Introduction: Playful Transgressions

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"Can someone help me? PLEASE!" The global chat channel of *ARK: Survival Evolved* (Studio Wildcard, Instinct Games, Virtual Basement, et al. 2017) had been full of this poor player's desperate pleas for hours, and large parts of the community were actively involved in coming to his rescue after he was captured by a fellow player. *ARK: Survival Evolved* is an open-world multiplayer survival game in which players are stuck on a lonely island with dinosaurs and—to this particular player's dismay—other castaways. The player informed the chat channel that he had been shot with a tranquilizer, and when he woke up, he found himself handcuffed and his inventory filled with stones. Unable to move or use his hands, he could not empty his overencumbered inventory, nor could he open his map to find his location and tell other players his whereabouts. Insult was added to injury as his captor did not allow him to starve to death and respawn: he was being force-fed whenever his health began to deteriorate. The player also reported having begged his captor for mercy. When the player asked why he was being subjected to hours of torture, his captor simply said, "I hate Americans."

If we understand transgression as going "beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention … to violate and infringe" (Jenks 2003, 2), the in-game situation described here is transgressive in several ways. First, the situation transgresses the general idea that play and games concern that which is nonserious, fun, safe, and with little consequence outside itself. The captured player's pleas for mercy and help demonstrate that sometimes games and play can be emotionally transgressive by offering unpleasant and distressing experiences and that being engaged in play may involve putting oneself at emotional risk. Further, the situation also demonstrates that gameplay can include transgressive play practices in which players act upon other players in a way that is meant to annoy, punish, or simply harass. At the same time, the captor did not break any game rules through his transgression, and, in spite of the hateful comment this person made, the act may even have been carried out from within a playful mindset. "It is only a game," the captor could have said, thereby

excusing his transgression while also pointing out that the prisoner should not take the situation so seriously.

Transgression in Games and Play

This book concerns transgressions in games and play. It is a collection of research and scholarly discussions of situations like the *ARK* one just described. Although videogames have a history of engaging with transgressive content such as excessive violence and transgressive play practices—for example, *griefing* (taking pleasure in sabotaging other players' gameplay experience) and *ganking* (killing a player who is at a disadvantage and for this reason no competition)—what is understood as a transgression inside the game context varies not only between a nongamer public and those with firsthand experience in the medium but also between gaming communities. As the *ARK* example shows, a game may take players out of a comfort zone due not only to the challenges of the game but also to its content and to the social situations it facilitates. How players respond to games is highly subjective and may range from disregard, opposition, or acceptance to transgressive play practices that include the breaking of game rules and intended gameplay as well as suggestive modifications of the game. What is transgressive for some may not be so for others, and there are important cultural and historical factors involved in how one responds to specific content. If we accept the idea that the social contract of play allows actions to have a somewhat different meaning than in the world at large (Bateson 1972, 180), we may also hypothesize that transgressions may have a special status in the contexts of games and play. This relationship can be traced to the idea that play in itself is characterized by a tension that makes it "double-edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously" (Schechner 2013, 89). Jonas Linderoth and Torill Mortensen describe play as something precarious that "needs to be maintained unbroken but at the same time needs to be challenged and put at risk in order to remain interesting" (2015, 6), and it is through an investigation of this claim that this book explores how play and games tackle such transgressions.

The motivation behind this book is the need for a contextual understanding of transgressive game content and play practices from a perspective that takes into consideration the cultural, social, and aesthetic aspects of the transgressions. Aiming for a medium-specific and experience-focused approach, this volume explores explanatory frameworks that are alternatives to psychological effect research with regard to how transgressive games may influence player experiences. By connecting uncomfortable, provocative, and offensive game content and play practices to the sociocultural and

aesthetic discourses of transgression, we highlight how games may challenge and overstep boundaries in terms of their content and through the play practices employed by players. Further, we stress that certain games share the intention of transgressive art and cinema to offend and provoke, sometimes for the greater good of creating reflection or debate among players or the public and sometimes so that players may intentionally or unintentionally experience transgression through subversive play practices.

The volume explores transgression in games and play from several angles by game scholars who come from different fields of research and use different methods. Whereas some of the chapters have roots in sociologically oriented player studies, others spring out of traditional humanistic textual analysis and philosophical discussions. A few of the contributors are transdisciplinary, situated within both media studies and cultural studies and oriented toward a broader cultural understanding of how to view transgression in games. Many of the chapters are based on empirical data, documenting how players engage with, interpret, tackle, and negotiate transgressive game content and play practices. The variety of data sources, methods, and play contexts makes this volume a valuable and insightful contribution to studies of transgression, spanning interpretations of in-game content and players' cultural practices.

Apart from this brief introduction, this book has fifteen chapters that explore transgression in games and play from several angles, and we have divided these chapters into four interrelated themes: concepts, practices, emotions, and society.

Concepts

Talking about games and play as potentially *transgressive* demands an introduction not only to the concept as such but also to how games and play can be said to be transgressive. When we describe controversial, problematic, uncomfortable, provocative, and offensive games and play as *transgressive*, we have not selected this term randomly. Dictionaries define transgression as overstepping boundaries of taste, moral codes, social taboos, or law ("Transgression" 2017), but in scholarly discourse the term has been used to talk about boundary-crossing activities in culture and society, including legal transgressions and cultural transgressions such as the breaking of norms and taboos. For sociologist Chris Jenks, "to transgress" means to violate or infringe limits set by law or convention, but he also stresses that the act of transgression "is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation" that acknowledges and puts into focus the norm, law, or convention that is being transgressed. In this sense, transgression reaffirms the boundaries that are being transgressed and thus "serves as an extremely sensitive vector in

assessing the scope, direction, and compass of any social theory" (2003, 2). Although transgression in many cases may be unintentional, it can also be carried out on purpose, either as a way to mark distance from the established norms or as an act of liberation. Games and play are often understood as taking place inside a subset of everyday life and so tend to be treated as a social frame in which one can act outside the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. In this sense, play and games may be seen as social situations that accept transgressions more easily than other situations.

From this perspective, the first section of the book discusses transgression in games and play from a conceptual perspective, focusing on the idea of transgression as discussed in sociology and philosophy. Jaakko Stenros challenges the idea that play and games are fun and safe by definition in the chapter "Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play." Delving into the concept of play, Stenros discusses transgressive play as a contrast to *idealized play*, which is seen as inherently good or positive. Presenting a typology of play practices that demonstrate different kinds of "bad play"—which is transgressive because it breaks contextual norms, disrupts other players' sense of play, or is dangerous or violent—the chapter defines the starting point of how we may understand the concept of transgression in the context of play as well as games.

The idea that games and play have a transgressive side is further exemplified by Torill Elvira Mortensen and Victor Navarro-Remesal's chapter "Asynchronous Transgressions: Suffering, Relief, and Invasions in Nintendo's Miiverse and StreetPass." Using the Buddhist idea of *duhkha*, "thirst" or "dissatisfaction," these authors examine Nintendo's quasi-social networks as a case for arguing that players may get relief from pain by playing with other players' suffering. For Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal, such play is not a matter of a sadistic pleasure but a ludic impulse to up the ante, to increase the challenge and the immersion. Identifying how players may transgress social or individual boundaries, the fictional frame of reference, the technological limits of the game, or the codes of conduct, they present a taxonomy that shows how players may trespass other players even when not playing with them.

Whereas Stenros and Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal focus on concepts relating to transgressive play practices, Holger Pötzsch directly addresses the concept of transgression, criticizing common definitions for not being able to grasp how something comes to be transgressive for someone in a particular context. Introducing the term *transgressivity*, he outlines seven types of it mapped across game form and play practices. His chapter, "Forms and Practices of Transgressivity in Videogame: Aesthetics, Play, and Politics," accounts for both text- and player-centric approaches and provides a series of examples to illustrate each type. The final chapter in this section explores how transgressions are highly dependent on context and how games present a different moral

context for actions compared to actions outside a game. In "The Bracketing of Moral Norms in Videogames," John R. Sageng takes a philosophical approach to formulate a model of how in-game actions can be subjected to moral evaluation and investigates the space for moral bracketing that this type of evaluation creates. By way of Immanuel Kant's deontology and a framing of videogames as comprising distinct deontic worlds, Sageng shows how and why these worlds converge and diverge ethically.

Practices

The idea of idealized play has often been contested (e.g., Geertz 1973, 432–433; Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 14; Malaby 2007, 107; Montola 2010; Juul 2013; Schechner 2013, 118–119; Jørgensen 2014; Linderoth and Mortensen 2015; Stenros 2015, 72–76), and most game scholars today agree that frustration, failure, and trolling are indeed characteristics of much gameplay. In the second section of the volume, we present case studies of transgressive play practices that illustrate this important point. What characterizes the chapters in this section is the focus on how gameplay practices may at one and the same time be playful and overstep boundaries of social etiquette. The chapters in this section demonstrate how playful transgression may be an act of resistance, either against a certain subculture or against the rules of the game, and what form such transgressions may take in a performative context.

The female streamer Kaceytron, who is the center of Mia Consalvo's chapter "Kaceytron and Transgressive Play on Twitch.tv," is an example of someone who commits playful transgressions in a performative context. Through an in-depth analysis of Kaceytron's live streams, Consalvo investigates what type of toxicity Kaceytron encounters, how she responds to it, and how the elements of community and platform play a role in both perpetuating and challenging these activities. Consalvo shows that Kaceytron, rather than being disrupted by the constant abuse, shapes it into a feature characteristic of her streams, challenging the norms of public appearances and thus making it unclear whether she is the transgressor or the one being transgressed against.

The chapter "Let's Play Performance as Transgressive Play" presents an example of transgressive practices that go beyond social etiquette to game rules. Hanna Wirman and Rhys Jones discuss how creators of Let's Play videos use *The Sims 3* (Maxis 2009) to create transgressive situations in a playful and humorous context, thereby allowing themselves to carry out otherwise taboo behavior and renegotiate the meaning of the game. The chapter demonstrates how the interactive nature of games allow players to include transgressive user-generated content that goes against the default message encoded by the developers, thereby turning provocative game content into something

the players can accept through playful engagement with the game. The ways in which players modify games and give them a new meaning is also the topic of Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros's chapter "Queering Games, Play, and Culture through Transgressive Role-Playing Games." The authors discuss how personalization and appropriation of game characters can be seen as part of the subversive practice of *queering*. The chapter addresses use of this term both to denote rebellious practices relating to games and to address sexual and gendered transgressive practices in games.

Emotions

Research on transgressions in games and play has historically followed the tradition of media-effects research dominated by psychological effect studies focusing on the effects of violent game content and excessive use (e.g., Gentile and Stone 2005; Ferguson, Olson, Kutner, et al. 2010; Kutner and Olson 2008). This research has invited discussions more concerned with whether games may corrupt the young and vulnerable rather than with how they are experienced in the gameplay context. However, with the rise of game studies as a cross-disciplinary field, there has been an influx of more context-oriented and culturally sensitive perspectives that stress games as meaningful in the lives of players. Springing out of these perspectives is research on how players make sense of games and the ways in which they experience and interpret them as media texts. Because transgression may involve overstepping individual sensibilities, emotional response to game content and play practices is a key issue in this section.

In their chapter "Guilt in *DayZ*," Marcus Carter and Fraser Allison discuss emotional responses that players have toward player killing in the multiplayer survivalist game *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive 2017). Studying survey data they gathered on how players reflect on the act of player killing through the lens of *moral management*, Carter and Allison show how players negotiate and rationalize their actions when they find themselves overstepping personal ethical boundaries. A related issue concerns player attitudes toward transgressive content and how players reflect on uncomfortable topics in games. In her chapter "When Is It Enough? Uncomfortable Game Content and the Transgression of Player Taste," Kristine Jørgensen reviews players' responses to transgressive game content in four focus groups, arguing that the in-game context and knowledge of genre conventions are crucial for how the content is experienced.

Kristian A. Bjørkelo takes a more introspective approach in his chapter "Transgressive Realism in *This War of Mine*." Through an autoethnographic exploration of the indie game *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014), Bjørkelo presents an experience he describes as both harrowing and insightful. This combination of emotions led him

to develop the idea of *transgressive realism*—a sense of social realism that cannot be attributed to the graphical style of the simulation of game mechanics but to game experiences that feel real because they are able to create a sense of truthfulness through their presentation of in-game situations as uncomfortable, disturbing, or otherwise transgressive.

Content

The aim to transgress is a common denominator in many forms of rebellious and oppositional aesthetic practices, from high art to independent cinema and videogames. *Transgressive art*, for instance, is a postmodernist genre that questions the idea of art itself. It aims to shock and to subvert conventional moral beliefs (Cashell 2009, 1) and is characterized as art that "disgusts, discomforts, unnerves, offends as well as art that triggers in us experiences of pain and shame" (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016, 1). It is in conflict with social and aesthetical norms and is sometimes condemned as a speculative attempt to draw attention under the alibi of art; at other times, it is accused of going so far in its taboo breaking that it becomes impossible to engage with as art (Cashell 2009, 1). It rebels by taking the audience out of their comfort zone and questioning "all received and ostensibly incontestable values" (Grønstad 2012, 38), potentially enabling reflection and awareness by forcing the audience to confront issues that tend to evoke unease and discomfort (Julius 2002, 189).

We also see a similar breach of norms in other media content. Splatter films and other subgenres of the horror genre are examples, not to mention the *cinema of transgression*, an oppositional movement in underground cinema (Sargeant 1999). Sometimes described as "punk cinema" (Beattie 2005, 40), the cinema of transgression explores topics such as drug abuse, nihilism, and sexual experimentation, with the aim to transform cinematic creativity by going "beyond all limits set or prescribed by taste, morality or any other traditional value system" (Zedd 2016). Although there has been no similar oppositional movement in videogames, they have historically been notorious for transgressive content. Excessive violence, exemplified by explicit cases such as *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games 1992) and *Manhunt* (Rockstar North 2003), is a classic issue, and in recent years indie-game development has begun to explore the darker aspects of life. Featuring cancer in children and post-traumatic stress syndrome, respectively, *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012) aim to induce reflection by exposing the player to uncomfortable experiences. *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft 2006) and *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015) have received wide criticism for their speculative representations of rape and mass killing.

Further, certain kinds of game mechanics, such as gamification and other persuasive design, have been accused of transgressing what is in their own best interests by being exploitative (Bogost 2011).

With reference to this discourse, the fourth part of the book is concerned with game content and the aesthetic side of transgressive games, focusing on techniques and game mechanics and the ways in which they function and are used for transgressive purposes. Tomasz Z. Majkowski carries out one such analysis in "The Renaissance Ass: Ezio Auditore and Digital Menippea." Through Michel Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, Majkowski argues that the otherwise noncontroversial game *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009) transgresses game conventions in its take on death and killing, on character development, as well as on the issue of freedom of action central to sandbox games.

Ragnhild Tronstad's chapter "Destruction, Abjection, and Desire: Aesthetics of Transgression in Two Adaptations of 'Little Red Riding Hood'" offers another analysis of transgressive game properties. Tronstad's mission is to conduct a comparative analysis of how the horror art game *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009) and the theater performance *Footnote to Red Riding Hood* (Jonasson and Vislie 2014) represent the transgressive potential inherent in the classic fairy tale, as identified in readings of historical versions of the tale informed by psychoanalytic theory. Applying a hermeneutical perspective, Tronstad argues that expectations of violence and horror function as inspiration for play in both works.

Faltin Karlsen's chapter "Exploited or Engaged? Dark Game Design Patterns in *Clicker Heroes*, *FarmVille 2*, and *World of Warcraft*" takes a third and more design-oriented approach to analyzing transgressive game content and mechanics. The chapter discusses whether game designers may transgress ethical boundaries by manipulating players through design. Employing the concept *dark game design patterns*, Karlsen discusses mechanics in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), *FarmVille 2* (Zynga 2012) and *Clicker Heroes* (Playsaurus 2014) that aim to stimulate the player to alter daily routines and develop long-term loyalty to the games.

Society

Ever since the launch of the car race game *Death Race* (Exidy 1976), in which players got points for running over pedestrians, videogames have been accused of tearing apart the moral fabric of society (Provenzo 1991; Kocurek 2012). However, what is experienced as transgressive varies with time and place. What is seen as transgressive today is not the same as what was deemed transgressive in the 1980s. Also, how different audiences

and subcultures inside gamer culture respond to transgressions in games and play are also in flux. From within the gaming community, controversies over game content are prevalent but often over very different issues. When Bioware included the option of homosexual romances in its role-playing game *Mass Effect 3* (2012), this decision was hailed by parts of the gaming community but greeted with outrage from other parts of the community over what they saw as a matter of yielding to political correctness and pressure groups (Oulette 2014; Holmes 2016). In other contexts, certain audiences are put off by subversive play practices such as ganking and griefing (Lin and Sun 2005) or by the explicit language and harassment that sometimes infuse online games (Consalvo 2012). The last section of the book is dedicated to how transgressions in games and play are and have been approached from a societal perspective.

Alan Meades looks at arcade gameplay through a historical lense in "The American Arcade Sanitization Crusade and the Amusement Arcade Action Group." In his comparative analysis of arcades in the United States and the United Kingdom, he shows that arcade gameplay was seen as transgressive in the early 1980s but "sanitized" and further accepted through being subject to regulation, especially in the United States. To a much larger degree than the arcades in the United States, the English arcades functioned as autonomous social arenas with less infringement by external entities to sanitize game culture.

Taking a contemporary perspective on gamer culture, Kelly Boudreau looks at the emergence of new forms of transgression in the age of digital online games. In "Beyond Fun: Transgressive Gameplay, Toxic and Problematic Player Behavior as Boundary Keeping," Boudreau identifies play practices in which players disrupt other players' gameplay in the name of boundary keeping. Through a review of literature on toxic gamer culture and historical literature on deviant subcultures, Boudreau identifies and explores an underresearched area: how toxic and problematic behavior may fit within the broader, historical frame of resistance to mainstreaming by subcultures and niche cultures.

This book is an attempt to provide a contextual understanding of content and play that has traditionally been framed as offensive, harmful, speculative, uncomfortable, or otherwise problematic. This contextual understanding emphasizes actual player experiences, including their renegotiation of, appropriation of, and playful orientation toward such content and practices. Although the book does not pretend to provide a simple answer to how such content and practice should be understood in the gameplay context, it does demonstrate that there are different and more culturally sensitive explanatory models to understanding games and play than the problem-oriented effect studies tend to provide.