

## 9 When Is It Enough? Uncomfortable Game Content and the Transgression of Player Taste

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How do players experience uncomfortable game content, and what are their attitudes toward controversial topics in games? Is controversial game content also uncomfortable game content? As videogames mature, an interesting question arises as to how players experience uncomfortable content in a gameplay context. With its point of departure in a focus-group study with experienced players, this chapter discusses player attitudes toward and experiences with game content that has been subject to public controversies. In what situations do players experience game content as speculative, objectionable, or offensive, and in what way do they experience it as a source of insight and reflection?

Based in the idea that the term *transgression* indicates overstepping boundaries relating to social taboos, taste, ethics, or the law (“Transgression” 2017), this book is concerned with game and play practices that challenge boundaries in a broad sense—from gameplay that breaks cultural taboos or the social contracts between players to game content that may challenge players’ subjective sensibilities. In this sense, this chapter focuses on a *subjective account of the transgressive*—that is, how experienced players relate to game content that has been described as questionable or potentially harmful and what kind of game content these players find transgressive, either shocking or provocative or uncomfortable. The discussion provides insight into what it is that makes individual players feel the way they do with regard to such content and how they reflect on whether such content is acceptable in a game context. By taking a context-sensitive and experience-oriented approach to games, this chapter opens up perspectives that are in opposition to basic tenets about media effects upon which the majority of effect studies are based. Not least, this chapter builds upon and expands the idea that controversial content may invite *positive negative experiences* (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010)—that is, experiences that are distressing but also gratifying because they create new insights.

## Research Background

Research on controversial game content tends to be grounded in psychological effect research. This latter is criticized, however, for not being sensitive to sociocultural context—that is, for overinterpreting correlational statistics with little attention to the sociocultural (Ferguson, Olson, Kutner, et al. 2010) or to the playful context of game content (Gentile and Stone 2005). However, growing attention is being paid to context-sensitive and experience-oriented approaches. The fact that audiences sometimes value uncomfortable fiction has puzzled thinkers since David Hume (1777) addressed the so-called paradox of tragedy. Lately, this fact has become of interest to the psychology of entertainment, which explores the emotional and cognitive mechanisms at work in fiction that spawns so-called nonhedonic gratifications (Oliver, Bowman, Woolley, et al. 2016, 392) and how this effect may have relevance to people's lives (Zillmann 1998; Oliver 2008; Schramm and Wirth 2010; Bartsch and Oliver 2011; Cupchik 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick, Gong, Hagner, et al. 2012; Oliver, Bowman, Woolley, et al. 2016). Today, scholars and artists accept the notion that uncomfortable media content has the potential to enable awareness by provoking audience members into reflection (Julius 2002, 27) and by making them question their culturally received values (Grønstad 2012, 38).

In game research, there is also an increased interest in uncomfortable game experiences, stressing that games and play may be unsafe and not fun and may have implications outside the game itself (Malaby 2007; Juul 2013; Schechner 2013; Linderoth and Øhrn 2015; Brown, Gerling, Dickinson, et al. 2015; Mortensen, Linderoth, and Brown 2015; Stenros 2015; Jørgensen 2016; chapter 2 in this volume). Earlier research has focused on players' emotional experiences with controversial, uncomfortable, and excessive game content as well as on their interpretation of the content and subsequent meaning-making process. Using diary studies, Jasper van Vught, Gareth Schott, and Raphaël Marczak (2012) present a framework that accounts for player experiences with controversial content. Through ethnographic research on young adult males, Wannes Ribbens and Steven Malliet (2015) explore how play style in violent videogames is construed, and Gareth Schott (2008) has studied how young players articulate the pleasures of playing violent games. Of special relevance to this chapter are Heidi Hopeametsä's (2008) and Markus Montola's (2010) analyses of player experiences with distressing content in live-action role-playing games, in which they identify what they call *positive negative experiences*—experiences that are intense and distressing yet somehow gratifying because they create new insights or experiences (see also Jørgensen 2014, 6–7). Common to this research is the focus on qualitative

methods for uncovering the subjective experience of game content in a contextual perspective, taking into account features such as the playful situation or the fictional context in which game actions take place. This research focuses on the meaning-making processes that take place in the gameplay situation and highlights games as a meaningful form of engagement and a medium with the same meaning-making potentials as other media.

## Method

The data discussed in this chapter stem from a focus-group study aiming to gain insight into individual players' attitudes toward and experiences of uncomfortable game content. Because it can potentially be uncomfortable to discuss certain topics with a researcher one on one, for this study focus groups were chosen over individual interviews to offer an arena for deliberation between peers. Key individuals were recruited from the environments surrounding local game organizations in a Norwegian city based on their willingness to discuss controversial and uncomfortable content in games. These key recruits were individuals who considered videogames to be central to their fields of interest but who did not necessarily label themselves "gamers"; at the same time, the selection aimed at finding individuals with diverse opinions about games and game content. After initial conversations, each of the key individuals was asked to recruit additional respondents whom they thought they would be able to have interesting conversations without necessarily agreeing with them. In effect, the focus groups consisted of individuals who already knew each other and had an established sense of trust and who frequently played digital and analog games together.

Although the focus-group method allowed the respondents to discuss controversial and uncomfortable topics, the risk of this method is the potential dynamic it may produce. One of the individuals may dominate the conversation, and the more reticent participants might not speak up because they feel that they are not as articulate as others or that their viewpoints are less interesting. Also, the focus-group format may create a space where consensus is expressed rather than more polarized opinions. Although all of the groups in this study did have dominant individuals, most people joined the conversation freely and raised their opinions. In cases where they did not contribute much, I would ask them directly about their opinion.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) formed the basis for the focus groups. IPA is a qualitative method used in psychology for researching how people understand and deal with major life events and lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 1–4). Often used within semi- or unstructured interviews featuring

open-ended questions and prompts, IPA allows the subjects to talk about their experiences and interpretations unfiltered and on their own terms because the method values self-expression and subjective accounts of emotions and lived events (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 56–57).

IPA is also used with focus groups, but a known issue regarding this combination is that focus-group discussions often tend to reveal more about attitudes than about experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 71–73). Because the aim of this focus-group study was indeed to examine player attitudes toward game content and subjective accounts of game experiences, the use of such groups was an intentional choice.

After an initial presentation of their own game preferences, the respondents were invited to answer the question “Have you had a game experience that you found uncomfortable or disturbing in any way?” The next question directed to all groups was “What is the difference between a bad and a good negative game experience?” Most discussions started with individuals recalling strong experiences with specific games but quickly developed into an exchange of opinions and attitudes about games and game content. In the second half of the interview session, video clips from four selected games were shown, intended to be examples of different kinds of controversial content and to create common points of reference for the discussion.

A note on method and to what extent the results of this study can be transferred to other cases: this research concerns the meaning-making processes of experienced players with regard to uncomfortable game content, so conclusions about the psychological effects of videogames cannot be drawn from it. More importantly, the study examines players’ subjective accounts of their experiences in retrospect. As such, it is limited by the respondents’ memories. It is also limited by the fact that it is not so much a study of the respondents’ experiences as such, but of their *interpretations* of their own experiences. That said, as a study that concerns the meaning-making processes of experienced players, it has merit because it provides insight into how players understand videogames as a medium of expression similar to other media and art forms.

The chapter first presents an overview of the respondents and their overarching attitudes toward game content in general and toward the four case games in particular. Then I present and discuss the respondents’ views on uncomfortable game content—in what situations it was experienced as positive and in what situations it was experienced as negative. Last, I sum up the main results and draw conclusions. The chapter focuses on empirical data, and, for ease of reading, theoretical discussions are introduced where relevant.

### Who Are the Respondents?

Group 1 consisted of three men ages 35–36, referred to here as Tony, Oscar, and Aron, all skilled workers. Group 2 was of mixed gender and consisted of two students and one unemployed person ages 23–29, here anonymized as Karen, Shaun, and Luke. Group 3 was also of mixed gender and consisted of one skilled and two unskilled workers ages 24–31, here called Mary, Anette, and Greg. Group 4 consisted of men only, two students and two unemployed people between the ages of 21 and 26, here referred to as Neil, Ted, John, and Peter. All were of Norwegian background and were living in urban and suburban areas.

Although the recruitment of respondents focused on including diverse perspectives about game content, there was relatively high agreement between the groups in terms of genre preferences and attitudes toward game content. Genre preferences included real-time strategy games, first-person shooters, action-adventure games, and role-playing games, with an emphasis on story-driven games. A couple of the respondents mentioned casual games, but no one listed sports games among their favorites. All expressed an interest in analog games such as board games or table-top and live-action role-playing games.

When asked about whether there is an ultimate taboo with respect to what can be thematized in a videogame, everyone who expressed an opinion believed videogames are entitled to the protection of free speech. Although this attitude toward game content may stem from the fact that the respondents were raised in a liberal northern European country and have high game literacy, it is important to stress that despite the common stance against censorship, there were diverging opinions about which kinds of representations are harmless fun and which are justified targets of criticism. From the conversations, it became clear that the respondents were focusing on taboo player actions rather than on taboo audiovisual representations and that they felt that as long as the context justifies it, no topic is by its very existence off-limits. Some did, however, point out certain topics that they had a hard time being able to defend, but they clarified that such content should be ignored or the target of criticism rather than of censorship.

### Four Cases: From Public Controversy to Traumatic Situations

The four games used as a common point of reference had been subject to debates regarding their content, but for different reasons. The debates about three of the games had focused on violent gameplay but were framed in different ways. With only a few

exceptions, most of the participants in all groups had heard about all the games, but only a few had played most or all of them.

The obvious challenge of having participants discuss video clips from interactive media is that this format cannot reveal how the game is experienced in the gameplay context, and this fact was also raised during the interviews. The respondents were confronted with the question of how seeing a video clip rather than playing the game affected their understanding of the game. In response, all groups stressed that in viewing only a clip they were deprived of relevant narrative and gameplay context and that character empathy as well as the sense of agency and complicity disappeared.

### ***Hatred: Intentionally Provocative***

Described as “the most violent game on earth” (Jenkins 2015), isometric shooter *Hatred* (Destructive Creations 2015) is an example of a deliberately provocative game, criticized by some for its violent content but by others for its mediocre gameplay. The focus groups were shown a video of the introductory cutscene where the protagonist prepares for mass murder and the following gameplay. Across the four focus groups, three respondents out of thirteen had played the game, and eight knew the game by reputation. All groups believed that the game developers deliberately speculated in creating controversy, but they found that the game’s exaggerated style makes it difficult to take the game seriously. Although some of the participants who had not played the game believed they would find playing it uncomfortable, those with experience stressed that there is a discrepancy between how the game looks and how it feels to play.

### ***Spec Ops: The Line: Positive Discomfort through Subversion of Conventions***

The second game used is the antiwar military shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), often hailed for its storytelling (Dyer 2012) but also criticized for its dissonance between gameplay and narrative (Björk 2015). The focus groups were shown gameplay and cutscenes surrounding the dramatic turning point of the game, featuring a scene where the protagonist fires white phosphorous at civilians, believing them to be the enemy. Five of the thirteen respondents had played the game, and five knew it through media. Respondents with experience in playing the game described it as an example of an uncomfortable game where the discomfort was appreciated due to its ability to create a sense of *complicity* (Sicart 2013, 21–23; Smethurst and Craps 2015, 277; Jørgensen 2016)—that is, the feeling that the events that unfold in the game happen because of the player’s choices.

***Life Is Strange: When No Option Is Right***

As the only game among the four in which violence is not central to gameplay, the adventure game *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod 2015) features emotionally traumatizing actions related to bullying and teenage suicide. Hailed for character development and its treatment of social issues, it was also criticized for plot development (Riaz 2015; Savage 2015). The focus groups were shown a scene where the protagonist fails to hinder a classmate from committing suicide. Across the four focus groups, three participants had played the game, and five had seen gameplay trailers or read reviews. Group members shared their general impression that the video was understood as emotionally laden. Those who had not played the game shared a broad curiosity about it, although some of those who had played it expressed frustration with being the victim of the bad decisions made by nonplayer characters and with never being able to do the right thing.

***Grand Theft Auto V: Does the Satire Work?***

The respondents were shown last a clip from the open-world game *Grand Theft Auto 5* (Rockstar North 2013). This game was chosen as a representative of the kind of a game that has been the subject of much public outrage but for which the satirical in-game context may contribute to a mitigation of the seriousness of the actions represented (MacDonald 2013; Sterling 2013). Eleven of the thirteen respondents had experience with this game or an earlier version, and the two remaining respondents knew it by reputation. In the focus groups, they were shown a scene in which the player inflicts torture upon a nonplayer character. *Grand Theft Auto V* created the most diverse responses from the participants in the study, from rejection to acceptance, and there were disagreements concerning whether the game actually succeeds in its attempts at humor and satire.

**Uncomfortable Game Experiences**

Whether game content is experienced as uncomfortable is related to the individual's subjective interpretation because experiences are based on subjective taste as well as on sociocultural background. *Discomfort* can be understood as "an absence of comfort or ease; uneasiness, hardship, or mild pain" or "anything that is disturbing to or interferes with comfort" ("Discomfort" 2017). Discomfort has a wide span and may cover anything from emotional dislike to physical pain, including dissonance, provocation, disturbance, unease, dismay, opposition, and rejection. Importantly, however, uncomfortable game experiences can be interpreted as either positive or negative.

Following Stuart Hall's (1980) influential theory on encoding and decoding in media discourse, it is here understood that a media text is always formed within a specific sociocultural context. This "encoded" message is an intended interpretation or reading of the text, but that interpretation may or may not be shared by an audience, who in turn interpret and thus "decode" the content of the text. Hall discerned three ways of decoding media messages—the intended *dominant/hegemonic* reading, a partly critical *negotiated* reading, and an *oppositional* reading (1980, 101–103). Thus, disagreement with the intended message, misunderstandings, as well as different interpretations are possible, and so this theory, although acknowledging the author's power in creating a message, also highlights the importance of subjective and individual interpretations. This becomes important when understanding the diverse opinions players have toward game content and regarding what is experienced as uncomfortable as well as why game content that is celebrated by some can be experienced as problematic by others.

All groups expressed the idea that the sense of discomfort can be created by both positive and negative game experiences. For the respondents, there was an important difference between discomfort that is deemed valuable to the game experience and discomfort that is not. Positive discomfort is connected to game content that provokes reflection in the player, provides new insight, has a purpose in the narrative, or makes the player curious about the story and makes her want to continue playing. Negative discomfort, in contrast, disturbs the experience and creates the urge in the player to distance herself from emotionally engaging with the game.

Videogames today are complex representational gameworlds that are both ludic systems and fictional environments (Jørgensen 2013). As such, they involve the player in processes of fictional as well as ludic engagement. Building on cognitive theory of fictional engagement (Smith 1995), Petri Lankoski (2011) argues that players engage with player-characters through both *goal-related* and *empathic engagement*. Goal-related engagement concerns our focus on achieving goals and subgoals, whereas empathic engagement concerns how we understand and interpret other people. As a framework for understanding fictional engagement, empathic engagement stresses that we engage with fictional characters and situations through processes such as recognition, alignment, and allegiance (Lankoski 2011, 296–300). Player engagement in games is a combination of goal-related and empathic engagement, but in the following discussion we will also see that in certain situations the former may surpass the latter in importance, depending on the kind of tasks the player is attempting to complete. We will also see that the respondents in the focus groups related to game content in different

ways, depending on whether their engagement at a specific time was predominantly empathic or goal oriented.

### Positive Discomfort and Meaningfulness

According to psychologists who conduct research on nonhedonic entertainment, uncomfortable media content is appreciated because of its perceived emotional relevance in our lives. Ron Tamborini and his colleagues (2010) argue that such content ties in with basic intrinsic needs, as described by self-determination theory, and Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and her colleagues (2012) show that appreciators of uncomfortable media content find it to be relevant for reflecting on their own lives.

In this study of the experience of controversial game content and uncomfortable topics, it may not be surprising that most of the discussions centered on how such content affects empathic engagement. When discussing the difference between positive and negative senses of discomfort, the respondents expressed that discomfort often is experienced as positive if it feels *meaningfully* integrated into the specific context, either by having a role in the narrative context or by providing new experiences or by inviting reflection on game actions as well as on life in general. A sense of meaningfulness is central to empathic engagement in the game fiction.

One way to make discomfort feel meaningful is to make the game fiction feel *personal* to the player. According to cognitive theories of empathic engagement with fictional characters (Smith 1995; Currie 1997; Vaage 2010), establishing a relationship between the player and nonplaying characters in the gameworld is one way of making this possible. In Group 1, Tony described how in-game situations have a bigger emotional impact on him when they concern a game character with whom he has established a relation and knows well: “If you get to know someone in a game ... , if you establish a relationship with them, then the effect is much bigger. If it’s just ... a complete stranger that you’ve never seen before and who you don’t have any connection with, then it’s like, okay, I don’t care” (September 28, 2015, ellipses indicate pauses in speech).

Although characters die in games all the time, often as a consequence of player actions and intended by game design, the emotional impact is greater when these characters have a role in the game narrative and the player has established a relationship with them. However, because games are interactive media, empathic and goal-oriented engagement often coalesce. Players not only empathize with fictional characters on the screen but are also actively engaged in decision-making processes as part of the advancement toward the goal. Due to their agency, players can be made *complicit* for

their choices, something that has the potential to create an emotional reaction and even a sense of discomfort. With reference to the turning point of *Spec Ops: The Line*, Oscar explained: “The whole thing is that ... this was something I chose to do, right. And then I get the feeling that this was not close to being right. And *this* is what makes me react—when it is *my* choice. Not because the game holds a poster up saying what I should feel” (September 28, 2015).

*Complicity* is the feeling that one has responsibility for causing events in a game due to the sense of direct control over actions and an interest in keeping the avatar-protagonist alive (Smethurst and Craps 2015, 277). According to game scholar Miguel Sicart, the sense of complicity allows the player to engage with the game using moral reasoning and stresses the fact that gameplay actions have a moral dimension (2013, 21–23). It is this sensation that, according to Oscar, turns the discomfort of *Spec Ops: The Line* into a positive experience.

Respondents also pointed out that uncomfortable game content is meaningful when it is able to evoke reflection. In Tony’s view, a positive uncomfortable game experience is able to provide him new perspectives on his own life:

A good one is one that makes you think, something that stays with you when it’s over. Well, when you’ve had a new experience. ... *Spec Ops: The Line* was good in that sense, it really made you. ... When I was through, I uninstalled it, just wanted it gone, and just sit outside in the sun and think, hell, I have a good life. When it has given you a sensation that you value what you have much more after that kind of experience. ... (September 28, 2015)

The observation that fictional tragedy enables reflection and makes us feel grateful for our lives is supported by psychological research (Knobloch-Westerwick, Gong, Hagner, et al. 2012). However, reflection may also be connected to the fictional context of in-game events. According to Sicart, two techniques for ethical game design are *subtracting* and *mirroring*. *Subtracting* forces the player to reflect ethically upon the actions of the avatar, and *mirroring* puts the player into an uncomfortable ethical position (2009, 215–216). Luke described how these techniques work with reference to an episode in *Life Is Strange* in which the player has the choice to euthanize her paralyzed friend: “There was, mildly speaking, a very uneasy feeling when, just when you are about to make the decision, there’s an A or B, make your decision now, and they use a lot of imagery to make it really shaky and uncomfortable, you are forced to make a really bad decision. And regardless what you choose, it is bad” (October 9, 2015). Here, subtracting is activated as the player starts reflecting over the decisions that the avatar is making in the game, and this reflection also leads the player into an uncomfortable ethical position. In this sense, the situation Luke describes appears to be a combination

of the two, or what we could call *mirroring by way of subtracting*: the sense of discomfort is created as a consequence of the ethical reflection provoked by the game.

### Negative Discomfort and Distancing

Many of the respondents expressed that *positive* discomfort is discomfort that makes them want to continue to play; likewise, some also characterized *negatively* uncomfortable game experiences as those that make them want to quit the game. In this section, I address situations in which game content makes respondents lose interest in playing or, in other words, when uncomfortable game content transgresses the gameplay experience by making the game potentially unplayable.

When the respondents find uncomfortable game experiences to be negative, such experiences tend to create a sense of *distancing*. This sense of distancing distinguishes itself from the disinterestedness that Immanuel Kant argues is defining for aesthetic appreciation. Whereas Kant's disinterestedness presupposes taking a step back and contemplatively appreciating the work of art objectively and without emotion (Cashell 2009, 5), the distancing I address here is a state created by a disruption that threatens to break the ability to engage with the work. As Kieran Cashell argues, provocative art can never be disinterested because of the emotions it generates (2009, 8). However, such provocations may alienate the player of a videogame and prevent full involvement with the game. Thus, this sense of distancing is more closely related to the estrangement effect, or *Verfremdungseffect*, described by Bertolt Brecht (1964, 151) because it concerns how the game content hinders the player from identifying with the characters and actions in the game and makes the audience aware of the communicative process. Consider Oscar's viewpoint about the important fact that not all negative responses include discomfort. Sometimes they may simply be *bad*, in the sense of being unconvincing in achieving the intended function or by taking the player out of the engagement and making him think about the game's artificiality instead. He elaborates:

I think there is no bad uncomfortable experience, because bad uncomfortable game experiences are not uncomfortable—they are tacky. Either you think and feel that this is not good, or you think, what the fuck. ... Ugh. And that is what I feel about that *GTA* [*Grand Theft Auto* torture] sequence. Yeah, I see what they are trying to do, but it doesn't work. And sure, you can call it a *bad* uncomfortable experience, but I wouldn't call it *uncomfortable*. And, if it makes you feel something it is a good thing. But if you think that it is stupid, then it is a bad thing. (September 28, 2015, emphasis in original)

Oscar pointed out the important fact that negative response does not need to be uncomfortable, stressing that he rejects the scene in *Grand Theft Auto 5* not because of

what it represents or because the representation creates unease or provocation in him, but because the techniques themselves are not able to create the response it appears to be intended to create. No special emotion of discomfort is evoked in him, just a reflective evaluation that this scene does not work as intended.

However, my use of distancing here is concerned not with the distancing effect caused by intentional use of dramatic techniques but with the sense of distance that emerges in the audience through *oppositional* readings (Hall 1980). The players may not necessarily be so disgusted that they distance themselves from engagement, but they may feel distanced because they feel that the game setting, narrative, or characters do not resonate with their interests, values, or identity. Mary provided an example of negative discomfort created by such distance. She described her experience with *Grand Theft Auto 5* as one in which she feels distanced due to a lack of empathy with the characters: “My problem with all *GTA* games is that you basically play a psychopath. But in a way he is played as a good guy. ... And that, kind of, falls to the ground. ... It’s so ridiculous and stupid. Like they’re trying to sell you this character as one you would want to play, want to identify with, while he actually is quite unsympathetic, really” (October 16, 2015). Here, Mary’s distancing can be attributed to her *oppositional* reading of the game content: she is not able to relate the situations or characters to her own values or situation, which lowers her interest in playing the game.

With these examples, I have discussed the ways in which feelings of discomfort may be positive when they are experienced as meaningful within the in-game context. But if the discomfort is not properly contextualized, it may distance the player from empathic engagement. Tony explained: “If the story is good, I can accept a lot. But *Hatred* didn’t have—I won’t even call it a story. ... One of the things that annoyed me most of all was that it didn’t have an actual story. If they had fleshed it out, provide[d] us a flashback into his life about why he felt as he did, then it would have been much more effective” (September 28, 2015). Here, the absence of narrative motivation and context for the excessive violence appears meaningless and questionable, present only for the sake of provocation—or, as Oscar described it in the same interview, merely a marketing strategy and “an attempt to shock in order to sell more games” (September 28, 2015).

Another kind of discomfort that made the respondents want to stop playing is the feeling of powerlessness. According to Greg, “Games where you are a nonimportant person or something like that, and you feel that everyone is working against you, I don’t like that at all. ... That feeling of powerlessness, I can’t handle that at all” (October 16, 2015). He elaborated on how he prefers games in which his character is the driving force of narrative progression. When games put him in a situation in which he

cannot control events—for instance, because other characters are designed to betray the protagonist—he loses interest in playing the game because it deprives him of a sense of mastery, competence, and agency.

### The Mitigation of Game Discomfort

In the previous section, I discussed some situations in which the respondents' interest in a game was lowered due to negative discomfort. In this section, I discuss situations where distancing does not necessarily make the player lose interest but lessens the sense of discomfort.

This may occur in the context of exaggerated game content. For example, respondents were unable to take *Hatred* seriously due to its exaggerated style and excessive violence. Aron described *Hatred*: “It’s so excessively extreme that I can’t see the difference between him stomping a person’s head to pieces, and in *Gears of War* with this ... chainsaw rifle. It’s just, like, not realistic in any way. It’s not possible to take it seriously” (September 28, 2015).

It is difficult for Aron to take the exaggerations seriously, and the distancing removes the sense of discomfort that could have been preserved in more moderate representations. This suggests that exaggerated violence creates a degree of desensitization and lessened emotional impact of violence in *Hatred*.

Furthermore, humor may also help mitigate the discomfort of excessive violence. In Mary’s case, she did not find the humor to work well in *Grand Theft Auto 5*, but she explained how it nevertheless somehow mitigated the discomfort she feels with regard to the torture scene: “What I think is really strange about the scene is that they have tried to make it humorous at some points. ... In a way, well, it makes it a little less nasty because it becomes more absurd. In a way, this weakens it somewhat. ... [But] I still find it gross” (October 16, 2015). Here, the sense of absurdity contributes to making the scene feel as though it is less representative of actual torture. Recognizing but not accepting the attempts at humor and its ability to subdue the discomfort and sanitize the violence, Mary expressed the most clearly oppositional reading of the game.

Whereas Mary’s distancing from *Grand Theft Auto 5* is connected to her oppositional reading of the game content, it is possible that Aron’s distancing is an effect of the designers’ active attempt to distance the player emotionally from the game. This view is also supported by the fact that the game’s perspective positions the player a great distance from the action, representing nonplayer characters in the game as “not people, they are just stick figures” (Ted, November 11, 2015). This particular perspective also

distances the respondents from empathic engagement: “I lose some of the closeness, I think, to what’s going on. It’s a bird’s-eye view, it’s quite far away in a sense, which makes it lose its impact,” explained John (November 11, 2015). From this perspective, the sense of distancing is in accordance with the developers’ intention, and Aron and John, for this reason, are following the intended, *dominant/hegemonic reading* of the game. This perspective is supported by the fact that the respondents find the game to be exaggerated and by the unlikeliness for commercial reasons that the developers would intentionally put players off.

Following this line of thought, although the respondents may be distanced from empathic engagement in the game fiction, this does not mean that the goal-oriented engagement is gone. As mentioned earlier, games that claim shock value or attract criticism because of their controversial topics are believed to use the shock or criticism to gain attention. Group 4 shared that many games that have been targets of controversy due to their difficult themes or excessively violent content nevertheless do not feel uncomfortable to play. *Hatred* is among these games, which Neil described as “a twin-stick shooter, just with different models” (November 11, 2015). Referring to the *Hatred* gameplay as representative of a particular genre, but the audiovisual representation as new, he suggested that the controversial topics are implemented on the audiovisual or fictional level but not replicated in the game mechanics. As a consequence, such games may look transgressive to an observer, but the gameplay is, in fact, ordinary and may even draw attention away from the game’s controversial topic.

Because players employ empathic engagement as well as goal-oriented engagement, the ability to focus on gameplay while partly ignoring the audiovisual representation can be attributed to a mindset Anders Frank calls *gamer mode*: the player becomes occupied with playing the game as a game and so does not engage with its fictional representation (2012, 120). Gamer mode thus allows the player to disengage from the representation and focus on the game’s ludic elements, such as reaching the objectives rather than engaging in emotional drama or exploring the game mechanics rather than treating the game as fiction. Gamer mode allows the player to focus on playing the game and to ignore the game’s representational aspects. In such a context, the representation becomes mere audiovisual flavor, a spectacle meant for pure sensory immersion (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005), but does not really mean what it appears to represent. This kind of metacommunication is strengthened or weakened by the way the developers have chosen to present the in-game situation—in other words, the effects and rhetoric used.

## Summary

This chapter has been concerned with player experiences with uncomfortable game content and has demonstrated that such content can be experienced as both negative and positive, depending on the context.

Uncomfortable game content is viewed as positive when it is experienced as being integrated meaningfully into the in-game context and when the players feel that it makes them thoughtfully reflect. This means that positive discomfort is never *transgressive* in the original sense of the word—it never breaks absolutely with our ability to engage with the game but is mitigated because there appears to be a good reason for its inclusion.

On the contrary, uncomfortable game content is experienced as negative when players are unable to connect with what happens in the game; this inability to connect is caused either by insufficient contextualization of the uncomfortable content, due to the players' lack of recognition of the situations, or by a sense of powerlessness. In such cases, the experience comes closer to a true transgressive experience that oversteps our ability to cope with it. However, there are also situations in which game discomfort is mitigated—for instance, when the game includes exaggerated content or humor, when perspective creates distance, or when gamer mode can be activated.

Judged from the data collected in this study, situations in which the respondents experienced uncomfortable content as positive to the gameplay situation tend to be connected to empathic engagement. If the player interprets uncomfortable game content as having a negative impact on his or her experience, this impact tends to distance the player from empathic engagement. However, when goal-oriented engagement dominates, the respondents can, to a greater degree, distance themselves from discomfort induced by the fictional context. In other words, when in gamer mode, a player can more easily remain distanced from a sense of discomfort induced by game content. Thus, it appears that *play* and *transgression* are mutually exclusive. If an activity is experienced as play, it does not actually break with the player's ability to engage with it, but if the activity indeed does go beyond what the player can cope with, it is no longer play.

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