its development, and the role of violence in it.

1.1. The Subject

Even in the pre-digital stages of modernity's development, the vertical distribution of power between the government and society was already skewed. However, the notable shift in power redistribution took place with the introduction of ICT, and the ability of the government apparatus to control the subject's development decreased. Of course, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri put it, capital relatively quickly recovered by turning information and communications technologies (ICT) into the new mechanisms of control (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. xii), which did not eliminate is the value of technologies but forked the course of its development. As a result, we now witness the situation where the balance of power becomes both altered and radicalized: ICT have provided unprecedented liberation for the subject and unprecedented control for the government. *In this context, there are two main scenarios for the subjects' modifications – the 'dividual' and the cyborg.*

Bogard argues that the definition of the subject alone does not explain the embodiment of the control practices. He suggests pairing the definition of the subject with the definition of 'dividual,' which does

not replace or deny the subject but extends its function by technological determinism (Bogard, 2009, p. 22). This addition is crucial, because, despite the notable interference of repressive apparatuses, the subject is the ideological/discursive construct that restricts material life as the result of epistemological manipulations. Meanwhile, the dividual is the result of the physical interference that strengthens this manipulation. Therefore, the subject-dividual is the capital's ultimate goal after ICT became integral to the evolution of modernity. On the other hand, there is Donna Haraway's conceptualisation of the cyborg which is opposed to the dividual both teleologically and ontologically. The definition of cyborg does not highlight the material dependence on technologies, nor does it strengthen the coherence of the subject's subordination. On the opposite, it gives a normative perspective of the subject's autonomy that we can reach with the right utilization of technological extensions. For a cyborg, the technology is a tool that helps to open a restraining codification chain and create an alternative subject.

1.2. Becoming

In the case of the dividual, the mode of the subject's development is subordination, and in the case of the cyborg, it is *becoming*. Deleuze uses the latter definition to describe the alternative mode of development that ignores the necessity to build a linear history and proposes multiple temporal perspectives. While the subject still can not escape the objective movement of time, s/he can alter the process of her/his evolution through certain conventional temporal stages prescribed by capital: 'to get young and old' at the same time as they put it (Deleuze, 1995, p. 170).

In this context, the becoming is a temporal analog of reterritorialization, which is a reorganization of the pre-determined microphysics of spaces. Together they are constituting coordinates for the alternative subjectivity, which main aim is to recode the assemblage and force it to work not for the system, but the subject. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and later Bogard, argue that the primary aim of such rewiring of the assemblage is 'commonwealth', which is the mode of collaborative production of material and immaterial things (Bogard, 2009, p. 27). The capital system, no matter if it is democratic or autocratic, is threatened by this: the appropriation of technologies by the cyborg in the process of becoming destabilizes capitalism (which is shattered even without it but still feasible).

It can easily be argued that the projective nature of the subject and accent on reflectivity in late modernity blur the boundaries between the subordination of the subject-dividual and the becoming of a cyborg. However, as Hardt and Negri suggest, while the mechanisms of control pretend to be loose and invisible, one can take the

subordination for liberation. Therefore, it is fair to assume that becoming remains as unattainable as it ever was. In other words, ICT can help rewire the assemblage to make it more adaptable, but even new technologies cannot prevent it from fulfilling its initial purpose. Similarities between the two modes are striking, and differences are subtle, so the subject can choose the wrong paradigm of development and end up being a latent dividual instead of a liberated cyborg.

1.3. Violence

Subordination as the fundamental relation between capital and the subject is a series of non-deliberate design choices. Ludic violence, as a particular form of violence, is always immanent to it. According to Slavoj Žižek, there is subjective and objective violence, where the subjective is concrete and visible, and the objective is abstract and concealed (Žižek, 2008, p. 9). Baudrillard describes a similar situation when he explains the native character of violence in the labor processes (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 12). Firstly, we must note that such conceptualization of violence goes beyond the understating of its daily application. Violence is not used as a general term for a particular class of actions or specific manifestations of power. It is not only contextual but also non-evident: it is the sum of practices that inherit the system and are essential for its proper functioning, as violence allows capital to receive and increase the economic surplus.

The violence of capital is rarely explicit in peaceful times; it is (a) imminent and (b) domesticated violence. As Žižek notes, it is subtle, dissolved in the mechanisms of capital, and always ready to be showcased explicitly. A system representative can legitimately or illegitimately use violence without any penalties from the local and international democratic institutions. As Paul Virilio would point it, we live in the context of 'administration of fear,' surrounded by loaded weapons, courts, prisons, and soldiers who are ready to turn the subject's peaceful daily life upside down (Virilio & Richard, 2012). Then, there is the violence of capital, naturalized and perceived as the 'objective rules of life'. When this system malfunctions, this 'objective violence' gives way to the one immediately directed at the subject. It is precisely the moment when the ideological apparatus intensifies its message and we hear politicians condemning video games.

2. Video game as a simulation of becoming

To sum it up, violence is an underlying, and sometimes heavily secured and concealed principle that organizes relations between the subject and capital. Based on that, we can understand the critique of video games in the following way: allegedly, violence in video games allows

the inevitable malfunctions in the system to occur more often. In other words, the game is a medium that uncovers the hidden principles in the machinery of capital. However, in this case, we may overlook the fact that the capital is also using video games to prevent disclosure of its hidden mechanisms. To see the role of the video game this way, we need to consider the game as an extension. According to McLuhan, an extension is an amplification of physical and psychical capabilities which amplify its practices (McLuhan, 1994, p. 4). In particular, a video game provides a way for virtual reality to augment social reality. In this case, the game is not just a technology that inserts itself into the infrastructure of modernity, but an institute, which shapes practices by using certain norms and rules. Here we consider two ways of how a video game can modify the subject-capital relations: the first way is sanctioned and aims to improve subordinative mechanisms, and the second way is an alternative that supports the idea of becoming.

2.1. The sanctioned culture

There are multiple modes of augmentation through a video game. In most cases, the game is designed to be an extension whose role is dictated by the necessity to create the use-value for entertainment. Besides, there are highly realistic games, such as the widely discussed *Microsoft Flight Simulator* (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008, p. 173), which target recursive loops of professional practices. Moreover, there is the phenomenon of gamification, in which it is not the world that is implicit to a game, but the game is implicit to the world. Finally, there are non-digital games, which are not included in the debate due to the lack of the explicit display of violence². However, in the case of digital games, we see the game culture which is sanctioned by capital, and which augments the subject-dividual practices.

There is a trend of using video games to strengthen the relations of capital: companies, including NASA, use various software simulations for research and development purposes; there are guides on how to utilize *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* for the pilot training; the U.S. Army recommends to soldiers to play *Call of Duty* in a peaceful time to maintain the military identity (Romaniuk, 2017). In this context, the video game matters if we consider it as a normative representation, or if we want to stress the active nature of video games, as a *normative simulation*. As Alexander K. Galloway mentions, video games rewire the player to execute specified algorithms (Galloway, 2007, p. 92), and it seems that this becomes a paradigm to strengthen the subordination processes.

2 Violence and subordination in non-digital games still can be implicit, as it is discussed in Trammell, A. (2020). Torture, Play, and the Black Experience. G|A|M|E Games as Art, Media, Entertainment.

What are the consequences, and also the benefits of the increased attention to video games in society? From this perspective, even the sanctioned games have not been fully recognized as integral but rather temporal or decorative supplements of the ideological apparatuses. Hence, even though the video game is 'officially useful,' it is still considered experimental, which means that the practical applicability of the game still cannot escape stigmatization. The central critique here is that the game can create an illusion of a simulation, but it can make zero impact on social reality, simply replacing less attractive parts of this reality instead. However, such an escape can be useful if necessary. From early on, computers became helpful to people who experienced issues with socialization, as Sherry Turkle has pointed out (Turkle, 2005). This trope allows us to consider the game not as a perpetually innovative training apparatus for subordination, but as a starter kit for becoming.

2.2. Simulation of becoming

Interpreted in this way, a video game is an alternative to subordination. In particular, such a critical position can be provided by role-playing games like *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) or *Baldur's Gate* (1998), which have mechanics that encourage various types of simulations. There are four ways we can talk about becoming in this context. In the first case, it is a steady development of the virtual alter ego that the user can approach as a simulation. Such development includes making decisions about character updates, equipping tools or weapons, and then watching a spectacle that is similar to one of the fights in the film *Real Steel* (2011). In the second case, the player develops their skills by interacting with the game such as *Commandos* (1998), *X Com* (1994) or any esports game. In this case, development is less about the design of the virtual character than directly about the actions of the player who operates the character. The skills that the player develops are the property of the player themselves; the better they adapt to the game rules, the further the progress can go. The third case of in-game development takes the non-linear direction of story narratives and spatial narratives as described, for instance, by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2004). The underlying factor that makes all three ways of development so essential is decision-making. It also manifests the bifurcation point for character development in drama (according to John Truby for instance (Truby, 2008)).

These three approaches to constructing the ludic self reinforce each other and make decision-making as complex as possible. In the case of *Baldur's Gate*, artful management of the party is never enough if each party member is weak. For this article, the best example can be found in *Deus Ex* (2000). The problem with *Baldur's Gate* is its old-fashioned tabletop mechanics, namely dependence on the role of

invisible dice, which have too much executive power. In comparison, *Deus Ex* is a first-person action game that allows the user to control the character directly, enhance it with implants, and choose how this combination of personal choices and the design of the character can assist in completing quests. In this case, such ‘micromanagement’ of the character directly impacts the repertoire of tactics which the user can utilize.

The video game as a simulation for becoming is an easy target to criticize: even if it is an open-world video game, it is still a pre-designed definite experience. Therefore, decision-making is only possible between the given options, which is the kind of experience that Baudrillard calls simulative (1993, p. 61). However, it is necessary to remember that a game is a means of entertainment, not a manual for revolution, and such simplification of the concept of becoming is required to sell it to the mass audience. However, it is another question whether this particular level of simulation is effective enough. In the end, all we need is an active medium that serves as a starting toolkit for further development. In the end, we need to consider not what the games suggest but how it is used.

2.3. Play and Game

To distinguish between the real and the simulated freedom of actions, we may turn to the insight that McKenzie Wark derives from Jacques Derrida’s differentiation of play and game: play is a sum of actions without any particular order or a definite aim, while the game is an activity within the defined framework of a rulebook (Wark, 2007, p. 14). The play is a chaotic, borderless and unrestrained pleasure; the game is a set of fixed states, where the environment itself and all actions in it are predetermined. Further on, Wark makes an even more important point and argues that the game and play are not necessarily contradictory categories, but ‘play’ can exist within the restraints and confinements of a ‘game,’ if the user chooses the right mode to relate to it. In this sense, all open-world games, from *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) to numerous episodes of *The Elder Scrolls III* (2002) can be placed on the continuum from ‘play’ to ‘game’: what they offer is not complete freedom of choice, but carefully designed areas where freedom of choice is possible. Moreover, it is not only the structural properties of the game that allow them to oscillate between these two categories but also how the player inhabits the game and brings its mechanics to life. In this sense, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) is more of a ‘game’ but it is also a ‘play’ if we utilize its resources properly (or blindly).

In further discussions of the liberating potential of video games, we may want to consider not just the fictional reality of the game, but video games as a medium at large. For example, we can discuss what Galloway calls a meta-interface (Galloway, 2007): the tools that allow

the user to go beyond the lore while still staying inside of the game space. Such functions as 'save' and 'load' allow the in-game events to become reversible, which bends the linearity of subordination. Together with the previously mentioned three interpretations and one factor of becoming, the meta-interface supports what we call 'replay-ability,' which, in this context, means the potentially infinite amount of scenarios that the active nature of the game makes possible. Replayability works against the one-dimensional imaginary landscape of the subjectivity that capital imposes. While remaining a pre-designed medium, the video game still provides more degrees of freedom that the subject can access in the iron cage of daily life. Furthermore, if we take networking in online games into account, the collective play opens the intersubjective dimension of tribal cooperation (see Stephen Smith and Tyrone Adams (2008)), which can ultimately recreate the social reality, but is now based on new and different rules, in the act of collective becoming.

3. Complications of violence

No matter if we consider a video game a simulation of subordination or becoming, violence remains a persistent problem. However, the game rearticulates the status of violence, which changes from the intentional sabotage of the system to a side effect of the education process. Below we consider three further complications of violence made visible by conceptualizing the game as a simulation of becoming. Firstly, our speculations should not obscure the main issue, as violent acts are still the dominant mechanic of simulation. Secondly, the gore is tightly connected to realism in video games, which in turn is the product of technological innovations in graphical processing. The more literal and detailed the simulation becomes, the more evident violence gets. Thirdly, the status of military video games becomes even more complicated. As simulations of subordination, they used to justify the neo-liberal regime and now suffer an (unexpected) backlash from their discursive allies.

3.1. Modulation of violence

The first controversy of video games is that violence may be their integral structural part. In this very specific case, we are not speaking about certain harmful attitudes such as racism or xenophobia (which are topics for different papers), but, more generally, about the underlying ontological necessity to harm to proceed with the narrative. On the ontological level, violence in video games is the implicit part of the functional system, so much so that it becomes a routine. Describing the consumer society, Baudrillard points out that not only objects are

commodities, but even phenomena become commodities by adopting the character of objects' model production and distribution (George Lukács named the similar process 'reification' (Lukacs, 1972)). Violence is yet another non-material phenomenon that be reified when produced industrially (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 35). The model upon which its production relies is the reincarnation of the platonic idea, which stays behind the curtain but serves as a blueprint for every 'real' phenomenon (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 57).

In video games, there are at least two layers of modelling which can relate to two different understandings of becoming. The first one is the game mechanic which makes the player systematically kill enemies to pass through game locations; this understanding is rooted in the environmental narratives Jenkins is talking about (Jenkins, 2004). The second kind of becoming is what we call 'tactics': the methods which players invent or borrow to make their raids more effective.

Of course, there are numerous examples and cases where the player can pass a game without killing anyone, relying only on diplomatic abilities. For instance, in the controversial violent action game *Postal 2* (2003), in which (non-motivated) violence is the main selling point, the player can still avoid it and live a long day of dull suburban life to complete the game. Many RPGs such as *Torment: Tides of Numenera* (2017) suggest more sensible non-violent ways to complete the game, as the player can talk their way out of every situation. However, these are also exceptions to prove that the peaceful way is an unpopular alternative. In the case of *Postal*, peaceful solutions ignore many game mechanics and do not introduce many new ones - isn't it proof that games are not games without violence? Generally, non-violent methods are rather exotic in mainstream games.

Violence makes the interpretation of the game as the simulator of a cyborg rather problematic. Of course, the cyborg was never innocent: in Haraway's writing, a cyborg is a renegade who escaped the circuit of capital (Haraway, 1990, p. 154). Deleuze and Guattari have stressed that their analog of the cyborg, Nomad, is a war machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 351). However, in this case, it is not always clear what can justify the cinematic repeats of deaths in *Max Payne 3* (2012), glorified fatalities and brutalities in *Mortal Kombat* (1992) the victorious scream 'headshot' in *Unreal Tournament* (1999) and even the exploding bodies after critical hits in *Baldur's Gate*. Can the didactical value of becoming justify violence in video games, and can anything at all justify violence?

We can, of course, argue that the extreme example of becoming is a role-playing game (RPG): such games do not describe the objective process of development, but rather the peak of transition. Or we can pretend that the accusations are redundant and argue that violence is the unfortunate routine part of the process of becoming. In both cases, we recognize violence in video games as an a priori harmless feature, an objective circumstance. With this argument, we suggest the

critics drop charges and pay attention to other features of games such as photorealism. However, the realism of video games is not immune to bold questions that may finally win over the (lack of) scientific rationality in debates about violent games.

The public drama around video games is the result of two instances of negligence: politicians overrate the impact of violence, but gamers tend to underrate it. *It is fair to say that one discursive element is absent from both lines of argumentation, and this element is the acknowledgement that the violence is designed to be cool.* The real problem may be a glorification of violence in pop culture, rather than real-life violence as a consequence of consuming violent media. Video games structurally rely on implicit and explicit violence, and capital valorizes this fact to increase the surplus value extracted from the culture industry. Even if mediated violence is harmless, can we allow it to be a showcase of our culture? This is not the question of interactive ethics, but the question of interactive aesthetics, and it is not about the norms of behavior, but about the norms of representations.

3.2. Realization of violence

The second contradiction of violence in video games is their preference for realistic gore. It may seem that the opponents of video games see the glorification of violence and its consequences as the central problem. However, as Ian Bogost pointed out, such problems did not emerge when video games became realistic, but when *Pac-Man* (1980) was programmed to eat its enemies to proceed further (Bogost, 2015, p. 46). In other words, it is not (only) the display, but the ontology of the game that worries critics so much. Our case reflects the double-layered structure of capital that Guy Debord described as the spectacle (Debord, 1983): the showy display hides repressive machinery, but both are equally guilty as they are one mechanism. Historically, current bad publicity around video games is based on the ontological accusations that later were strengthened by the arguments about representation.

However, such realism is also what allows for convenient becoming. In this sense, the game is a step forward from the hyperreal normative images of propaganda. The technological advancements altered video games in the same way as films: the subtlety of visual narrative was replaced by explicit detailing. Once suitable technologies became available, developers of video games were eager to implement realistic 3D graphics to make users rely less on their imagination and more on empirical virtual worlds. We as gamers moved from the early model of representation where text described the details that GPU failed to provide, to the more direct contemporary mode in which elements of the game do not exist if they are not shown. At the earlier stage, archaic sprite engines were not capable enough to present realistic graphical assets, and the texts of the game were responsible for driving its

narrative; these texts also filled in the logical gaps, so the players could imagine what was technically impossible to depict (especially RPGs on Infinity Engine exploited this approach extensively). At the contemporary stage, the new visual mode of realistic representation has increased marketability, and, consequently, transformed video games themselves. The new isometric look of *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) won over the former fan base of *Baldur's Gate*. The first person perspective of *Morrowind* allowed players to take better control over the character, and the window for character build-up became just a supplement to the core gameplay, rather than the primary element of the interface.

The inevitable consequence of advancement in graphics was that game violence was becoming more scandalous when the game depicted manslaughter. Not just the outfit of the enemies, but even their internal parts had to be photorealistic. For instance, the mechanics of the already controversial *Mortal Kombat* received a makeover that converted the insides of killable characters from abstract red lines into detailed representations of internal human organs. The more visually literal the killing scenes became, the more evident they made the original sin of the video game that pedantic critics had already discovered in *Pac-Man*.

3.3. Contradiction of violence

The third controversy primarily concerns the simulation of subordination, which is not limited by relatively harmless projects such as *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. It should not come as a surprise that violence has played a key role in the games that depicted historical or modern conflicts. Militarist values of the dominant ideology are reinforced by action and strategy games and normalized in-game cultures. Video games have been supporting the neoliberal warfare of the USA in particular and glorified the status of the US military for decades. Given that routine violence is a significant part of video game ontology in general, it can be argued that armed conflicts became a prominent narrative of modern life and a particularly attractive selling point for action games. In the words of McKenzie Wark, this narrative is a part of the *military-entertainment complex* (Wark, 2007, p. 6). Moreover, producers of video games did not create original discourse for it but appropriated other media such as TV programs and films. This is how *Operation Flashpoint* (1999), *Call of Duty* (2003), and *Battlefield 1942* (2002) series found their target audiences. This narrative then received critical acclaim from state representatives: video games are used as a part of military routine even in peaceful times to maintain soldiers' identity, and there is the game *America's Army* (2002), produced by the US Army to promote a career in the military.

The official attitude changes when violence in video games is declared a national threat. In this situation, military games find

themselves in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, a celebration of violence in military action disrupts the idea of subordination. On the other hand, subordination is simultaneously reinforced by the narrative and the action, where the common good is achieved by climbing up military ranks. As a result, both the opponents and proponents of video game violence are trapped in a discursive loop. When Trump's administration attempted to make video games responsible for domestic violence, it also implicitly prevented the same video games from justifying the actions of the US army abroad. This can be seen as a major glitch in the state ideology.

The situation becomes even more peculiar when it is difficult to distinguish propaganda from mediated violence. In the meantime, the government has never made any attempt to prevent US television such as Fox News from showing the same kind of military violence e.g. in news programming. From this perspective, the government (accidentally) tries to censor, or at least restrain, the simulation of subordination, not violence as such. Therefore, the problem is like the medium, and also, in the proprietary right to control the narrative.

A third-party simulation claims ownership of the narrative which is typically a proprietary representation owned by the state media. Television provides the old-fashioned one-directional communication channel through which the state apparatus can fully control the situation. At the same time, even the most linear video games call for active participation. In some cases, this means participation in acts of violence that are more brutal than any broadcasts from the war zones.

However, video games also provide too much room for maneuver. Full control over the game subject makes various unscripted options available: the player can devalue the narrative of patriotic violence by turning it into a massacre, or by refusing to leave the camp. Both scenarios disrupt the simulation of subordination and create use cases for a simulation of becoming.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the problem of violence in video games by applying the critique of the relations between the subject and technology in the context of capital order. Populist critics hold violence in video games accountable for real-life terrorist attacks; as preventive measures, they demand to place stricter regulations on the distribution of violent games, similarly to pornography; which would eventually withdraw such games from the public sphere of entertainment. There are two aggravating factors: firstly, video games are not just interactive but also an active medium that makes players perform simulative acts of violence. Secondly, the size of the video games industry is now immersive. As a result, the video game enters the interplay

of power between capital and the subject, in which violence is already the critical systemic principle, eventually leading to real-life violence. While being stigmatized as the cause of this problem, the video game, like most of the digital media, radicalizes and destabilizes the power relations within the system. The capital attempts to turn the individual into the individual, to establish the subject as the repressive ideological construct. The critics of the regime of capital suggest that technological and other extensions make us cyborgs who approach technologies as means for one's redesign. The specific role of the video game in this process of cyborgization is to provide the simulation that can support both the modes of subject development. In the case of subordination, the video game streamlines its processes, and in the case of cyborgization, the game allows for the simulation of becoming, the non-linear model of the subjectivity development.

Populist critique of violence in video games is often one-dimensional. On the other hand, the game as a simulative extension provides a much more complex interpretation of the problem of violence. There are at least three complications of violence that become visible when we look at video games from this perspective.

First of all, we should consider the glorification of violence questionable. (Hyper)realistic depiction of violence makes the process of becoming controversial because even its simulation is tightly coupled with systematic violent acts. This becomes an aesthetic issue instead of ethical, no matter if games have any direct connection with violence in real life.

Secondly, the problem of violence reemerges as the logical continuation of the increasing level of realism, which allowed the profound simulation of becoming or subordination in the first place. Even old games with very abstract representations of violence caused controversies, which means that it is the ontology of video games that caused criticism. Today, meticulously realistic depictions of gore provide even more arguments to the critics of violent video games, who may even use it in their presidential campaigns. Lastly, military-themed games are no more enjoying their status of sanctioned simulations of subordination. Such games obtain a more problematic status, as their violence at the same time legitimizes the violent foreign policies of neoliberalism. By realizing it, we witness the biopolitical glitch, as one part of the ideological apparatus is criticizing another part of the same apparatus for the legitimation of repressive politics.

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