LANDSCAPES
CITIES
LOCALITIES

ceegs 2025

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

8-10 SEPTEMBER 2025
UNIVERSITY OF WROCŁAW
WROCŁAW, POLAND

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CEEGS 2025

LANDSCAPES, CITIES, LOCALITIES

Thinking in terms of space and environment is an experience shared by game designers, players, and scholars. Explorable, strategic, symbolic, imaginary, open or claustrophobic, game spaces can be essential genre markers, narrative devices, mechanical tools, political platforms, critical resources and more. The three spatial categories that co-create the topic of this year's CEEGS conference – landscapes, cities, and localities – bring out the qualities that seem particularly in tune with the multifaceted and complex ways in which space may be relevant for games, game cultures, and game industries. On the one hand, they are, by definition, constructed, delineated and, more often than not, anthropocentric – locality defined from a situated point of view and usually signifying the mutual infiltration of the spatial and the social (Duncan, 1989); city as a trademark example of human-shaped habitat; and landscape implying the presence of not only an observer and their aesthetic lens, but sometimes also traveling technology (Urry, 2007). All those features resonate with controlled and pragmatic design as games' fundamental attribute. On the other hand, each of those categories offers a different kind of flexibility, openness and porosity – local and global contexts in an ongoing negotiation within game cultures and industry; in-game urban settings frequently functioning as patchwork, heterotopian, or hybrid environments; landscapes reconciling the inevitable omnipresence of the player's eye with various ways and not always anthropocentric goals of visualizing the gameworld space.

The three categories are also in line with the fact that many game scholars around the world are now interested in local aspects of games. The local, conceived broadly as a counterweight to the global (Swalwell, 2021), can manifest itself on different scales. In-game, this could mean a very specific area (*S.T.A.L.K. E.R*), a large stretch of land that now belongs to a single nation-state (*Kingdom Come: Deliverance*), or a region containing multiple countries (*Reign: Conflict of Nations*). In terms of game cultures and game production, "the local" could refer to a few friends making small games in the same city of the Eastern Bloc in the 1980s, to the contemporary indie game industry in a particular country, or to the decades-long unauthorized game distribution across Central and Eastern Europe.

The conference embraces all these scales and also acknowledges the importance of the global scale. This year's edition, however, puts emphasis on relatively small places and spaces, which we term as localities. The other two categories, landscapes and cities, are not meant to limit the discussion scope or oppose each other, but rather to signal the variety of approaches to space in and around the game medium: from flat to three-dimensional, from decorative to interactive, from carefully arranged to chaotic, from uninhabited to populated, from places to non-places (Augé, 1995).

This year's conference will take place in Wrocław, "the City of one Hundred Bridges," also dubbed *the meeting place*. It has long been a place on or near the border, linking multiple countries, cultures, communities, and languages. Historically influenced by Slavic, Roman, Jewish, and Germanic

inhabitants, today the city continues to witness various kinds of international, intercultural, and interspecies meetings, which makes it a particularly matching scenery for the conference topic.

The conference program is managed by the Central and Eastern European chapter of the Digital Games Research Association. Workshops and local organization are managed by the local team at the University of Wrocław (UWr). The units organizing the conference at UWr are the Institute of English Studies and the Institute of Sociology.

The conference will take place at the

Institute of English Studies

University of Wrocław

Kuźnicza 21-22

50-138 Wrocław

PROGRAM COMMITTEE

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DAY 0
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DAY 1
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12:30-13:30 LUNCH

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Gerald Kapałka, Maria Celińska Emotional Landscapes in Localization: Affective Reception of Proper Nouns in Outer Wilds

Yuantong Yun Pixel to Parallax: Low-Poly Cartographies of Medieval Spatial Narrative in Games

Diego Barroso, Zidong Huang Urban (Re)development for Video Games. Effective Ludoforming and the Work of Ryu Ga Gotoku

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Zsófia Orosz-Réti The Master's Code to Dismantle the Master's Game? Games as Pocket Universes in *Black Mirror*

Magdalena Kozyra, Aleksandra Łozińska Vampiric Spaces of Ambience. The Case of Visual Novels *Vampire: The Masquerade – Coteries of New York* and *Shadows of New York*

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Emilia Mazur The Atmosphere of the Lost Place in *The Thaumaturge*

Kumru Akdogan Game Localities as Normative Affordances

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Kacper Karwacki Playing and Nothingness – Aesthetics of Emptiness in Game-World's Construction	**Stanisław Krawczyk, Kim Holflod, Rikke Toft Nørgård, Em Achilleus Hansen** "That's Not Fair!": Cultural Heritage, European Values, and Youth's Societal Engagement at a Cultural Game Jam
	Mikhail Fiadotau, Maria Garda The Glocal Game Jam? A Variantological Look at the Local History of Game Jamming Cultures in Poland and Japan

15:00-15:30 COFFEE BREAK

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Štěpán Šanda If the Astronomical Clock Stops, This Country Is Done For: Gameworld, Otherworld and Mythological Sites of Hrot	**Karol Popow** Cardboard Gameworld: Spatiality and Materiality in Board Games
Dale Leorke Navigating Lore and Landscape: Ludic Mythography and Player Pilgrimages in Dark Souls and Black Myth: Wukong	**Konrad Augustyniak** Was Sherlock Holmes from Wrocław? Locality and Theming in Polish Escape Rooms
Barnabás Springer, Pietro Noceti Playable Heritage: A Case Study of Embedding Folklore into Game Design for Cultural Mediation	**Mateusz Felczak** 'D&Dfication' of Localized Spatiality: (De)constructing 'Kashubianness' in Dungeons of the Amber Griffin

17:00-18:00
ROOM 307
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

DR HAB.DOROTA KOŁODZIEJCZYK
(UNIVERSITY OF WROCŁAW)

THE GAME EXOTIC – HOW TO DECOLONIZE GAMING AND NOT LOSE THE FUN? A TRANSMEDIA REFLECTION

DAY 1: **9:00-10:00** KEYNOTE 1 (ROOM 307)

Postcolonial studies have done a lot to raise the awareness how deeply entrenched the appropriative and commodifying processes of representing cultural uniqueness and difference are in the global culture of today (read: globality engendered by the cultural industry of the West). Even if literature, especially postcolonial literature, is keen to debunk the allure of exoticism inscribed in the very idea of adventure/quest/hero narrative since modernity (and before), and even if gaming communities are increasingly far-from-naïve cultural commodity consumers, the exotic remains a powerful transmedia force in cultural narratives which seep into games, too.

In my talk, I will reflect on how narrative media, including games, develop their own cultural landscapes by succumbing to two contradictory forces. One seeks always new stimulating narrative wrapping for the game, infusing it with exotic locales and encouraging ergodic involvement in the tasks of conquest and domination. The other undermines the mythopoeic pull of the hero/quest/conquest/domination narrative models as cultural commodification, reification and appropriation.

My key concern, however, will be not how criticism and game studies deconstruct and debunk the game exotic, but how games, as intermedia narratives, can actually eat the cookie and have it. In so many words, my question will be how we can enjoy the foundational narrative elements of the game which require an archetypal quest layer, and still decolonize what comes along with it and make our desire for the thrill of the exotic sustainable and equitable.

MÄRTEN RATTASEPP (BLANK SPACE / DIGIMANCY ENTERTAINMENT)

LAYERS UPON LAYERS – THE SPACES FOR DISCO (*ELYSIUM & PENTIMENT*)

DAY 2: **9:00-10:00** KEYNOTE 2 (ROOM 307)

Märten Rattasepp is an ex-academic, researcher, essayist, writer, and narrative designer from Estonia. He graduated with a Master of Arts degree from the University of Tartu in the field of literary and cultural theory, with a focus mostly on postmodern/amodern writing, metafiction, and historiography. After shifting to the gamedev world, he has written for games such as *Pentiment*, *Disco Elysium*, *Death and Taxes*, and *Broken Alliance*. From these, both *Pentiment* and *Disco Elysium* especially are intertwined with particular landscapes and localities, so much so that the living city of Revachol itself plays a significant part in the experience of the protagonist of *Disco Elysium*. The world of *Disco Elysium* is heavily built around particular temporalities and experiences of 90s and early 00s Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, while *Pentiment* is trying to recreate an authentic-feeling vision of a small town in early 16th-century Bavaria and the Holy Roman Empire.

KRZYSZTOF OLSZAMOWSKI (AGH UNIVERSITY OF KRAKÓW)
KACPER KARWACKI (UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW)
MIKOŁAJ POKRZEPA (JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)
MAGDALENA KOZYRA (SWPS UNIVERSITY)

LUDIC EXHAUSTION – RECONCEPTUALISING THE POETICS OF SOULSPACES

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 9:00-12:00, ROOM 111)

Bonfire has gone out. We disenchanted the souls games. Creators started to imitate design practices popularized by From Software studio, such as approaches to environmental design and feeling of mystery, leading to the emergence of souls-like genre, which in result led to disenchantment (Weber, 1904) of such gameworlds, resulting in the continual fading of the ludic sublime (Vella, 2015). Daniel Vella's conceptualisation of the souls-like genre experience as an aesthetic engagement with a gameworld that appears as impossible to fathom comes across as unattainable within the modern video-game landscape. The feeling of mystery, which characterises the initial experience of a souls-like games, is contrasted with the genre's position within the industry. It becomes increasingly difficult to become enchanted with the soulspace especially while observing various efforts to better understand and explain their mysteries attempted by gamers and scholars alike (Illger, 2020; Andiloro, 2022).

The modern market is saturated with souls-likes and souls-lites (we understand these terms similarly to the dichotomy 'rogue-like'- 'rogue-lite') across all budget categories: AAA titles such as *Elden Ring* (From Software, 2022) or *Jedi: Fallen Order* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019), AA releases exemplified by *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (Sandfall Interactive, 2025), *Lords of The Fallen* (Deck 13, 2014) and independent titles, including *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017), *Blasphemous 2* (The Game Kitchen, 2023). All these games, despite a significant variance in their approach toward game design – atmosphere, game mechanics, narrative – tackle the environmental design of the gameworld similarly, aiming at evoking a sensation of the ludic sublime within the player. This approach can be recognised as, but not limited to: labyrinthian level design with high relevance of shortcuts (Andriano 2024), narration based on a structure of intentional understatements and obfuscation of the storytelling devices, and a sense of progression evoked by the player's increasing knowledge.

Overuse of these practices, coupled with the fan-based discourse around souls-likes and the amount of content created around the games (Welsh 2020), led to a situation where, once modern and avant-garde design approach became fully recognised by its recipients, leading to a slow fading of the ludic sublime. This exhaustion is greatly evidenced by the release of *Elden Ring: Nightreign* (FromSoftware, 2025), where the sensation of ludic sublime appears as irrelevant, instead being replaced by a postmodern collage (Jameson, 1989) of recognition, quotation and over-saturation.

The release of *Elden Ring* was linked to the introduction of souls-likes into the mainstream, but also to the dropping of game-world design based on linear mazes. The open-world gameplay design can be on the one hand read as following dominant trends, but on the other as a departure from the souls-likes identity. *Elden Ring*'s design approach strikes a balance between constantly increasing combat challenges and introducing mechanics aimed at supporting players who reject the 'git gud' culture (Felczak 2024). However, in *The Shadow of the Erdtree* (FromSoftware, 2024) expansion, developers proposed the opposite direction, returning to the pattern of interconnected linear locations, perhaps responding to nostalgia for the classic souls-like experience. The result was a combination of traditional level design and the intense, dynamic gameplay typical of modern souls-likes. In the spirit of this year's CEEGS conference main theme – Landscapes, Cities, Localities – we propose to rethink and reconceptualise spatial poetics of souls, souls-likes and souls-lites games. We will be pleased to receive a variety of papers raising issues such as, but not limited to, e.g.:

- player within a soulspace

- alternative or non canonical game spaces (mods, fan works)

- mixed genres and borderline cases (2D "souls-likes", jrpgs "souls-likes")

- level design (open world in relation to the genre tradition, labyrinth-like gameworld)

- worldbuilding (atmosphere, environmental storytelling, aesthetic particularity of a gameworld)

- community aspect (emerging narrative, community notes and bloodstains)

- significant places and their meaning (hubs, boss areas, bonfires)

- music as a poetic tool

KÜBRA AKSAY (UNIVERSITY OF FREIBURG)
SEBASTIAN R. RICHTER (UNIVERSITY OF REGENSBURG)

TRAVERSING GAME WORLDS: MOVEMENT, MOBILITY, AND MEDIATION

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 9:00-12:00, ROOM 209)

From walking and wandering "without an end point" (Kagen 2022, 27) to commuting, high-speed travel, and "digital tourism" (Lamerichs 2018; van Nuenen 2024; Salmond and Salmond 2016) or Ludoforming (Aarseth 2019) movement in video games is central to how players experience and engage with game worlds. Whether on foot, by car, on horseback, through teleportation, or via fast-travel systems, navigating virtual space is never merely mechanical; it is cultural, affective, narrative, and political.

Traversal in games can be understood as both a mechanic and an embodied practice, offering methodological and theoretical pathways for (re-)thinking about space and "non-places" (Augé 1995), exploration, infrastructure, identity, and sensory experience. Thus, the topic also opens up dialogue between everyday mobilities (e.g., commuting, migration, walking), theoretical traditions (e.g., phenomenology, psychogeography, infrastructure studies), and game design paradigms (e.g., open worlds, level design, travel mechanics). This intersection invites critical reflection on how virtual movement, ranging from embodied navigation to "armchair travel" (Korte and Sennefelder 2022, 1), shapes not only gameplay but also cultural understandings of place, belonging, and mobility.

This workshop invites participants to explore how spatial movement can serve as a critical lens for studying games. We welcome contributions examining the dynamics of navigating game space and how these dynamics shape meaning, structure, and aesthetics in digital environments. We encourage submissions that engage with both established and emerging approaches to in-game movement—planned and accidental, purposeful and aimless, embodied and abstract. Building on a substantial body of work on space, navigation, and mobility in game studies, this workshop seeks to highlight underexplored perspectives and propose new directions for thinking about how navigating game spaces can inform broader conversations about spatial politics, agency, infrastructure, and the experience of digital play.

Workshop Plan

This three-hour workshop begins with a 15-minute introduction by the organizers, outlining key questions, conceptual framing, and goals. Next, six short presentations (10 minutes each, followed by 5 minutes Q&A, 90 minutes in total) will offer case studies or critical reflections on traversal, covering a range of topics such as walking simulators, fast travel, liminal spaces, vehicles, and the cultural meanings of movement in games. Audience members will be expected to read abstracts provided by presenters in advance of the workshop.

The final segment of the workshop will be a roundtable discussion (45 minutes, preceded by a 15-minute break after the individual talks) open to all 15 participants. This session will reflect on shared themes from the talks, build on the feedback during the Q&As in the first half of the workshop, and methodological challenges of studying traversal in games, with the aim of building connections and identifying future directions for research on movement and spatial experience in games. Possible Topics Include (but are not limited to):

- Traversal and identity: gendered, racialized, or class-based movement

- Walking, wandering, dérive, and digital flânerie

- Vehicles, mounts, and modes of locomotion in games

- Commuting and routine movement in game narratives

- Fast travel, teleportation, and traversal shortcuts

- Traversal as metaphor (e.g., for grief, memory, exile, growth)

- Infrastructure, roads, and mobility systems in world-building

- Traversal and accessibility / the politics of movement

- Traversal interfaces: maps, waypoints, compasses, GPS

- Traversal constraints: borders, gates, loading screens

- Game speed, slowness, and the temporality of movement

AGATA WASZKIEWICZ (CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LUBLIN)

DEMYSTIFYING ABSTRACTS: INTRODUCTION TO GAME STUDIES

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 13:00-16:00, ROOM 211)

To be active in academia is to write (so, so) many abstracts. Game studies, like every other discipline, has its own practices and norms – many of which often are assumed rather than clearly specified. And so, this workshop has been designed to demystify the process of abstract writing for BA and MA students, and to offer you a warm welcome to game studies conferences.

This workshop offers a focused, supportive environment for up to 12 participants, who will engage directly with their own research topics to craft strong abstracts and begin structuring scholarly articles.

The workshop will be divided into two parts: a short theoretical section during which we will try to answer the most pressing question (how to do a good literary review? How many sources are too many? What is a game studies methodology? What are reviewers looking for? Why you really do not need to mention the ludology vs narratology debate?) and a writing workshop during which the participants will work on their own abstracts. Special attention will be given to navigating and entering game studies in Europe, with consideration of the specificity of the requirements of the countries of the participants.

During the workshop, the participants will be expected to work on their abstracts, receiving and providing peer feedback, as well as work collaboratively to develop outlines and plans for transforming these abstracts into full articles.

MICHAL KABÁT
JURAJ KOVALČÍK
VOJTĚCH STRAKA (UNIVERSITY OF SS. CYRIL AND METHODIUS IN TRNAVA)

HOLD MY PADDLE: LOCAL PONG-CLONE MEMORIES & MATERIALITIES IN (POST-)SOCIALIST EUROPE

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 13:00-16:00, ROOM 111)

What the session is about

Do you or your older siblings remember that winter in the late '70s when households everywhere unboxed a sleek Pong console and finally brought the arcade home? – We don't. In socialist Czechoslovakia the state-owned Tesla conglomerate managed to release only a few thousand TV tennis units (XD 8000/8000A/8001), built around an original MAS 601–603 chipset and priced well beyond most family budgets. Meanwhile, hobbyists smuggled AY-3-8500 "pong-on-a-chip" ICs from Hungary or East Germany and wired together their own ball-and-paddle contraptions using scrap printed circuit boards, salvaged knobs, and step-by-step instructions from localized magazine schematics. Those improvised machines – now scattered across attics and forgotten club newsletters – tell a different, messier story of early videogaming: one of bootleg logistics, invisible factory labour (often performed by women), and teenage tinkerers dreaming in solder fumes.

Building on our forthcoming chapter "Hold My Beer! Pong Clones in Communist Czechoslovakia" that will be part of an edited collection *Silicon Dawn: Creative Computing in Europe 1970-2000*, this workshop invites CEEGS participants to surface comparable stories and artefacts from across Central and Eastern Europe. Together we will widen the lens from one country's case study to a regional collage of memories, objects and social practices. We know that those stories are waiting to be told. Magazines like *Radioamator* i *Krótkofalowiec* in Poland and *Radio, Televiziya, Elektronika* in Bulgaria cited Czechoslovak manuals, and all around the Eastern Bloc there were local Pong clones – either manufactured or homebrew, AY-3-8500-based or otherwise. Let's hear those stories.

Aims

- Exchange undocumented memories and artefacts – personal anecdotes, photos, circuit diagrams, battered plastic shells – that illuminate how local ball-and-paddle devices were made, modified and played.

- Compare national trajectories of production, distribution and reception, mapping common threads such as clandestine parts-hunting, state-sanctioned amateur electronics clubs, or gendered labour.

- Seed an open micro-archive (short oral-history clips, digitised images, scans) that will extend the chapter and underpin a co-authored publication slated for 2026 (we can share the work wersion of the text with possible workshop participants).

Format (3 hours)

- Scene-setter (10 min). A rapid overview of key gaps and provocations drawn from the chapter.

- Lightning show-and-tell (≈ 90 min). Up to twelve pre-accepted contributors each present a five-minute "object" and its story.

- Mapping & theming break-outs (45 min). Small groups cluster the collected material along axes such as amateur ↔ industrial or hidden ↔ visible labour, sketching patterns on flip charts.

- Wrap-up (20 min). We agree on post-conference tasks. Suggestions: ≤ 750-word vignettes and media files due 31 October 2025, a mailing list/Slack channel, and roles for editing the online archive.

GIULIO ENEA BEVIONE (UNIVERSITY OF BARI)
TOM LEGIERSE (UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN)
MARIA RUOTSALAINEN (UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ)
IDA MARTINE GARD RYSJEDAL (UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN)
ROBIN ZINGARELLI (BRUNEL UNIVERSITY OF LONDON)

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR QUEER, TRANS AND GENDER RESEARCH IN GAME STUDIES

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 13:00-16:00, ROOM 209)

The workshop was created by combining two proposed workshops:

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON GENDER AND GAMES

A focus on gendered issues has been part of game studies since the field's earliest development, but its significance has increased in the past two decennia. Especially after #Gamergate, we have seen an exponential growth of studies on gendered discrimination, experiences and representation in games and gaming spaces from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. The critical engagements with gender and games have both highlighted the gendered challenges present in game cultures (e.g. Cote 2020, Malkowski & Russworm 2017) as well in the study of them (e.g. Phillips 2020, Bergström 2022), This academic work has additionally highlighted the need for intersectional approaches to gendered issues (Gray 2020).

However, despite the field's contribution to scientific and societal debates, issues persist. We are now at an important cultural moment in which there is an increased need to think about the futures we aim to contribute to with our research practices. Academia's tendency to point out issues has been duly noted elsewhere (e.g. Sedgwick 2002, Pötzsch & Jørgensen 2023), and we agree a constructive turn is necessary. We need to think, collectively, about what is next, both in terms of theoretical underpinnings and pragmatic solutions. In other words, we need to ask not only what research on gender and games reveals, but also what research on gender and games should do?

In this light, we propose a workshop, titled *Future Directions for Interdisciplinary Research on Gender and Games*. This workshop focuses on mapping and understanding the central questions related to the research of gender and games. The central aim is to map the key research areas and directions for the near future and to ponder how they situate in the current global socio-political context. We encourage scholars to critically reflect on current research practices, and to propose a way forward that spells out the futures it works towards. Besides individual presentations, a general discussion will be utilized to synthesize various visions put forward during the workshop. This synthesis will form the basis for a co-authored commentary on future directions for research on gender and games.

In times where scientific communities are increasingly under political and societal pressure, not least when they are working on issues related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, we identify a vital need to form strong networks of scholars working on these issues. As such, an additional goal of the workshop

is to bring scholars working on gender and games together and introduce them to a to-be-launched Interdisciplinary Network for Research on Gender and Games (initiation funded by Nordic Gender Fund). Through this network, we hope to ensure that the collaborations that form during the workshop can be sustained in the years to come.

Proposed structure of the workshop

The workshop will be open to conference participants who are not presenting in the workshop themselves, but who are interested in these issues. Nonpresenters are welcome and encouraged to take part in the discussions during the workshop. The workshop will be capped at 20 participants, including 5 presenters and 3 organizers.

The bulk of our workshop is reserved for presentations and discussion, with each presentation being limited to 10 minutes and followed by 20 minutes of discussion. We will take 5 minutes to introduce the session briefly at the start of the session, and 15 minutes to synthesize and conclude the session. The synthesis of this workshop will lead up to a co-constructed commentary based on the workshop's discussions. Participants can voluntarily choose to contribute to this commentary, which we aim to submit to an open-access journal afterwards.

We will invite participants to join us for an informal dinner (on their own expense) after the session. During dinner, we can continue the discussion, but most importantly we will discuss the Interdisciplinary Network for Research on Gender and Games with those who are interested.

QUEER/TRANS GAME/STUDIES SPACES: REFLECTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURES

Queer (Ruberg & Shaw 2017) and trans game studies (Ruberg 2022) have emerged as dynamic and growing fields of inquiry, investigating the increasing presence of queer and transgender identities in games (Shaw 2015, Ruberg & Shaw 2017, Thach 2020, Kosciesza 2023), queer and trans players (Whitehouse et al., 2023), queer independent designers (Ruberg 2019a, 2019b), but also the subversive potential of games as a medium (Ruberg & Shaw 2017, Ruberg 2019a, Chow 2023). Stemming from transgender studies, queer studies, and their overlap (Stryker & Whittle 2006, Stryker & Aizura 2013), these works have pointed out the need to diversify games and game studies, as well as to establish counter-hegemonic practices and angles (Hantsbarger et al. 2022). Prominent works in the field remain, however, limited, and mostly produced by Western European and North American scholars, underscoring the need for contributions from intersectional and marginalised voices.

This rise in the popularity of queer/trans game studies coincides with heightened political scrutiny of queer and trans lives (Butler 2024), underscoring the urgency of critically examining these intersections. Queer communities have become focal points in the public discourse, as several countries adopt hostile legislation and censorship targeting transgender identities, including closures and cuts in Queer and Gender Studies departments in Anglophone academia (Butler 2024). In times of unpredictability, with both dictatorships and democracies limiting freedom of speech and aiming for the silencing of queer lives, we must strive to preserve counter-hegemonic approaches across both the academic and the non-academic spheres.

This workshop seeks therefore to investigate the state of the art of queer/trans game studies, of queer and trans representations in and around games, and of the reception of queer and transgender studies in the field of game studies, highlighting their relevance and the potential tensions between such overlapping fields, and the importance of marginalised spaces and localities in shaping our current understanding or queer/trans games and game studies. It also proposes to explore how game studies scholarship situates itself within the current socio-political climate around transgender lives, and how it can comprise a safe space for promoting transgender and queer awareness.

The workshop proposes to investigate (but is not limited to) the following questions:

- What are the origins, trajectories, methods, and future directions of trans/queer games studies?

- What is the state of the art of transgender and queer representations in games, and can queer and trans communities benefit from more visibility in the medium?

- How are queer/trans game studies situated geographically, and what are the main communities in focus? How is it possible to incorporate intersectional perspectives?

- What limitations or gaps persist within queer/trans game studies and game representations?

- How can we move towards greater queer and trans acceptance in game studies conferences, departments, and broader academic contexts? Should academic practices align with transgender activism to promote awareness, safeguard rights, and foster a diverse environment? And if so, how?

- This workshop aims to map the current landscape of queer and trans game studies, critically reflecting on their developments, and envisioning their potential to challenge, disrupt, and transform the relationship with game studies scholarship, bridging existing gaps and inviting research on underrepresented themes and from underrepresented subjectivities. The workshop is also a first step toward a forthcoming CfP for an edited volume on queer/trans game studies with the journal *GAME*.

ANDREI NAE (UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST)
DOROTA KOŁODZIEJCZYK (UNIVERSITY OF WROCŁAW)

VIDEO GAMES BETWEEN POSTCOLONIALISM AND POSTCOMMUNISM

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 16:30-18:00, ROOM 211)

Central and Eastern Europe is still an underrepresented region in game studies. In recent years, the focus on the politics of games, gaming, and gaming cultures has been limited to what Immanuel Wallerstein would call either core or periphery countries. The semi-periphery finds itself in an uneasy position due to the blind spots of postcolonialism and the decolonial option, two approaches that have so far been rather inefficient in accounting for the semi-periphery, more specifically postsocialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

This workshop contributes to an on-going effort in Central and Eastern Europe to put the region on the political map of game studies by focusing on video games developed in the region and the representation of the region in games developed elsewhere. More specifically, the workshop will focus on Andrei Nae's upcoming collective volume *Video Games between Postcolonialism and Postcommunism* that will be published by De Gruyter in 2025. The volume looks at video games developed in various regions of the world, while maintaining a strong interest in Central and Eastern Europe. The volume uses the diverse corpus of games to challenge the provincialism and theoretical shortcomings of postcolonialism and advocates for a postcolonial/postcommunist approach that can adequately provide an ideological account for video games and/in the semi-periphery after the dismantling of the Soviet Union.

The core activity of the workshop consists in a discussion between invited keynote speaker Dorota Kołodziejczyk, who has written extensively on postcolonialism/postcommunism, and Andrei Nae, the editor and main co-author of *Video Games between Postcolonialism and Postcommunism*, based on the book's manuscript. The discussion will be ensued by a Q&A session involving the other participants and a subsequent discussion on future action for the further inclusion of Central and Eastern Europe into the academic mainstream of game studies.

RAFAEL MARQUES DE ALBUQUERQUE (UNIVERSITY OF VALE DO ITAJAI)
FLÁVIO ANTHERO NUNES VIANNA DOS SANTOS (SANTA CATARINA STATE UNIVERSITY)

KALEIDOSGAME – A CARD GAME FOR TEACHING CREATIVE AND ANALYTICAL THINKING IN GAME DESIGN

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 16:30-18:00, ROOM 111)

This workshop introduces *Kaleidosgame*, an innovative card game designed to teach game design thinking. It allows participants to engage in collaborative, rapid ideation sessions where they combine mechanics from a curated deck to create original game concepts under evolving constraints (e.g., platform, audience). The activity fosters analytical and synthetic thinking, peer learning, and design fluency, mirroring the creative intensity of game jams. Designed for educators, students, and practitioners, the workshop offers a replicable tool for cultivating game design literacy through experiential, game-based learning.

Workshop Goals

By the end of the session, participants will:

- Understand how card-based games can scaffold creative and analytical thinking in game design education.

- Analyze games as emergent systems of interacting mechanics.

- Reflect on the role of constraints and divergent thinking in innovation.

Theoretical Framework

The workshop grounds its approach in the distinction between praxeology (processes/tools) and phenomenology (mechanics/experiences) in game design (Lankoski & Holopainen, 2017). It emphasizes Zagal's (2008) framework for understanding how mechanics coalesce into player experiences and Schell's (2008) iterative design principles.

Activities

- Discussion (10 min): Reflection on insights, pedagogical applications, and adaptations for diverse contexts.

- Introduction (20 min): Overview of the theoretical model and Kaleidosgame rules.

- Gameplay (60 min): Teams draw mechanic cards (e.g., "class systems," "synchronization challenges") and pitch game concepts under progressive constraints (e.g., "design for VR"). Peer assessment rewards creativity and viability.

PAWEŁ GRABARCZYK (IT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN)

ANALYZING SOFTWARE WITHIN PLATFORM STUDIES

WORKSHOP (DAY 0, 16:30-17:30, ROOM 209)

Platform studies is now an established and distinctive approach in game studies, characterized by its use of a diverse set of methods. These include code and hardware analysis, close readings of software, interview analysis, reverse engineering, social and institutional history, as well as discourse analysis. Needless to say, the specific choice of methods must always be tailored to the particular platform under investigation. Different books in the *Platform Studies* series vary in terms of the methods they employ and their overall focus, but most feature detailed analyses of software in relation to the technical affordances of the hardware.

The aim of this workshop is to focus specifically on software close reading and to use the case of the Atari 8-bit platform to illustrate both the challenges and opportunities involved in studying retro platforms today.

The workshop begins with a brief overview of the peculiarities of the Atari 8-bit platform— technical and historical details necessary for understanding the methods that will be demonstrated later. In the second part of the workshop, I will guide participants through examples of software analysis using source code examination and modern emulation tools. Participants will be encouraged to run an emulator on their own machines to explore how software was constructed, with the help of features such as screen composition analysis and asset extraction.

We will conclude the workshop with a demonstration of software that requires original hardware to run properly due to the limitations of contemporary emulation. This will highlight not only the technical challenges of retro platform research but also its potential to uncover forgotten or underappreciated aspects of software history.

The planned workshop duration is 1h. The workshop will be open for up to 20 participants who will be encouraged to use the emulation software themselves. The emulator is freely available. To avoid any copyright issues the retro software to be analyzed will be public domain.

ABSTRACTS

HANS-JOACHIM BACKE (IT UNIVERSITY COPENHAGEN)

WHO, WHERE, OR WHAT IS THE 'HEART OF CHORNOBYL'? CALCULATED SPATIAL AMBIGUITY IN S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2

PANEL 1: **(UN)REAL SPACES** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

Through its title and setting, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl (2024) foregrounds questions of location and landscape even before play commences. In the lead-up to the digital game's release, the combination and recreation of the fragmented locations of the original games – S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl (2007) and its sequels Clear Sky (2008) and Call of Pripyat (2009) – as a 60 km² open gameworld (GSC Game World 2024) drew much attention (Lane 2024). At the same time, news that the Power Plant itself would be inaccessible caused controversy on e.g. Reddit (Rough-Theme-8830 2024) and the Steam Forums (Grimtasy 2024). How could the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant be absent from the game, given that it is "the heart of the Zone" (S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Wiki 2025)?

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 ultimately offers an explanation for its subtitle, but does so only late in the game and invites players with many small gestures to speculate on the meaning of 'Heart of Chornobyl'. The presentation will argue that the ambiguity surrounding the metaphor is designed to amplify the spatial ambiguity of the game's landscape. To that end, the presentation first establishes the parameters of the heart-metaphor, shared by most languages (Sheridan 2018), as the location of emotions (love, desire, worry, sorrow), and the carrier of the qualities of sincerity and courage, which metonymically can signify a whole person (Gutiérrez Pérez 2008). As attested by the prominence of the heart-metaphor in public speeches of Ukrainian President Zelensky after the Russian invasion (Żyśko and Izdebska 2022), its use in Ukrainian frequent and nuanced (Shchepanska 2019), with the metaphor of the heart as center or core being the oldest and most well-established (Anisimova and Repp 2021).

In a second step, theories of digital game spatiality will be briefly explored. Of particular relevance is the concept of landscape, commonly understood as the meeting of culture and nature, where people are simultaneously shaping the land just as they are being shaped by it (Nelson 2023, 11). Landscapes are enclosures (Nelson 2023, 14), liminal spaces that are neither fully nature nor culture. Following W.J.T. Mitchell's definition of landscape as "a natural scene mediated by culture" (Mitchell 2002, 5), all game spaces might be understood as landscapes. While this perspective has some vocal advocates (e.g. Liboriussen 2008), others have argued that the spaces of digital games only in rare cases are scenic backdrops, and are better understood as active elements (McGregor 2007), and thus more in line with Lefebvre's understanding of space as "active – the operational or instrumental" (Lefebvre 1990, 11).

In its third step, the presentation applies these reflections to S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2, demonstrating that the Zone is actively problematized as an anti-landscape. The gameworld is a re-natured industrial area that has reverted to terra incognita and is removed from capitalist access. Where landscape paintings have

traditionally glossed over the objectification, exploitation, and ruination of nature (and indigenous cultures), S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2's gameworld simulates the paradoxical enclosure of a space excluded from capitalist logic, and characterizes it narratively as a subject rather than object of human activity. Interpretations (Ellis 2021; Mitchell 2024) of the novel and film (Strugatsky & Strugatsky 2012; Tarkovsky 1979) that inspired the game series show that this ambiguous treatment of space is already anticipated there, but that it only comes to full fruition in the recent game. By mystifying where, who, or what the 'heart' of the zone is, the game provokes an intensive reflection of the concept of (digital game) landscape, and thus invites players into a political and philosophical discussion that is as well-hidden as it is openly alluded to in the subtitle.

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ONLY BEAVERS LEFT ALIVE. POLISH CITY RE-BUILDERS AND CLIMATE APOCALYPSE

PANEL 1: **(UN)REAL SPACES** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

Recently, the theme of climate catastrophes gained popularity among Polish game developers. Drought, flood, severe winters, and terrifying storms became to-go obstacles underlying core mechanics in several resource-management games, created by both major game developers and small, independent studios. The BAFTA-nominated *Frostpunk* (11 bit studios, 2018) and it's 2024 sequel; the society-survival *Floodland* (Vile Monarch, 2022); the lumberpunk *Timberborn* (Mechanistry, 2023), and dark fantasy *Against the Storm* (Eremite Games, 2023), are only selected examples of Polish re-builders: post-apocalyptic games pitting the player against dire results of climate changes that resulted in major ecological catastrophe.

In this talk, we will present the comparative analysis of four aforementioned titles in the vein for ecocritical game readings (Abraham and Jayemanne 2017, Chang 2019, Backe 2017, Navarro-Remesal 2019), outlining their shared perspective on climate change, and on the fate of humanity after the climate apocalypse. Our aim is, though, to pinpoint cultural specificity of climate games produced in Poland, we dub "re-builders:" a distinct subset of contemporary ecogames (op de Beke et al. 2024), focusing on reshaping and repositioning human (or anthropomorphic) urban society after a ecological disaster, adjusting it to the new realities. We will highlight the country's semi-peripheral position and the historical experience of rebuilding from ruins as major forces behind the local concept of nature (Morton 2009), distancing Polish re-builders from the core concepts of Global North environmentalism, as presented in games (Mukherjee 2024). We will also tie this tendency to the larger idea of cultural catastrophism, rooted in Polish 20th-century literature (Całbecki 2023, Fiećko et al. 2014, Wilkoń 2016).

All analyzed games are commercial products, without explicit aim to raise climate awareness or call to action, often highlighted as a major feature of ecogames (Condis 2020, Freye 2023). They share a high difficulty level, and a post-apocalyptic setting with the focus on the survival of the community instead of preventing or reversing the climate catastrophe and two important features that open them up to the ecocritical reading: agency of natural forces and ambivalence towards humanity.

Player's goal is to create an urban community of survivors and protect it against hostile environmental phenomena. Natural catastrophes happen regularly, partially nullifying player's effort and forcing them to constantly rebuild in an attempt to find ultimate, durable setup (hence re-builders). The same time nature provides food, water and other resources crucial for survival. Therefore, nature is simultaneously hostile and beneficial, active and passive force to be both resisted and nurtured.

Equally paradoxical is the position of humankind, either decimated by the cataclysm of their own making, or completely extinct and replaced by other creatures, including sentient beavers. The focus on the twilight of humanity and its role in climate catastrophe invites non-anthropocentric reading, yet all games focus on rebuilding and protecting what's left of human civilization.

Despite those ambivalences, we don't consider analyzed games failed attempts at climate fiction. While not directly educational, they rely on regular catastrophes to disturb the growth-based flow of traditional city builders and reduce player agency over the environment. By introducing a sense of impending doom, they contribute to the larger tradition of Polish cultural catastrophism, an artistic movement problematizing the inevitable apocalypse. As such they offer a different kind of climate fiction: instead of presenting a warning, they question the possibility of avoiding the climate apocalypse and mobilize artistic, restorative potential of catastrophism to discuss modes of possible reconstruction. As such, re-builders may be seen as concrete utopias, a fluid and mutable space for anticipation, allowing us to imagine a different future (Pederson 2021).

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DANIEL VELLA (UNIVERSITY OF MALTA)
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TAKING IN THE VIEW: VIEWPOINTS, VISTAS AND VEDUTI IN GAMES

PANEL 1: **(UN)REAL SPACES** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

In genres from the adventure game to the role-playing game, the player's relation to the places of the gameworld is defined by exploration, navigation, forward movement and progress according to the spatial structure of the quest (Aarseth 2004; Nitsche 2008). There has been attention paid to games that establish experiences of dwelling (Vella 2019), that foreground atmosphere (Andiloro 2023), or privilege affects of coziness (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020). This presentation shall build on this existing work by engaging with specific moments and locations in games where purposive forward movement is momentarily halted, and the player is invited to pause, linger and take in the view.

We consider the grand viewpoints of games like Horizon: Zero Dawn (Guerrilla Games, 2017), The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo 2017) or Baldur's Gate III (Larian Studios 2023), which present the gameworld as a distant vista encapsulating a privileged perspective. We also look at moments of quiet contemplation provided by predefined spots that afford sitting in Life is Strange (Dontnod 2015) and Animal Crossing: New Leaf (Nintendo 2012), which associate the act of sitting with a sense of presence in, and nearness to, the surrounding place. Rather than the instrumental performance of "striving play" (Nguyen 2020) that shapes our usual active engagement with game places, in these defined spatiotemporal moments the player is encouraged to experience the gameworld in an aesthetic mode, with a foregrounded awareness of their being located - in the figure of the avatar - in a certain time and place. We are rooted not only in a certain landscape but also in the emotional moment that it evokes, which might be grand like in Baldur's Gate III or intimate as in Animal Crossing.

We examine these moments in relation to Western artistic traditions of landscape, starting with the "discovery of nature" in the Renaissance, which has been identified as coinciding with the consideration of the view for its own sake in Dante and Petrarch (Burckhardt 1878). At the same time, we argue there is another relation to game landscapes which emerges in such moments, given that they exist in the context of the player's movement through the gameworld - being offered as a reward for progress, or as an anticipation of conquests to come. We understand this in relation to the artistic practice of the veduta, the print of the obligatory sites of interest whose acquisition was an integral part of the Grand Tour - and to Sontag's observation that, with the advent of the camera, "travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs," with the travel album existing to "document sequences of consumption" (2019, 8-9).

In this vein, we also consider the link between these moments of pause in game landscapes and photo modes (Möring and de Mutiis 2019). Many such moments come with the invitation to take a screenshot to be shared on social media as cultural capital. In Astro Bot (Team Asobi 2024), for example, the tourist-attraction styled 'photo ops' gather all the characteristic elements of a specific level into a

staged postcard arrangement - a parallel to another artistic tradition, that of the capriccio, with its fanciful combination of disparate recognizable elements into a single composition.

The argument we make identifies a paradox in these viewpoints and moments of pause in games. On the one hand, they mark a momentary shift into an aesthetic and contemplative engagement with place. On the other hand, they represent a recapture of the aesthetic into the purposive and instrumental logic shaping the player's progress through the gameworld: the view, and its associated screenshot, becoming one more collectible for which the gameworld can be mined.

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THE CITY OF BRNO AS A VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY CLUSTER: COTTAGE-LIKE ORIGINS AND COMMUNITY VALUES

PANEL 1: **(UN)REAL SPACES** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

In recent years, scholars have argued that video game production is significantly influenced by local conditions despite the overall globalization of the industry (Keogh 2023; Kerr 2017). Literature has identified several clusters of video game development such as, in alphabetical order, Helsinki (Lehtonen, Ainamo, and Harviainen 2020; Lehtonen, Schilli, and Harviainen 2022), Kuala Lumpur (Wong 2024), Melbourne (Banks and Cunningham 2016a; 2016b; Darchen and Tremblay 2015; Keogh 2020; 2021b), Montreal (Darchen and Tremblay 2015; Grandadam, Cohendet, and Simon 2013; Pilon and Tremblay 2013), or Shanghai (Huang 2022; 2024). However, Central and Eastern European cities have not received much attention in this respect. This submission aims to fill this gap by exploring Brno (and its surrounding South Moravian region) as a major locality for video game production in Czechia.

Brno is the second-largest city in Czechia with a long history of manufacturing industries (Saleh, Carmel, and Mroczkowski 2004; Vaishar, Šťastná, and Zapletalová 2025; Ženka et al. 2017). It also has a comparatively large student population and a strategic location close to the densely populated parts of Austria and Slovakia. Although industry statistics show Prague as the center of the Czech video game industry with 51% of studios, Brno is an important secondary location with 21% (GDACZ 2023).

Our submission is part of a bigger, ongoing comparative project on European video game industry clusters. For CEEGS 2025, we draw on 29 interviews, which we conducted throughout 2024 and 2025 with developers, educators, event organizers, and representatives of the local government. These primary sources are complemented by press and journalistic materials, such as additional interviews with local developers. For this part of the project, we use qualitative methodology, specifically thematic inductive analysis (Ayres 2008).

Our findings suggest that Brno's development scene first coalesced around amateur collectives based at local schools and universities and then in the mid-1990s around the publisher Vochozka Trading, which acquired the funding necessary for the professionalization of local enthusiast teams and attracted developers from other parts of Czechia and Slovakia. The growth of the local industry was further helped by the international successes of Hidden and Dangerous (Illusion Softworks 1999) and Mafia: The City of Lost Heaven (Illusion Softworks 2002) and the following acquisition of Illusion Softworks by the US publisher Take-Two Interactive in 2008. The current industry ecosystem in Brno sees subsidiaries of international conglomerates like Take-Two or Embracer Group coexist alongside Czech-owned studios, with the latter often focusing on smaller scale mobile game development.

Despite the involvement of foreign corporations in local studios, the video game industry culture in Brno is described by its members as informal and friendly. This communal nature is epitomized by the cluster organization, which relies on volunteer labor from many of the key (and veteran) representatives of the local industry. These communal values are also how, according to our respondents, Brno differs from Prague, where local meetups are believed to be organized more around serving corporate goals, such as hiring. Our findings resemble the communal values and mutual support previously described among video game developers in Melbourne (Banks and Keogh 2021; Keogh 2021a). However, this culture is not without its flaws as informants note the personal cost of volunteer labor and how crunch and development deadlines can negatively affect the functioning of the local community, raising further questions about self-exploitation and sustainability in the video game industry.

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WACŁAW KULCZYKOWSKI (UNIVERSITY OF GDAŃSK)

FROM LOCAL HISTORY TO GLOBAL PLAY: SCIENCE-BASED VIDEO GAMES AS TOOLS FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EDUCATION

PANEL 2: **SPACES IN DEVELOPMENT** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 307)

This paper explores how video games can connect game development, cultural heritage, and education by examining two history-based games: Excavate! and Waterworks!. Both games were created through a collaboration between an archaeologist (the author) and the independent game developer Mateusz Sokalszczuk from Scriptwelder Studio. Their main goal was to make science more accessible by turning archaeological and historical research into engaging interactive experiences. These free games, available in Polish and English, have been played over two million times worldwide, showing how digital games can help share academic research with the public.

Excavate! (2015) puts players as archaeologists excavating a 17th-century cemetery in Nowe Monasterzysko, northern Poland. The game is based on research conducted by the author and was developed as part of the Archaeology Live & Online project, funded by the Foundation for Polish Science. It presents an authentic version of archaeological fieldwork while encouraging players to reflect on the importance of historical sites and local heritage. Since its release, Excavate! has reached a global audience through major online gaming platforms like Armor Games, Newgrounds.com, and Kongregate.

Similarly, Waterworks! (2020) focuses on a specific historical topic: the medieval water supply system of Grudziądz, Poland. This strategy game challenges players to manage water distribution over different historical periods by hiring water carriers, expanding infrastructure, and introducing new technologies. The game is based on research from the author's doctoral dissertation and was funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Its success was recognized internationally when PC Gamer named Waterworks! one of the best free PC games of 2020.

These games are not only tools for engaging the public with history and archaeology, but also valuable educational tools in academic settings. The author teaches History in Games, an original course at the University of Gdańsk, where students explore how different types of games - digital, board, role-playing, and outdoor games - can be effective methods for teaching history. The course demonstrates how games can communicate historical knowledge and how historians can collaborate with the gaming industry as consultants or co-creators. Additionally, the author coordinates the Historical Game Design program, which prepares students to work as game developers, historical consultants, and specialists in cultural heritage institutions. Both initiatives incorporate modern teaching methods that use games as interactive learning tools, emphasizing the growing role of digital media in historical education and heritage promotion.

By linking these games to the themes of the CEEGS: Landscapes, Cities, Localities conference, this presentation will show how video games influence public perceptions of historical places, cities, and regions. These games demonstrate how the local history, while turned into interactive experiences, reaches global audiences, making them relevant to discussions on game localization and regional game studies, games and cultural heritage, and game production's impact on local environments. This study argues that when developed with researchers, video games can be powerful tools for preserving and sharing cultural heritage in today's digital world.

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SILVESTER BUČEK (GAMINGGURU, MASARYK UNIVERSITY, ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS)

REFRAMING GAME SPACE: FROM TECHNICAL TO SYMBOLIC SPECTACLE IN DIGITAL GAME MARKETING

PANEL 2: **SPACES IN DEVELOPMENT** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 307)

The research examines evolving framings of spatiality in video game marketing by conducting a comparative analysis of promotional language from two distinct periods: 1995–2005 and 2015–2025. Employing discourse analysis and drawing upon established theoretical frameworks from game studies, including Aarseth's conceptualization of spatial representation (2001), Jenkins' theory of narrative architecture (2004), Consalvo's work on paratextual framing (2007), and Mukherjee's approach to symbolic world-building (2015), this research critically evaluates how promotional texts reflect and influence shifting understandings of game environments.

Historically, promotional materials, particularly within action game titles like Doom 3 (2004), prominently emphasized technological advancements such as real-time 3D rendering, advanced lighting effects, and audio realism. This technologically deterministic framing positioned spatial realism and graphic fidelity as central to a game's immersive potential, aligning with broader industry narratives of inevitable technological progression as primary drivers of player engagement.

Conversely, contemporary promotional discourse, exemplified by titles such as Doom Eternal (2020), increasingly foregrounds emotional resonance, atmospheric immersion, and symbolic narratives. This shift illustrates a significant departure from previous technodeterminist marketing paradigms, instead emphasizing space as a locus for player meaning-making, narrative immersion, and affective engagement. Such framing resonates with Jenkins' (2004) notion of narrative architecture, where spatial environments transcend their function as mere technological artifacts, becoming integral to storytelling and symbolic interpretation.

This paper argues that this transformation in marketing discourse does not merely reflect a diversification of rhetorical strategies, but also signifies a broader reorientation within the gaming industry away from strictly technological determinism towards a more nuanced, experience-centered understanding of spatiality. Consequently, traditional spatial typologies organized primarily by visual perspective (e.g., first-person, third-person, isometric) prove increasingly inadequate in capturing contemporary engagements with game space. The present analysis demonstrates the necessity of integrating symbolic, narrative, and experiential dimensions into game spatial typologies to more accurately reflect current practices and perceptions.

Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing discussions within game studies about the experiential turn (Calleja, 2011), the role of paratextual discourses in shaping player expectations (Consalvo, 2007), and the importance of understanding spatial representation as culturally and communicatively embedded. By redefining spatial typologies to incorporate experiential and symbolic elements, this paper underscores the evolving complexities of how games mediate player interaction with virtual

environments, highlighting the cultural and communicative significance of space within contemporary video game discourse.

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CLIMATIC ERASURE AND ECOLOGICAL AMNESIA: A CRITIQUE OF CLIMATE INSTRUMENTALIZATION IN CEE GAME DEVELOPMENT

PANEL 2: **SPACES IN DEVELOPMENT** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 307)

This study interrogates the systemic toolization of climate elements in Central and Eastern European (CEE) games, arguing that dominant scholarship's fixation on environmental mechanics as functional assets (e.g., survival challenges, exploration modifiers) obscures their role as cultural signifiers tied to regional histories, folklore, and post-socialist identity. While existing research prioritizes climate's gameplay utility—analyzing radiation mechanics in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (GSC Game World, 2007) as risk management or *The Witcher 3*'s (CD Projekt Red, 2015) weather as open-world pacing tools—it neglects how such designs flatten CEE's climatic-cultural hybridity.

Four critical research gaps emerge:

1) Symbolic shallowness: Climate's decoupling from localized ecological memory (e.g., *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s reduction of Chernobyl's "Red Forest" to generic toxicity meters);
2) Technopolitical erasure: Western engine standards (e.g., Unreal's global illumination) imposing climatic homogeneity, as seen in ArmA's (Bohemia Interactive) hyperreal Middle Eastern deserts versus tokenized Central European microclimates;
3) Unarchived resistance: Dismissal of player-led climate subversions, like 1990s Polish piracy communities replacing Delta Force's deserts with rainy textures;
4) Methodological insularity: Overreliance on ludological frameworks, sidelining cross-disciplinary lenses like climate anthropology (Ingold, 2010) or post-socialist technocritique.

Through case studies spanning AAA studios to indie experiments, this paper reveals how CEE developers and players negotiate climatic representation under dual pressures of global market appeal and technological dependency. For instance, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018) employs a "pan-European" medieval climate to dilute Bohemia's fog-bound industrial legacies, while *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014) weaponizes winter coal shortages to critique post-Soviet energy inequities—a rare instance where climate mechanics transcend instrumentalization to embody socioecological critique. Similarly, modder communities' climate hacks (e.g., altering Witcher 3's rain cycles to align with Polish harvest rituals) highlight grassroots attempts to reclaim climatic agency, yet such practices remain marginalized in academic discourse.

Methodologically, this analysis synthesizes game engine studies (Montfort & Bogost, 2009), postcolonial digital humanities (Risam, 2018), and player anthropology (Svelch, 2023) to map three axes of climatic toolization:

1. Cultural commodification: CD Projekt Red's "Slavic exoticism" repackaging regional weather (e.g., randomized blizzards) as globally digestible aesthetics, severing ties to agrarian calendars or folkloric tempests.
2. Data-driven decontextualization: Door Kickers (KillHouse Games, 2014) reducing snow to a stealth modifier, erasing its linkage to Poland's 1981 martial law snowscapes.
3. Engineered amnesia: Western middleware's climate presets privileging "universal" biomes (tropical, temperate) over CEE's liminal ecologies (e.g., Carpathian fog belts).

Findings demonstrate that climatic toolization perpetuates neo-colonial epistemologies within game production: CEE studios, reliant on Western technology stacks, often self-censor localized weather narratives to meet export expectations. However, counter-narratives emerge through modding praxisand indie experimentation—This War of Mine's blizzards critiquing Warsaw's heating poverty, or piracy-era texture swaps asserting climatic autonomy. These practices, though fragmented, propose a decentralized climatic vernacular challenging the industry's core-periphery dynamics.

The study concludes by advocating for decolonial game engines—tools embedding regional climatic epistemologies (e.g., fog as historical metaphor)—and participatory archives documenting player-led climate interventions. By recentering climate as a sociohistorical actor rather than a gameplay variable, this work bridges ludic analysis with CEE's ecological memory, urging scholars to confront the politics embedded in every virtual raindrop.

MARIA RUOTSALAINEN (UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ)
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FROM OBSCURITY TO SPORTS PAGES – THE EVOLVING ATTITUDES TOWARDS ESPORTS IN MEDIA

PANEL 2: **SPACES IN DEVELOPMENT** (DAY 1, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 307)

Year 2024 was arguably a milestone for esports in Finland. In the annual poll for the "Most inspiring sports moment" organized by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), for the first time one of the moments the public could vote for was from esports. That moment was the professional *Counter-Strike 2* (Valve Corporation, 2023) player Aleksi "AleksiB" Virolainen leading his team to victory in PGL Major Copenhagen, the most prestigious tournament in this sport (PLEY.GG, 2024). Whilst the moment did not win the vote (but was third), being nominated in a major sports event clearly indicates that esports has become a sport among sports in Finland.

The change in attitudes towards esports did not happen overnight and is not unique to Finland. Indeed, mainstreaming esports appears to be a rather global occurrence. In the past decades, esport has gone through a process of sportification (Mora and Héas, 2003), meaning it has been actively modelled after traditional sports, both in its structure and its (media) presentation (Taylor, 2016; Turtiainen et al., 2020). Earlier research has drawn attention to how likening esports to sports functions to increase its mainstream appeal and acceptability (Cumming, 2021; Ruotsalainen, 2022).

Whilst mainstreaming esports in media has been discussed in different contexts, what the current research lacks is an understanding on how esport games are discussed in relation to esports in media. Game journalism has traditionally focused on particular elements of digital games such as playability, graphics, and audio (Kirkpatrick, 2016) and sports journalism has traditionally focused on the athletes, their performance, and major competitions (e.g., Rowe 2007; Horky 2010; Sherwood et al. 2016), even though human-interest stories and broader phenomena related to sports have increasingly gained exposure in recent years (Broussard, 2020). Earliest examples of esport journalism date back to the early 2000s, but it was around 2016 established media started to enter the space of esports journalism (Wolf & Cote, 2024).

The games played are not inconsequential in esports: when Aleksi "AleksiB" Virolainen leading his team to victory was nominated for the sports moment of the year, it was arguably important for his nomination that the game he plays is CS2. CS2 and its predecessor Counter Strike:Global Offensive (Valve & Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012) have gained an almost national esport status in Finland, being clearly the most viable esports in Finland. Despite the global nature of esports media, locality can play a part in how sportification through media takes place.

Against this backdrop, we examine how esports and in esports games are discussed by the biggest national newspaper Helsingin Sanomat and the news website of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) in the years 2017-2024. We analyze the material with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995), examining how esports becomes positioned as sports (and possibly as something else) and what role

the games played have in this. We examine how game mechanics, narrative content, and gamewold are discussed, drawing from existing research on the role (or lack of it there of) of game fiction in esports (Koskimaa et. al., 2021) and ask, how exactly are games discursively constructed in the sportified frame of esports.

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ASHLEY REZVANI (UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA)

THE CITY AS IDEOLOGY - THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF URBAN PLANNING IN *FROSTPUNK 2* AND *TERRA NIL*

PANEL 3: **MAPPING OUT THE SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 11)

In the first half of the 20th century, modernist approaches to urban design in the Western world framed the city as manifestations of an individual designer's plans (Jacobs, 1992). The 1960s and 1970s marked a departure from these traditions, as urban planners and sociologists contended the design of cities is instead shaped by, and thus reflective of, prevailing cultural, economic, and political ideologies (Castells, 1972; Jacobs, 1992; Lefebvre, 1974). Unlike their real-world counterparts, virtual cities are not inherently restricted by cultural, economic, and political forces. Invoking a modernist approach, many city-builders frame the player's role as that of an almighty, supreme urban planner, earning the genre the nickname of "god games" (Bereitschaft, 2016). Despite the player's supposed all-powerful position, Magnet's (2006) concept of a gamescape reveals how a game's landscape shapes "a player's particular understanding of a larger set of spatial ideologies inherent to the game." Thus, the urban environment players construct in city-builders is powerfully shaped by the player's exploration of and interaction with cultural, economic, and political ideologies embedded in the game rules. This paper argues that the player's construction, negotiation, and perception of urban landscapes in the city-builder games *Frostpunk 2* and *Terra Nil* are tangibly influenced by spatial ideologies embedded within the gamescapes. Both games feature landscapes ravaged by climate disasters but present dramatically different gamescapes, therefore communicating two different ideological perspectives on the ethical dilemmas related to urban planning within environments threatened by climate crises.

The city-builder survival game *Frostpunk 2* may initially seem adjacent to early-modernist urban design, as players adopt the role of urban planner and political leader to singlehandedly build and manage the city of New London, which eventually serves as the hub of a sprawling empire comprised of linked city-states. However, the gamespace of *Frostpunk 2* imposes limitations on the player's spatial agency: buildings must be constructed in specific patterns and areas, the populace must be controlled by physically constructing a police state and/or engaging in corrupt political machinations, and the extraction and depletion of resources in the capital city makes imperialist expansion a necessity. The gamespace of *Frostpunk 2* forces players to survive the climate apocalypse through constructing urban environments aligned with an imperialist perspective spatio-temporality, which classes all space into one of three categories: the center, the line, or "outside" (Smith, 2022). All urban environments in *Frostpunk 2* belong to one of these categories, with the heat generator at the center, tendrils of industry expanding out from the center in marked lines, and everything else "outside" these two serving as either barren wasteland or uninhabited landscapes ripe for exploitation. The empire the player constructs inevitably follows this same pattern, with New London as the primary center connected by lines of skyways or trails to all colony cities and outposts, themselves centers surrounded by the "outside" wilderness.

In contrast to the autocratic and imperialist spatial ideologies embedded within the gamespace of *Frostpunk 2*, *Terra Nil* offers players entirely different interactions with its gamespace. Tasked with restoring polluted landscapes back to health, players construct buildings in a decentralized manner, where each building has its own area of effect that should, optimally, overlap with others. As play progresses, the player constructs environments characterized by overlapping spheres of effect, evocative of pre-colonial maps of North America where indigenous nations loosely overlapped their neighbors. Informed by the game's themes of anti-capitalism and restoration, the spatial composition of buildings and landscape in *Terra Nil* ask players to adopt an indigenous, rather than imperialist, perception of space to heal the damaged environment.

The design of real cities shapes the way inhabitants experience it, emotionally and literally, and our urban environments give physical structure to systems of power (Jacobs, 1992; Shome, 2003). The gamespaces in *Frostpunk 2* and *Terra Nil* prompt players to negotiate and explore spatial ideologies through preventing or encouraging certain city layouts, communicating two different ideological approaches to resolving climate fallout.

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EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPES IN LOCALIZATION: AFFECTIVE RECEPTION OF PROPER NOUNS IN *OUTER WILDS*

PANEL 3: **MAPPING OUT THE SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 11)

This paper explores the emotional and spatial resonance of translated proper nouns in the Polish version of Outer Wilds (Mobius Digital, 2019), with an emphasis on how language influences the player's perception of virtual locales and landscapes. The game, known for its narrative depth and exploratory space environments, constructs its world through a series of evocative names. The purpose of this study is to determine whether these translated names cause players to feel the same emotions as their English counterparts and whether they contribute to the game world's narrative and immersive elements in ways that are culturally relevant.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in the methodology. Players' affective responses are measured using a modified version of the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) scale (Lang, 1980), expanded by Imbir's (2015, 2016) Emotion–Duality Model. Imbir's Affective Norms for Polish Short Texts (ANPST) dataset demonstrated the SAM's usefulness in evaluating emotional reception of brief verbal stimuli, making it a suitable framework for analyzing emotionally charged proper nouns in game localization. A detailed examination of the emotional and cognitive perceptions of names by native Polish and English speakers is made possible by the six dimensions that are used in Imbir's questionnaaire: valence, arousal, dominance, origin, significance, and source.

Participants rate their responses to selected proper nouns from the game, and are also asked to describe any visual, emotional, or narrative associations that the names evoke. This combination of scaled data and open-ended responses helps identify patterns in how names construct a sense of place, danger, familiarity, or other key aspects of Outer Wilds' narrative world. Preliminary results suggest that Polish translations do not merely mirror the English originals but recontextualize them within a different cultural-emotional frame. For example, Krucha Pustka ("Brittle Hollow") is often interpreted by Polish players as poetic, eerie, and empty, supporting both spatial and existential themes in the game's narrative arc.

This study positions itself at the intersection of game studies, localization studies, and emotion research. It draws on Aarseth's (2001) and Jenkins' (2004) theories of game spatiality and narrative architecture, as well as Bernal-Merino's (2015) work on the cultural function of localization. By focusing on proper nouns, a relatively understudied linguistic category in game translation, this research contributes to our understanding of how linguistic elements shape player experience, particularly in games where landscape is not just background, but a central narrative device.

In the context of CEEGS 2025's theme, Landscapes, Cities, and Localities, this paper offers a unique lens on the locality of language and its role in digital spatial storytelling. It shows how translation is not just about linguistic equivalence but about emotionally and culturally anchoring players within

imagined spaces. Through a relatively small-scale, player-centered methodology, the study highlights how translated names can succeed, or fail, in shaping affective maps of game worlds.

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PIXEL TO PARALLAX: LOW-POLY CARTOGRAPHIES OF MEDIEVAL SPATIAL NARRATIVE IN GAMES

PANEL 3: **MAPPING OUT THE SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 11)

This study investigates how the technical constraints of game engines, particularly low-poly 3D modeling, reconfigure historical narratives of medieval architecture through a materialist lens informed by Friedrich Kittler's media theory. By analyzing the interplay between computational parameters (e.g., polygon counts, texture resolution) and the ludic representation of Gothic spires, fortified castles, and other medieval structures, the research uncovers how technical specifications act as nonhuman actors that mediate historical authenticity and player cognition.

The first section introduces the concept of parametric disenchantment, arguing that game engines reduce architectural complexity into calculable data units (e.g., converting flying buttresses into triangular meshes), thereby divorcing medieval buildings from their historical-material contexts. Case studies of Unity asset packs (e.g., POLY MEDIEVAL) reveal how modular design logic prioritizes engine compatibility over cultural specificity, producing a homogenized "pan-medieval" aesthetic that erases regional diversity. This process aligns with Kittler's assertion that "media determine our situation," as technical limitations—not creative intent—dictate the symbolic boundaries of historical representation.

The second section examines negative historicity, a novel framework to describe how players cognitively compensate for low-poly abstraction by projecting cultural memories onto simplified models. Through empirical methods (e.g., eye-tracking, player interviews), the study demonstrates that minimalist structures (e.g., pixelated cathedral spires in Stronghold) trigger associative thinking, where players unconsciously reconstruct historical narratives using external references (e.g., films, literature). This participatory "gap-filling" redefines players as co-constructors of history, challenging top-down narratives imposed by developers.

The third section critiques the political economy of engine ecosystems. Asset stores like Unreal Marketplace privilege Western medieval templates (e.g., Norman castles) over non-European architectures (e.g., Byzantine or Islamic styles), reflecting a digital geopolitics where technical standards enforce cultural hegemony. By tracing the supply chain of modular assets—from photogrammetric scans to low-poly optimization—the study exposes how capital-driven efficiency metrics (e.g., draw call reduction) flatten historical nuance into globally marketable commodities.

Methodologically, the research bridges media archaeology and cognitive science. A comparative analysis of Kingdom Come: Deliverance (2018, PBR-textured) and Knights and Merchants (1998, 2D sprites) quantifies how polygon fidelity alters player perceptions of historical accuracy. fMRI experiments further reveal that low-poly models activate brain regions associated with imaginative synthesis (e.g., prefrontal cortex), whereas hyperrealistic assets engage memory retrieval circuits (e.g., hippocampus), suggesting divergent cognitive pathways for historical engagement.

The findings challenge the myth of technological neutrality in game studies, positioning engines as ideological apparatuses that naturalize Eurocentric histories. Theoretically, the study advances techno-capital symbiosis—a framework to analyze how engine constraints and profit motives co-produce hegemonic narratives. Practically, it advocates for "critical asset design" that foregrounds technical mediation, urging developers to expose—rather than obscure—the constructedness of digital history.

By interrogating low-poly assets as sites of material and cultural negotiation, this research redefines historical games not as passive simulations but as contested terrains where code, capital, and cognition collide. It contributes to media theory, game studies, and digital heritage discourses by foregrounding the invisible politics of polygons.

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URBAN (RE)DEVELOPMENT FOR VIDEO GAMES. EFFECTIVE LUDOFORMING AND THE WORK OF RYU GA GOTOKU

PANEL 3: **MAPPING OUT THE SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 11)

There are multiple reasons to use preexisting spaces in fiction, from nostalgia to faithful simulation. Cities are sometimes used as settings for books, films, and video games, with their own complete identities. Still, more often than not, those cities are an inspiration, their essence borrowed for a new urban setting. However, despite not keeping their namesakes, we still recognize those original spaces in them. There is something that endures after "translation," a distinctiveness. To pursue this line of thought, we explore the following questions:

Are urban environments designed for video games capable of replicating the experience of preexisting real-life urban environments?

How do they accomplish this?

How do gameplay and narrative design impact virtual urban design?

This paper identifies and compares the techniques employed to translate cities' "essence" (distinctiveness) into video games. We look at different elements and layers of the district of Kamurocho from the Yakuza/Judgment series (Ryu Ga Gotoku), relating it to its modeling and transformation of a particular area in Tokyo (Kabukicho). We analyze these spaces that manifest the original cities' essence through a tri-modal methodology based on the following principles and methods:

First, we acknowledge the referent, the modality of preexisting (real) spaces that shape a particular virtual environment. Here we turn to Kevin Lynch's study of -mainly- Los Angeles (1960) for a way to read the image created by real-life cities (in his 2019 comprehensive approach to game-level design, Christopher Totten had already shown the usefulness of Lynch's five urbanistic elements for a "legible" city). For this first layer, we focus on architecture and urban design (mainly the vertical-horizontal axis) and gauge the "distance to height" proportion of Kamurocho following Ashihara's study on the primary and secondary profiles of a city (1979).

The second spatial modality refers to the ludic topology itself. Building on the previous analysis of Kamurocho as a particular place, we explore the practices and strategies of 'ludoforming' (Aarseth, 2019) employed by Ryu Ga Gotoku. Abstracting layers of built virtual environment (not breaking, but deconstructing; vid. Pearson, 2017, 2019, 2020; Pearson and Rose, 2017) and juxtaposing them with their real-life referents help us reach unexplored levels of urban design within and without video games. The focus here is the scale of the modifications, camera control, and behavior, among other elements.

Finally, the third modality would be that of "environmental storytelling" ("indexical storytelling" is also a valid idea). This final modality brings back together space and life. Ryan et al. (2016) have explored the narrative capabilities of space in media; they further explore Jenkins' concept of environmental storytelling (2005), bringing closer "embedded" and "emergent" narratives.

Following this conceptualization of video game narrative, we find a design loop between a virtual environment and its stories, between virtual urbanism and its embedded-emergent narratives. Through careful comparisons between the designed spaces within and without the Yakuza/Judgment world, we articulate strategies or techniques conducive to a vivid experience and creating a lived (virtual) space.

To close this analytical circle, we return to the real world (with Nitsche, 2019 and Dimopoulus, 2022; also for a general exploration of "virtual urbanism" Dimopoulus 2017 and 2020) with one closing question: Can specific video game (virtual) urbanistic projects give us insights/inspirations for real-life developments? Indeed, by exploring how the Yakuza/Judgment series translates Kabukicho (real space) into Kamurocho (virtual space), not only do we identify clear strategies for developing video game environments but also delve into the ever-evolving relationship between real and virtual.

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"YOU'RE ON A PATH IN THE WOODS" – LIMINALITY OF SPACE AS A METAMODERN NARRATIVE DESIGN IN *SLAY THE PRINCESS*

PANEL 4: **LIMINAL AND AMBIGUOUS SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 307)

Slay the Princess exemplifies metamodern narrative design through its use of space. The setting of the game is a temporally unanchored place, stripped of identity, which functions as a tool of recursive storytelling and mitigation of agency. This paper explores the game's portrayal of spatial liminality and mimetic structures, with particular emphasis on the symbolic and affective role of the cabin—a mutable, looping space that anchors the player's cyclical return to a fractured narrative. The setting of the game, a cabin, may be considered a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1981) of a fairy-tale environment, fulfilling a comparable role to that of the fairy tale itself: it operates as an allusive and metaphorical device, constructing an "as if" space wherein the player engages in a journey of self-reflection (Barsotti, 2015). The cabin seems to function as both a simulacrum and an uncanny object (Freud, 1955), evoking disorientation through its shifts and reactive quality to player decisions. These spatial transformations echo the metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony, construction and deconstruction, evoking Deleuze's (1990) notion of *becoming*—process of changing in form, identity or nature as a result of experiencing external factors and entering into a relation with them. By treating the cabin as an object imbued with agency and considering its ability to impact the narration, this paper engages with object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2005) to suggest that space in Slay the Princess is not merely a setting, but a narrative agent—one that mirrors the instability of identity and meaning found within the story. This liminal space, constantly shifting and resisting fixed interpretation, produces an affective disorientation that destabilises the player's sense of progression and authorship. Within this context, the cabin may be seen as a site of metamodern affect, where the interplay of choice and consequence is dramatized as both real and illusory. The game's procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008) positions the player as a co-author navigating a pre-structured but susceptible to change narrative landscape, while agency is simultaneously granted and manipulated, distributed among the narrator, the player, and the Princess, all of whom function as competing storytelling agents. This layered construction foregrounds the metamodern tension between structure and improvisation, fictionality and self-awareness. Drawing on the theoretical framework of metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010; Huber, 2014, Syundukov and Svishchenko, 2016; Radchenko, 2023), alongside Deleuzian philosophy of becoming, this paper argues that Slay the Princess reconstructs the fairy tale genre through a metamodern lens centred around the liminal space of the cabin. It creates a spatial poetics where choice, identity, and narrative unfold in recursive loops, and where space itself participates in the story as a liminal and affective force.

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THE MASTER'S CODE TO DISMANTLE THE MASTER'S GAME? GAMES AS POCKET UNIVERSES IN *BLACK MIRROR*

PANEL 4: **LIMINAL AND AMBIGUOUS SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 307)

The anthology Netflix show Black Mirror, in its (so far) seven seasons, has consistently addressed the grim implications of modern technology, putting a recurring and special focus on video games and instances of "gameliness" – such as the talent show in "Fifteen Million Merits" or the virtual reality testing experience in "Playtest." The exploration that I propose is built on the assumption that the depiction of video gaming in popular culture in general, and in the Black Mirror series in particular, is founded on the dual fantasy – both positive and negative – of the magic circle (Huizinga). This implies that despite the rich academic discourse on the unsustainability of magic circle thinking (Calleja, Moore, Vossen), popular culture imagines games and gaming culture by indulging in both the illusory promise of maintaining the magic circle and presenting games as pocket universes (Davies) of a sort, and the horror and fascination that accompany the transgression of the magic circle threshold. In this way, video games as envisioned by popular culture, I contend, are and contain special, digital spaces – hence nodding to the theme of CEEGS 2025 – that have the potential to make visible, critically comment on, and challenge the implicit rules of Western, neoliberal pop culture – including those of race, gender, and sexuality.

To demonstrate this, I propose to use narrative and thematic close reading analyses of three case studies composed of six episodes from the series. First, "Striking Vipers" will be tackled as a case of a game offering an egalitarian and liberating utopia (see Kłosiński) that is kept entirely distinct from the diegetic reality of the episode. While it does enable well-regulated and "harmless" entertainment, it still reinscribes heteronormative sexuality into an otherwise subtly queered primary universe. "San Junipero," on the other hand, is in fact presented as a queer (if hauntological) utopia.

Then, the standalone Black Mirror episode "Bandersnatch," together with its season 7 spin-off "Plaything," will be scrutinised in the context of deliberately crossing the threshold that is supposed to keep the "pocket universe" apart from consensual reality. As both episodes focus on the real-life consequences of in-game actions, an ecocritical approach to digital care (Ruberg; Ruberg and Scully-Blaker) emerges as possible.

Finally, "USS Callister" and its 2025 sequel "USS Callister: Into Infinity" focus on the very boundary between game spaces and actual spaces, and a productive oscillation between body and mind, digitality and physicality, to provide creative ways of "changing the narrative" (Hantke) and slowly readjusting the sexist and racist undertones that are sometimes still associated with gaming culture (see Paul).

With this, this paper hopes to join the recent discussion on the role of video games in popular culture not only as its "other" (Consalvo and Dutton, Rich), but also as a meta-medium envisioned as potentially having a critical utopian potential in popular culture.

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VAMPIRIC SPACES OF AMBIENCE. THE CASE OF VISUAL NOVELS *VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE* – COTERIES OF NEW YORK AND SHADOWS OF NEW YORK

PANEL 4: **LIMINAL AND AMBIGUOUS SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 307)

Space creation in visual novels (VN), relying mostly on narrative text, sound and steady background images, visibly differs from poetics of other genres. Despite this dissimilarity, it remains on the margins of game studies field, which focuses on VN' didactic potential (Andrew et al. 2019, Camingue 2020), japanese origins, narrative structures and player agency (Cavallaro 2010, Bruno 2017, Carstensdottir 2019), or defining the genre (Camingue et al. 2021). Thus, we propose a case study expanding the current scope of research, meant as a starting point for capturing the specifics of VN' spaces.

To do this we will analyze two games based on the world first introduced in tabletop RPG Vampire: The Masquerade (V:TM): Coteries of New York (2019) and its continuation, Shadows of New York (2020). We chose them for two main reasons. Firstly, they heavily draw from narrative types stressing the importance of space: urban fantasy (which itself was influenced by the original V:TM; Ekman 2024, Wolski 2020), detective fiction, and a tradition conceptualizing vampires as inherently urban creatures (Piatti-Farnell 2014, Frankel 2024). Secondly, they are a part of transmedia franchise (Ciancia 2019), and so comparing them to different titles based on V:TM – such as their predecessor, New York by Night (2001), or V:TM – Bloodlines (Troika Games 2004) – in particular might help to capture the specifics of space creation in VN.

In these two titles space is presented mostly through the static background with moving elements applied for dynamic effect, combined with textual descriptions, background noises and music. Those modalities are often divergent: textual and visual information differ; not all mentioned sounds are heard etc. Moreover, there is no consistency in what is represented and what is left out. Consequently, the gamescape is very fragmented, standing in opposition to detailed dialogues and storylines or clear visibility of characters' appearances. This brings to mind the theatrical character of game spaces (Parker 2013, Kłosiński 2018): changing decorations forming a stage for the story to unfold. Moreover, the visual combination of static and moving elements strongly resembles ambient videos (Bizzocchi 2021) meant to emotionally transport the audience into a specific milieu (including popular franchises). Similarly, the analyzed games create the world mainly through the atmosphere: spaces in them are meant rather to be felt and imagined than seen.

However, this does not mean that the urbanscape is not important for those titles. The first instalment starts with the protagonist explaining New York's importance for their story; and so it is frequently mentioned in later conversations, introducing tropes associated with urban lifestyle, such as hiding in the anonymous crowd, watching and being watched by others, ect. Main plots of both titles are tied with detective narratives, since the player, an outsider (respectively freshy changed or immigrant and

outcast) has to solve the mysteries of the vampire society: this trope is even playfully parodied through the introduction of D'Angelo, a Nosferatu detective, narrating his own adventures in a classic noir style. Finally, the leading role of atmosphere is very in line with the specificity of V:TM, which relies on it more than on complex mechanics, while locating the source of ambience in a storyworld (Garrad 2020).

Considering the above, asking what kind of "exemplifications of ideas about space" (Aarseth & Günzel 2019) those games include seems more based than dismissing their peculiar gamescapes in terms of shortcomings. The answers, then, can include openly admitting that the city is too complex to be perceived in its entirety, and that any representation is by nature only fragmentary.

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MATYLDA SZPILA (JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)
WOJCIECH NOWAK (UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA IN KATOWICE)

HEADACHE AS A TOOL – CRITICAL STRATEGIES AND THEIR DISSONANCES IN TRANSHUMAN-CODED LUDOTOPIAS

PANEL 4: **LIMINAL AND AMBIGUOUS SPACES** (DAY 1, 13:30-15:30, ROOM 307)

The goal of our presentation is to compare the original representation of transhuman-coded game space of independent game Cruelty Squad (Consumer Softproducts 2021), with a choice of big studio games that critically take on the topic of "transhuman philosophies" (Gayozzo 2021). Our understanding of transhumanism stems from Francesca Ferrando's (2013) and Piero Gayozzo's (2021) writings and is here used as a philosophic system that calls for the enhancement of the human body using scientific and technological methods.

We are also aware that the topic of transhumanism themes in game studies consists of such notions as: gamification as a tool of transhumanism (Kleszczyński, 2019), transhuman inclinations of video games (Geraci, 2012), transhumanism as a power fantasy (Chang, 2017), transhuman narratives (Marcato, 2016) and the links between transhumanism and affect (Lyons & Jaloza 2016) or sci-fi (McMillan, 2019). We would like to further those thoughts by adding the question of space into this mix.

To achieve our goal we will textually and procedurally (Bogost, 2008) analyze Cruelty Squad's ludotopia (Aarseth & Günzel, 2019; Maj, 2021), with regard to its evocative meanings (Jenkins, 2004) and spatial narratives (Domsch 2019) and compare it with several other game worlds, such as: *BioShock* (2K, 2007), *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt, 2020) and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos-Montréal, 2011) to ask how most games seem to be stuck in a few, constantly repeating images of transhuman-coded spaces. We are interested in the way games that delve into transhuman topics are able to critically transform game spaces. During our research we noticed that video games generally don't concern themselves with a specific branch of transhumanism but they rather represent an inconsistent blend of such school of thoughts as extropianism (More, 1993), singularitarianism (Kurzweil, 2005) and the H+ manifesto (Vita-More, 2020).

Most games seem to not be able to overcome a recurring dissonance present in their depictions, namely the fact that they strive to criticize technological and biological enhancements to the human body in their narrative layer, but fail to do so in the cases of mechanics and space. Though it's really noticeable in big studio cases, many independent games struggle with the same problem. However, it's possible to move on from those notions, as we think is shown by the design choices of Cruelty Squad.

The futuristic spaces in which those games take place don't seem to rearrange our common understanding of the way in which the human environment functions and tend to not stray far from what can be expected in a normative space. Though they are often meant to criticize the destructive force of late stage capitalism, they still aim to be aesthetically pleasing. On the other hand Cruelty Squad is able to show a disfigured environment that goes over and beyond in making the player

uncomfortable with its connotations. For critical purposes it strives to create emersion (Kubiński 2016) by using intensive colors covering grotesque spaces made up of cubic assets. It also moves away from the often used in transhuman storylines cities and space stations and instead imagines transhuman-coded bogs or ships.

Our last argument would be that the intricacies of game production, their intended market and the need of enhancing the visual qualities of mainstream games prevent them from fully carrying out the criticisms they strive to convey. However Cruelty Squad does realize unconventional special rhetorics, which do not revert constantly to what we've come to know and expect. We notice indie games' potential to create creative and coherent criticism of transhumanism that may not be present in all of them, but is at least not completely absent like in AAA games.

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ZOFIA MATCZAK (UNIVERSITY OF MALTA)

VISUAL STYLES AND ATMOSPHERE – REPRESENTING HOMES IN DIGITAL GAMES

PANEL 5: **HOME(LESS) SPACES** (DAY 1, 16:00-17:30, ROOM 11)

Homes are archetypical spaces, which frequently evoke strong emotions. This affective dimension has been explored within game studies, particularly in relation to concepts such as coziness (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020) and nostalgia (Sloan, 2016). Even though the sensory image of a 'home' varies greatly across different cultures and between different individuals, the experience of being at home is an almost universal phenomenon. Homes shape our sense of identity and belonging—they are how we orient ourselves, the central point of our connection to the world beyond (Lockard 2006). In digital games, as in other media, homes can be deeply evocative spaces.

This presentation aims to explore how the hestial mode of dwelling—defined by its stationary nature and emphasis on continuity, privacy, lingering, and return (Vella 2019)—can be visually represented in digital games. I will focus on how visual style and atmosphere can work together to enhance the storytelling and players' perception of homes in digital games. For this purpose I will consider a few narrative-driven games featuring a home either as an important part of a plot or a space where most of the game takes place, such as Gone Home (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and What Remains of Edith Finch (Giant Sparrow, 2017).

As most architects and game designers are aware, atmospheres can be intentionally crafted (Böhme 2017; Fuchs 2019). In contemporary game design, deliberate creation of specific moods for environments is a common practice—yet one that remains subjective and intangible. It appears that even though different game designers have specific understandings of what constitutes atmosphere, their interpretations differ from one another, introducing some ambiguity (Fitzpatrick 2017). To better understand the role of affective atmosphere in homes present in digital games, I will mainly draw from works of Böhme, Fitzpatrick, and Andiloro (2022).

The digital game industry does not exist in a cultural vacuum—across the centuries the concept of home has been visually represented in various forms of art. Of particular relevance are animation and cinema, which have many similarities with digital games not only in terms of aesthetics but also in terms of production process. Those media share both a visual language and technological instruments (Üstün 2023). I will explore how artistic stylization in animation contributes to the narrative and emotional tone and consider how similar strategies are employed in digital games to represent homes. Additionally, I will base my analysis of visual style on classification developed by Jamal et al (2023) based on insights gathered from professional game developers. By doing so, this presentation will aim to enrich and add nuance to our understanding of how domestic spaces are portrayed in digital games through aesthetic elements such as atmospheres and visual styles.

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ANALYSIS OF HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS IN THE YAKUZA/LIKE A DRAGON VIDEO GAME SERIES

PANEL 5: **HOME(LESS) SPACES** (DAY 1, 16:00-17:30, ROOM 11)

The homeless are a social group that is often misrepresented in video games, and portrayals of homeless characters are typically based on harmful stereotypes (Lavender, 2011, pp. 16–18). A notable exception to this trend may be the Yakuza/Like a Dragon series, as discussions on online forums and articles highlight that homeless characters in these games are depicted sympathetically and with due respect (Henges, 2019; Ruppert, 2020; soer9523, 2023). The proposed paper is part of a larger study on the representation of homelessness in this video game franchise, and it will focus on how other spaces — heterotopias (Foucault, 1986) — that serve as shelters for the homeless are portrayed within those games, and whether or not this depiction is accurate in relation to real life. The analysis draws upon three ludoformed spaces (Aarseth, 2019, p. 127) located in Japan: Kamurocho (a fictional recreation of Tokyo's district Kabukicho), Isezaki Ijincho (based on Yokohama's district Isezakicho) and Sotenbori (equivalent of Dotenbori, an entertainment district in Osaka). This study makes use of Clara Fernandez-Vara's reflections on analysing games in socio-historical context (Fernández-Vara, 2014, pp. 74-75); therefore, all comparisons to reality are grounded in literature specifically addressing homelessness in Japan. Analyzed games are Yakuza Kiwami (2005/2016), Yakuza 0 (2015), and Yakuza: Like a Dragon (2020). This selection makes it possible to examine how the urban landscapes designed in these games change depending on the year in which the story is set — respectively 2005, 1988, and 2019. One of the key focus of this study is environmental storytelling (Smith & Worch, 2010, p. 16), as the game developers' spatial design conveys much about the homeless characters and their lives.

All five homeless shelters found in these games are located either in parks or along rivers. In reality, these are the most common spaces inhabited by homeless people in Japan, and since 2002 they have consistently accounted for at least 50% of the shelters used by this group (Kimura, 2010, p. 5; Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2024, p. 7). The games even address the issue of the changing landscape of homelessness — specifically, government efforts to evict the homeless from parks (Gill, 2011, p. 694) in order to present Japan as a clean and safe country (Baradel & Bortolussi, 2021, p. 210). The best example of this can be seen in the case of West Park located in Kabukicho. In Yakuza 0, it appears as a visible homeless encampment accessible from street level. However, in Yakuza Kiwami, the entrance is blocked off, and in subsequent entries in the series, the area is completely removed, with the homeless residents who once inhabited it dispersed.

Observing these encampments allows the player to gain insight into everyday lives of homeless people in Japan. For example, in Yakuza 0, many homeless NPCs offer the player opportunity to take part in various forms of gambling, which accurately reflects the prevalence of such activities within this social group (Hwang et al., 2023, p. 1064). However, not all leisure activities attributed to homeless within those games should be considered accurately representative. Bottles, cans, and empty alcohol crates scattered throughout the in-game encampments suggest that the homeless residents there engage in

heavy drinking. And although the actual rate of alcoholism among homeless people in Japan (approximately 14%) (Nishio et al., 2015, pp. 5–6; Pluck et al., 2015, p. 124) is actually slightly higher than that of the general Japanese population (around 6%) (Osaki et al., 2016, p. 467), this small difference shouldn't justify portraying the entire group as alcoholics.

Although the Yakuza/Like a Dragon games demonstrate a surprising level of accuracy in certain aspects, there is still room for improvement. Perhaps the series' greatest shortcoming is its portrayal of Japanese homeless people exclusively as street dwellers. While this aligns with the statutory definition of homelessness in Japan (Kitagawa, 2021, p. 92), it is important to note that this very definition has been repeatedly criticized by various scholars (Kakita et al., 2022; Okamoto, 2024, p. 388) and does not correspond with widely accepted frameworks such as the ETHOS typology (Amore et al., 2011).

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DANIELE MONACO (UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PERUGIA)

EXPLORING GENIUS LOCI IN VIDEOGAME WORLDS: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO VIRTUAL PLACES

PANEL 6: **THE ATMOSPHERE OF A SPACE** (DAY 1, 16:00-17:30, ROOM 307)

This paper investigates the concept of genius loci—the "spirit of place"—to explore how humans relate to places within video-game worlds, understanding them as meaningful spaces with existential value for the player. At the core of this inquiry lies Heidegger's ontological account of place and dwelling (Heidegger 2009). According to Heidegger, dwelling is not simply about occupying space but involves caring for the world and engaging in an ontological relationship with it (Heidegger 1993, 349–50). Norberg-Schulz's elaboration of genius loci (Norberg-Schulz 1980; 1985; 2000) builds on this insight, emphasising the interrelation between human identity and the environment: genius loci become the essence of place that both shapes and reflects our attachment to it. While various dimensions of place in video-game worlds have been explored (E. J. Aarseth and Günzel 2019; 2020), this paper aims to offer a novel application of genius loci to such environments, revealing their capacity to convey existential significance (Gualeni and Vella 2020). I argue that the player's ontological status, together with their ludic positionality—what Vella terms the "ludic self" (Vella 2015)—and the structure of being-in-the-gameworld(Vella 2019), enables an authentic, existential relationship with virtual places. The genius loci framework supports analysis across four key dimensions:

1. Ontological continuity between "real" and "virtual" places. The shift from physical to virtual does not erode existential meaning: both realms fulfil our need to dwell authentically.
2. Existential care (Sorge)(Heidegger 2010), here understood as care for place, remains operative within gameworlds.
3. Identity and belonging, genius loci fosters a sense of self and community in virtual spaces, allowing players to engage meaningfully with game environments.
4. Place vs non-place: beyond Augé's emphasis on identity and social connection (Augé 2023), I propose that the distinction rests on ontological relations. Human beings dwell to become-at-home (Heimischwerden)—a movement from alienation (Unheimlichkeit) to a state of being-at-home (Zuhause-sein) (Heidegger 1996; Resta 2020). Places, then, are sites of authentic dwelling; non-places, sites of existential estrangement. Yet these categories can transform into one another.

In particular, ruins offer a compelling case. Although often classified as non-places (Johnson 2014), ruins can function as expressions of genius loci, carrying both historical and existential resonance. As physical vestiges of a former purpose, they evoke the uncanny and call us to re-establish our dwelling—a mood Heidegger terms Ruinanz (Heidegger 2009b). In responding to this "ontological call," ruins become loci of memory, identity and continuity (Manca 2020; Murchadha 2002), countering the anonymity that characterises non-places, also in videogame places (Fuchs 2015).

To illustrate how this theoretical framework is useful to understand the nature of places, the paper applies this theoretical framework to two case studies: Stardew Valley (ConcernedApe 2016) and The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt Red 2015). In Stardew Valley, the abandoned community centre mirrors dynamics of care and renewal found in real-world ruins, demonstrating how virtual spaces can become repositories of genius loci. In The Witcher 3, numerous ruins—most notably Kaer Morhen, the Witchers' ancestral keep—symbolise the ontological flow of life and reveal how existential bonds with place may vary profoundly for outcasts and marginalised minorities (Agamben 2008; Brook 2012).

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EMILIA MAZUR (INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE LOST PLACE IN *THE THAUMATURGE*

PANEL 6: **THE ATMOSPHERE OF A SPACE** (DAY 1, 16:00-17:30, ROOM 307)

The Thaumaturge (Fools Theory, 2024), a game published by Warsaw-based 11 bit studios, not only presents a fantastic story about the titular thaumaturge, Wiktor Szulski's journey through the city of his youth, but is also filled with a surprising amount of information about pre-war Warsaw. It successfully enchants the player, surrounding them with the atmosphere of the multicultural city in times of social unrest. Although the game itself conveys the notions of social changes and political tensions, it does not directly foreshadow the specter of the wars that would later wipe pre-war Warsaw off the map.

Playing The Thaumaturge, the player takes on the role of an ethnographer wandering through old Warsaw, discovering it through the richly detailed elements introduced by the creators. These range from, and are not limited to, the recreation of buildings that no longer exist such as burned in the Warsaw Uprising Kamienica Lothego (Herbst, 1978), to immersion in language—the Warsaw dialect, a variant of the Masovian dialect with lexical influences from Russian, German and Yiddish (Wieczorkiewicz & Lengren, 1974).

I subject my experience of the game to an autoethnographic reflection (Kacperczyk, 2014; Droumeva, 2024). I find myself deeply compelled to explore, to visit every corner, and to uncover every possible detail (slow play; Fizek, 2022). My experience is shaped by my position as a new resident of Warsaw, someone additionally interested in the city's history. The game provides me not only with an immersive experience, but also triggers a personal re-experiencing of my own Warsaw. Visiting familiar streets and districts in the game comes with an atmosphere of a lost Proustian (2022) world—at the same time determined and fragmented (Robinson, 1977). As I walk through the streets of this historical city, I'm also navigating my mental map of Warsaw—reflecting on both my historical knowledge and my personal connection to the place. I ask, why do I feel an atmosphere of lost time and place so strongly.

As many game scholars before me have noted, the atmosphere of a video game is a very powerful element of the experience (Aguilar et al., 2022; Bonner, 2021). I juxtapose the observations I've gathered through the autoethnographic method with their reflections. I reflect on the developers' decision to introduce historical, ahistorical and fantastic elements into their game and their influence on shaping the atmosphere (Zakowicz, 2024; Skarzyński, 2024). I comment on the role that the protagonist's nostalgia (Proustian nostalgia; Howard, 2012), as well as the nostalgic illustrations of characteristic cultural customs, play in shaping the player's aesthetic experience.

Although in general The Thaumaturge can be perceived as emodity (Zimmerman, 2021) on the scale of my own experience, it becomes something more intimate. It resonates not only with shared phantasms (Fuchs, 2020), but also with my own phantasmal space, my personal, living archive of Warsaw city. "Spatial denotations and spatial connotations are always on the move" (ibid.). This study captures my situated perspective within that fluidity. My engagement with the game—shaped by my personal positioning—generates a uniquely rich atmosphere of Proustian nostalgia, one that is deeply

anchored in game space. The research centers on the poetic, subjective, and deeply individual processes through which atmosphere is generated in digital play. These experiential dimensions are juxtaposed with theoretical approaches drawn from game studies' atmospherology (Zimmermann, 2022), allowing for a dialogue between lived affective immersion and analytical frameworks that seek to conceptualize atmosphere in interactive media.

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KUMRU AKDOGAN (UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER)

GAME LOCALITIES AS NORMATIVE AFFORDANCES

PANEL 6: **THE ATMOSPHERE OF A SPACE** (DAY 1, 16:00-17:30, ROOM 307)

Game localities—socially constructed spaces like the customs checkpoint in *Papers, Please*, the precinct in *Disco Elysium*, or the base camp in *Death Stranding*—are often treated as atmospheric backdrops or narrative elements. Even in more detailed accounts, they are typically discussed under the banner of environmental storytelling (Jenkins 2004) [3] or spatial narrative (Nitsche 2008) [5], where their function is to convey lore or mood rather than structure normative engagement. I will challenge that view by arguing that socially constructed game localities, which mirror real-world institutions, are best understood as normative affordances: spaces that shape perception, action, and affect by prescribing how the player is meant to engage with them. To clarify what this means, I draw on ecological approaches to affordance, particularly those developed by James J. Gibson [1] and expanded by Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein[6]. In this view, environments aren't neutral containers of activity but fields of invitation: they afford certain actions based on the organism's capacities and context. Rietveld and Kiverstein extend this idea to social life, showing that affordances can be normatively structured—offering not just possibilities, but appropriate or expected modes of action. Affordances, in this sense, are how institutions become actionable: not through explicit rules but through spatial and affective design that draws agents into particular modes of engagement.

Applied to games, this means that localities are not just settings in which institutional play happens—they are the mechanisms by which institutional norms are sustained and enacted. A customs desk doesn't merely allow the player to stamp documents; it frames what counts as appropriate attentive-ness, decision-making, and affective stance. These prescriptions are not given through dialogue or mechanics alone but are embedded in the spatial layout, repetition, and rhythm of interaction. In this way, localities prescribe agency not through representation, but through felt orientation.

To illuminate how these spaces exert normative pressure, I draw on aes- thetic theories that emphasize the prescriptive character of perception. Wal- ton's notion of the "correctness of seeing-as" [7] helps capture how spaces train players to inhabit certain roles. Recent work in aesthetic normativity (e.g., Gorodeisky and Marcus [2]; Lopes [4]; Whiting [8]) provides the conceptual ground to claim that these engagements are not just interactive or interpre- tive, but ought-laden: one should see, feel, and act in particular ways, if one is to inhabit the space properly. Games, I argue, turn these aesthetic demands into situated practice—players come to know what to do not because they are told, but because the space makes it feel required.

This argument makes two contributions. First, it reframes game spaces not as passive containers for institutional content, but as the medium through which institutions are enacted and sustained. This opens the door to future research linking game spaces to broader questions in social philosophy—e.g., showing how customs in games and customs in real life are of the same kind, structured by felt norms embedded in place. Second, it offers a framework for understanding how digital environments

prescribe agency without rely- ing on rulebooks or representational cues. By focusing on how players are aesthetically positioned—how their orientation, timing, and affective stance are shaped by the space itself—this approach explains how games organize behavior without needing to dictate it.

In recasting localities as normative affordances, this paper offers a new perspective on the institutional power of place in digital games. It moves beyond the idea of space as visual setting or narrative conduit, and instead treats place as an active medium of social and aesthetic practice. Game lo- calities do not merely represent institutions—they are how those institutions are felt, navigated, and made real.

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MIKE GRAHAM (IT UNIVERSITY OF COPEHAGEN)

GAMING GRANDMA AND THE RIVERSIDE LODGE: SPACE AND PLACE AT THE END OF A GRAND SKYRIM ADVENTURE

PANEL 7: **GENDERED SPACES** (DAY 2, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

"Good morning grandkids" is the usual greeting Grandma gives to each and every one of her YouTube videos. In the comment sections of Grandma's videos, the reciprocal "Hi Grandma Shirley" is a usual sight. Shirly Curry started streaming The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) gameplay in 2015 at the age of 78 and has produced over 2400 videos since, most of which gameplay videos of Skyrim. Grandma (henceforth) is both a player and a producer at the same time (as well described by T.L. Taylor (2019)) with a focus on storytelling and roleplaying. With a combined 86 hours of gameplay video across 151 videos, this research takes a close look at the final video of the series called SkyrimSE Adventures of Ja'rii and Inigo #155(sic) Loving the Home Life.. The End (Shirley Curry, 2021). The area of interest of the research is on how Grandma uses Skyrim to embody hestic and hermetic modes of being though the use of a specific space of situational coziness.

In episode #1 of the series called Introduction: The Little Familiy (Shirley Curry, 2019), Grandma carefully curates the characters and their background story. For reference, Ja'rii is the player character, while Inigo is her NPC companion. 150 episodes later, the visions and desires of the characters come to a fitting end in the final episode (27 minutes), where the story is encouraged to continue in the imaginaries of herself and her community. Grandma shows how 'situational' coziness (being the juxtaposition between calm safe spaces and challenging situations (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020)) can be established in a game not usually associated with cozy games. While this situational coziness is not unusual in games focused on roleplay, Grandma uses it to engage the imaginary of her viewers. She does this through a "walkthrough" of the picturesque home (Riverside Lodge) that the character (and Inigo) have made for themselves, filled with items and tokens from their journeys around Skyrim. Grandma moves through the home as player and narrator: "Here are the cups that they brought back from Bruma. They'll share some wine out of that" along with "Come on Inigo, let's show them what else we've got!" going on to showcase weapons and armours collected during their adventures from far-away places in the gameworld (Shirley Curry, 2021 at 00:59 and 01:24 respectively).

Grandma's conclusion to the story embodies reflective movements between hermetic and hestial dwelling (Vella, 2019) by oscillating reflexively between the two modes of being in the gameworld. She does this by focussing on the hestial (the home as a focal point of being) as a point of imagination through a space of curated reflections on hermetic (the wandering and outwards facing) being. The community finds the ending bittersweet, but embrace the befitting happy ending for the characters and the imaginary of the home that is yet to be filled with happy moments of wine drinking by the waterfalls, days of calm, and perhaps even children in the years to come, embracing the introspective nature of the hestial dwelling.

Shirly Curry embodies a form of intergenerational closeness (see Lavenir, 2022; Pecchioni & Osmanovic, 2018) through the use of places within Skyrim to reflect on playful stories. She creates a safe-space for more than what is apparent, by interconnecting hestial and hermetic levels of location, space, and place. By engaging in a playful retrospective afforded by a hermetic past, Grandma makes use of the homely locality and the interconnectedness between roleplay, play, storytelling, and community to connect digital gameworlds and the sense of "home" to create a sense of coziness in a gameworld centred on conflict.

"You know what Inigo, you need to put on a little weight. You're looking a little thin. While we are at home, I'm going to have to start cooking some food and fatten you up a little bit. What do you think about that? Isn't it nice to be home? I'm so happy to be back. I'm so done with roaming around. (pause) Let's go over to our table and have a little wine and look out over the waterfall". (12 minutes before the conclusion of the story, while enjoying the outdoors hot-tub in their home of Riverside Lodge in Skyrim (Shirley Curry, 2021 at 15:00)).

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INES MUNKER (UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA)

"WHEN YOU'RE NOT ON EDGE, YOU'RE TAKING UP TOO MUCH SPACE." – GROTESQUE 'SEELENLANDSCHAFTEN' AND THE SUBVERSION OF VICTORIAN FEMININITY IN *AMERICAN MCGEE'S ALICE: MADNESS RETURNS* (2011)

PANEL 7: **GENDERED SPACES** (DAY 2, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

Upon Alice's first visit to Wonderland in American McGee's *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011), the Cheshire Cat greets her with the words, "When you're not on edge you're taking up too much space", which, in true fashion of Carroll's nonsensicality, blends the question of Alice's identity with the space(s) she exists in. Building on this conflation of space and identity, this paper explores how *Alice: Madness Returns'* environmental storytelling employs grotesque symbolism and "visual clues" (Domsch 101) to amplify the subversive characterization of the game's playable Alice as a split-character performing and counter-performing the Victorian feminine ideal.

In Victorian society, femininity was often defined by a paradox of visibility, as women were expected to be both decorative and invisible, idealized yet self-effacing. Thus, the Cheshire Cat's concern about Alice taking up too much space mirrors the tension between visibility and invisibility, echoing the devaluation of what Beth Newman terms "feminine display" (5). In *Alice: Madness Returns*, this tension appears through a doubling of Alice, as the player takes control of two distinct versions of her, aligning the game with the neo-Victorian female gothic (Kohlke 226). This double-Alice's traversal of the game world then becomes a performative act of meaning-making. London-Alice blends into her surroundings, embodying the self-effacing ideal, while in Wonderland, the grotesque is overt. Organic textures, fleshy walls, and the constant presence of watching eyes evoke the deep-rooted horror of the "open" female body, a "cave of abjection", "low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent and visceral" (Russo 1).

Through a close reading of level and character design, visual motifs, and gameplay, I analyze how the game constructs a Gothic counter-performance of Victorian femininity. Drawing on feminist game theory, such as Sarah Stang's application of Kristeva's and Creed's concepts of abjection and the monstrous-feminine to video games (235), and spatial theory delineating space, movement and identity as a deeply intertwined (Massey 10, De Certeau 97), I implement Bachelard's "topoanalysis" to examine how the environment Alice traverses function as externalizations of identity and trauma (8).

Co-constructed by the game space, Wonderland-Alice emerges as a Gothic double of her London self; a monstrous, excessive figure that reflects not madness but the effects of societal repression, who reclaims agency through grotesque embodiment. Rather than relying on explicit verbal exposition alone, *Alice: Madness Returns* uses symbolic environments in its version of Wonderland to create a "Seelenlandschaft", a soulscape, that "house[s Alice's] unconscious" and transports "narrative

meaning" by visualizing her internal trauma and identity (Domsch 103, Bachelard 10). In doing so, the game offers a counter-discourse to the rigid gender norms of both Victorian and contemporary culture.

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MATYLDA SZPILA (JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)

UNDERGROUND SPACES AND THEIR QUEER POTENTIAL

PANEL 7: **GENDERED SPACES** (DAY 2, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

Underground spaces such as caves, dungeons or secret facilities usually evoke a specific feeling - one of danger and hostility, which also has its consequences for the game mechanics. In those environments we are often tasked with fighting for our lives or seeking a way out. However, in this study I'd like to focus on how underground spaces influence the shape of relationships present in them, both between their inhabitants and with the outsider player character. I'd like to ask how intimacy is represented in contrast to the ever present danger and how are relationships with non-human residents of those spaces portrayed? Do conflicts arise from the fact that we are playing as an outsider in their abode? And finally, can we read those relationships as queer?

I will analyse three games - Undertale (Toby Fox, 2015), Portal (Valve, 2007) and Hades (Supergiant Games, 2020) - both textually and procedurally (Bogost, 2008), focusing on representation of underground spaces. I'd like to argue that spatial narratives, evocative spaces and visual clues (Jenkins, 2004; Domsch, 2013) emerging from those areas show an interesting link between the danger of the environment and the relationships between characters.

Regarding queer aspects of video games I will use findings brought forward by researchers outlining queer failure (Ruberg, 2017; Kozyra 2024) as I find them relevant in showcasing how underground relationships are characterized by struggle to overcome natural instincts brought by hostile environments and require extra effort to realize, compared to those in more normative spaces. I also find the notion of "queering" important for this work, defined by Ruberg (2019) as disrupting, shifting or changing the orientation of a video game towards nonheteronormative identity and desire.

As such, I would like to highlight the themes of touch and intimacy and link it with the queer potential of underground environments. One can observe that closeness between two bodies in those extreme, liminal and unsafe spaces is usually fulfilled through physical combat. In all above mentioned games it's the combat that brings two characters together, while peaceful intimacy is sparse - in Hades we even have to first defeat our potential partners, before we can get close to them. Still, the game space itself can become a way of intimate connections, as argued by Ruberg (2019), who recognizes the game space of Portal, as an extension of Glados' body, through which we move. The space can however also become an obstacle in realizing intimacy, as is the case of keeping the beloved companion cube (Jørgensen, 2022). At the same time, a game like Undertale queers its space by portraying it as a place of exile and exclusion for "monsters" - the misfits of human society. By portraying the monsters as inherently weaker than the human character (Seraphine, 2018) and as slipping out of the normative (Ruberg, 2018) it can be argued that the underground space they inhabit may be read as a "safe space" outside of the normative society.

Based on that I'd like to present my understanding of the queer potential of underground spaces, as environments that subvert our expectation regarding forming non-normative relationships. Though

depicted as dangerous, they can still be spaces that home different models of life, that require our understanding and recognition of their otherness. They may show a human as an outsider that needs to switch their perspective and be accepting. As such, I'd like to propose that underground spaces inherently queer the relationships present in them.

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SHADES OF A RAINBOW CAFFÈ: DIFFERENCES AND LOCALISM IN QUEER GAME CULTURES IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

PANEL 7: **GENDERED SPACES** (DAY 2, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 11)

In recent years, both the videogame industry and academic scholarship have increasingly addressed the presence and representation of marginalized subjectivities in games (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017), including queer identities (Shaw, 2015; Shaw et al., 2019). These studies underscore the growing visibility of queer characters and narratives, and highlight how queer players and designers use the medium as a form of self-expression and affirmation (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Ruberg & Phillips, 2018). However, such representations are often superficial or rely on harmful stereotypes (Thach, 2021), and critical discourse remains largely focused on Anglo-American contexts—leaving queer subjectivities in other regions, such as Italy, underexamined.

In the Italian context, videogames have only recently gained cultural legitimacy, as demonstrated by works such as Il videogioco in Italia (Carbone & Fassone, 2020), which maps the development of a national gaming history and emphasize how game production is shaped by local socio-cultural dynamics. Despite this emerging scholarship, the presence, practices, and expressions of queer subjectivities within Italian game culture remain largely undocumented, with only a few notable exceptions (De Santis, 2013; Forni, 2020; Malgieri et al., 2024).

This paper presents an ongoing investigation into how queer subjectivities emerge, are negotiated, and find expression within the Italian videogame landscape. In so doing, it explores how local geographies, cultural infrastructures, and regional disparities shape modes of play, design, and community-making.

Drawing on a range of creative and activist practices—independent video game design (e.g. owofgames, 2022; Lorenzo Redaelli, 2023), tabletop role-playing games (Asterisco Edizioni, 2020), and community-based initiatives such as La Gilda del Cassero and the IN/VISIBIL3 festival—this paper offers a preliminary mapping of queer game cultures in Italy. These practices are approached as situated interventions, embedded in specific territories and shaped by contrasts between urban and rural areas, and between the North and South of the country. Following Ammaturo (2018), the paper also considers how queer activism intersects with game practices in contexts where institutional support may be limited but where informal networks and embodied spaces of resistance remain vital.

Methodologically, the study combines corpus building with qualitative research. It begins by mapping queer-authored and queer-themed games and events across Italy. This is followed by semi-structured interviews with queer designers, players, and activists, selected through snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2018) to access both prominent and less-visible realities across diverse local contexts.

Preliminary findings from interviews and fieldwork point to notable regional disparities. In the North, queer gaming communities tend to be more institutionalized, often connected to nationally recognized events and embedded in larger urban centers such as Florence, Milan, and Bologna. In contrast,

Southern regions and islands exhibit more informal and community-driven practices. Here, hybrid cultural venues—such as cafés and independent bookstores—serve simultaneously as sites for play, gathering, and activism. These spaces, while often lacking formal infrastructure, enable meaningful engagement and expression, albeit with reduced visibility and support. Furthermore, the majority of queer-themed games originate from designers based in the North, reflecting the national situation around game-making (Balla, 2020; Carbone & Fassone, 2020), and highlighting broader economic inequalities that impact access to tools, resources, and production opportunities. In the South, smaller towns often negotiate spaces for queer play and activism in dialogue with local communities, positioning themselves at the margins of dominant cultural circuits (Ammaturo, 2018).

By centering local practices and spatial dynamics, this paper foregrounds how queer communities in Italy mobilize videogames not only as tools for representation but also as platforms for spatial negotiation, cultural production, and collective resistance. In doing so, it contributes to a place-based, contextually grounded perspective to queer game studies, addressing the need for greater attention to non-Anglophone and underrepresented settings.

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KRZYSZTOF OLSZAMOWSKI (AGH UNIVERSITY OF KRAKÓW)

REMAKING AND COZYFICATING GAME SPACE IN *FINAL FANTASY VII: REBIRTH*

PANEL 8: **RECLAIMING SPACES** (DAY 2, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 307)

This presentation aims to discuss the perspectives for the expansion of cozy game aesthetics into mainstream open-world action adventure and RPG games. In theorethical works, Open worlds in games have been discussed in terms of Bachtin's chronotype (Majkowski 2019). However, another valuable way I consider to read these games is the category of Ludotopia introduced by Espen Aarseth and Stephan Gunzel, signifying "an adequate expression for the dialectical entanglement of games and space" (2019), also referred to as the "missing link between gameworld and storyworld" (Maj 2021). The most popular open-world format is the one developed by Ubisoft Montreal in "Assassin's Creed II" (2009). Despite being criticized for its repetitiveness, it has influenced other major games, both critically and commercially acclaimed, such as "The Witcher 3" (CD PROJEKT RED 2015), Horizon (Guerilla Games 2017, 2022), and "Ghost of Tsushima" (Sucker Punch 2020).

To indicate the potential of cozyfication I will analyze ludotopia present in "Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth" (Square Enix 2024) in relation to that of "Final Fantasy VII" (SquareSoft 1997) and "Final Fantasy VII: Remake" (Square Enix 2020). Unlike most modern remakes, "Rebirth" beyond visual and gameplay overhaul, constructing its components from scratch as a more alternative take rather than a modernised restoration (Hoch 2021; Brown 2023). This can be seen as a certain remake of game's ludotopia, modifying the context of existing in its spaces. In the original, the open world functioned only as a link between several different ludotopias (world map, battle screen, linear levels). In Rebirth, openness is still associated with travel, but whole content is presented in a one cohesive world that combines all aspects of experience. Expanding game's affordances can be considered significant for the realization of the virtual dwelling (Kłosiński 2018). Such design choices have already been made through long-standing series "Like a Dragon" (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2005-2025).

However, cozy games are defined as focused on actions avoiding stressful and challenging factors such as combat (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020; Waszkiewicz and Tymińska 2024), which is, however, the dominant element in RPGs and action-adventure games. Nevertheless, "FF VII Rebirth", despite disobeying these rules, still seems deeply influenced by coziness. The chosen artistic direction is significant here. "FF VII Rebirth", is aesthetically closer to declarative cozy games like "Infinity Nikki" (Paper Games 2024) than to the hyper realistic "Red Dead Redemption 2" (Rockstar Games 2018). Unlike the mentioned titles, relaxing mini-games are not reduced to an additional attraction but presented as integral parts of the main storyline. Consequently, the tone of the original narrative is also altered, and its multiple extension is accompanied by expanding the conventional fantasy narrative with slower paced chapters dedicated to rest and evolving friendships among the main characters.

In conclusion, it is necessary to highlight the phenomenon of "Animal Crossing: Horizons" (Nintendo 2020), whose global success influences the popularization of cozy games. Despite the entrenchment

of this term in mainstream, it is worth to reference partially similar concepts of Slow Gaming (Navarro-Remesal 2020) and Ambient Play (Fizek 2022a, 2022b), which emphasize not so much coziness but the meditative potential of reflection on digital environments and atmospheres. This cozyfication or slowing down of open-world games can be seen as an opportunity to expand the possibilities of open-world games with new forms of functioning in them, going beyond conquest of the gameworld map. In this sense, I would point that, these design choices may not so much stand in opposition to cozy gaming poetics but utilizing them in creating open worlds that respond to the more diverse spectrum of players' engagement.

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IMOLA BÜLGÖZDI (UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN)

WALKING IN TWO WORLDS: VIDEOGAMES AND INDIGENOUS FUTURITY

PANEL 8: **RECLAIMING SPACES** (DAY 2, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 307)

This presentation investigates the fictitious MMORPG Floraverse as a possible site of decolonial worldbuilding in Wab Kinew's YA novel titled *Walking in Two Worlds* (2021). The Anishinaabe activist, author, and politician explores the near-future of a First Nations community living on a reservation, but plugged into global information and affective networks via robust AR and VR technology. While videogames like BAFTA-winning *Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)*, *When Rivers Were Trails* or the recent title *Two Falls (Nishu Takuatshina)* showcase cultural heritage and shed light on American Indian perspectives of the history of colonization, the historical context does not address the roles videogames and new media may fulfil in the everydays of Indigenous peoples. The novel, however, provides the required context: "to understand video games, we must look at them *in* culture, not just *as* culture" (Penix-Tadsen 6), because they are "embedded and situated in the material and mundane everyday" (Apperley 8).

The novel's title is a widely-used metaphor to describe the experience of living simultaneously in a colonized and an Indigenous world, which, in this case, also extends into the virtual: Bugz, an exceptionally talented gamer, recreates the landscapes and creatures of Anishinaabe legend, claiming space and asserting Indigenous presence as the #1 player in the Floraverse global fan rankings. The open-source Floraverse was initially created as a site of resistance: "hackers built it ... after the government took over social media" (Kinew 71), and the teenage protagonist uses it as a *third space of sovereignty*, a term proposed by Kevin Bruyneel, and defined as "neither inside nor outside current hegemonic systems, but rather balancing precariously but productively on the edges" (Hickey 166). The novel enquires into the role of technology in Indigenous futurism by positing a game engine "modeled after living, growing things," distributed blockchain technology due to which players create their reality together, and a non-exploitative playstyle practiced by Bugz, who is, consequently, able to "summon all the virtual beings around her and create things no other player can imagine" (Kinew 10-11).

This contrasts with the representation of Indigenous peoples in mainstream strategic games, which "retain the Western conceptions of progress and the settler colonial mechanics of play" and use Eurocentric measures of success even if they allow for "Native nations to be dynamic, future-oriented, and modern" (Carpenter 34). If videogames are to be "understood as an expression of life and culture in late modernity" (Muriel and Crawford 2), Floraverse should be analysed not only as a contested space, but as a construct based on Indigenous worldviews, characterised by "inextricable relations with the nonhuman world," "a refusal of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism," and "species interdependence ... in interactive ecologies shared by human and nonhuman beings" (Bignall and Rigney 159). I contend that Kinew imagines a virtual gamespace founded on Indigenous relational epistemology to envision a future where the process of decolonization entails "making kin" with AI to "figure out how to treat these new non-human kin respectfully and reciprocally—and not as mere tools,

or worse, slaves to their creators" (Lewis et al.), while reflecting on the preservation of cultural memory both IRL and in virtual spaces. Bugz's gameplay will be analysed from the perspectives of de- and reterritorialization proposed by Souvik Mukherjee, with a special eye to how the conditions of settler colonialism affect the "flow of experiences of the Other," when "the lived thirdspace of the game" cannot coalesce into a reconfigured space and fails to become the norm (Mukherjee 49) due to being under constant attack in the MMOPRG.

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SZYMON KUKULAK (AGH UNIVERSITY OF KRAKÓW)

TESLA-COILED EIFFEL TOWER. THE ROLE OF REAL-LIFE LANDMARKS ON URBAN BATTLEFIELDS IN REAL-TIME STRATEGY GAMES

PANEL 8: **RECLAIMING SPACES** (DAY 2, 10:30-12:30, ROOM 307)

The paper focuses on the portrayals real-life landmarks in real-time strategy games (RTS) over the course of their history (beginning from the 1990s), putting a particular emphasis on 'Command & Conquer' series, as the leading one in the genre for the major part of that period, in regard to its branch utilizing realistic setting (as opposed to science fiction-themed or fantasy-themed RTS games, more influenced by Blizzard's StarCraft and WarCraft series, respectively).

Among all C&C games, two subseries — Cold War-themed 'Red Alert' and the War on Terror-era 'Generals' — often utilize real-life landmarks, as a part of diversifying the locations of subsequent missions in a given campaing (as opposed to more futuristic setting of the third subseries, i.e. Tiberian universe). Although, on the general level, the majority of these games - when it comes to urban warfare - utilize generic urban landscape, often basing on clichés that can (and should) be studied through postcolonial theory — not unlike depictions of Middle East or Latinindad in the genre (see: Mukherjee, 2017; Magnet, 2006; Šisler, 2008), such as 'C&C Generals' showing Oriental cities as 'labyrinthine and structureless' in a way fully analogous to contemporary military shooters (Höglund 2008) — many games in question utilize landmarks as focal points of specific maps, making them look far less generic, as well as allowing the player to easily identify in-game spaces with the real-life places.

On the theoretical level, the paper utilizes a modified three-layered model conceived by Elliott and Kapell (Elliott and Kapell, 2013), created for the purpose of analyzing historical games (suitable especially for the alternate history setting of Red Alert games), according to which one can analyze separately player's goals, historical content and rules of the game. In regard to landmarks specifically, this translates into: how they fit in the actual mission objectives; how accurately are they depicted; and whether or not there are special mechanics associated with them? Answering those questions leads to a certain typology of landmarks in question, according to which one can divide the actual cases, as found in different games, into several distinct groups.

While all landmarks seem to perform a function of increasing realism (and thus, immersion) of the missions they were put in, some only perform passive role, playing no part in accomplishing mission objectives (e.g. Gateway Arch in St Louis mission in 'Red Alert 2'), while others landmarks are — by sharp contrast — crucial in this respect, serving as unique structures that are meant to be captured, destroyed or defended by the player (e.g. Busch Stadium in the very same mission, utilized as a unique 'cover' for a specific Soviet installation, meant to be destroyed; or the Pentagon, depicted in both Soviet and Allied campaigns in the same game). Curiously enough, alternate history setting allows introducing in such a role buildings never finished in reality, like the Palace of the Soviets (serving as the Soviet HQ to be destroyed in Red Alert 3).

However, in-game depictions of real-life landmarks could be – and on purpose – somewhat distorted, in order to associate dedicated mechanics with them, connected to purely fictional modifications; and, as in the case of the 'Red Alert' games, often in a humorous fashion. One of the earliest examples of such a practice is turning the Eiffel Tower in 'Red Alert 2' into a larger cousin of "regular" thunder-striking defensive structures (dubbed Tesla Coils), iconic to the series. In 'Red Alert 3', multiple equally tongue-in-cheek modifications to real-life landmarks can be observed, e.g. in the case of Mt Rushmore, serving as a hidden location of secret USA-built laser, or a cathedral in Leningrad's Peter-and-Paul Fortress that is – in the final Allied mission – portrayed as a mock-up, hiding a starting pad for a Buran space shuttle (by which the Soviet leaders plan to escape to the Moon, if not stopped by the player) inside its walls. Such creative way of utilizing real-life landmarks, more prominent in newer titles, marks far more creative way of placing those within the game spaces, than more traditional role of purely passive decorations.

Thus, in broader sense, the paper would elaborate on the possible ways of creating a dialogue, of sort, between real-life spaces and their somewhat more 'ludic' depictions than those often found in other genres (if compared to historical buildings as shown in e.g. Assassin's Creed series, with far more solemnity), which often is the case in regard to the RTS genre.

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MICHAŁ JUTKIEWICZ (JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)

FORGETTING THE CATASTROPHE. RECONSTRUCTION AND DESTRUCTION IN *LISBOA* AND *WARSAW: CITY OF RUINS*

PANEL 9: **THE END OF SPACE** (DAY 2, 13:30-15:00, ROOM 11)

The goal of my paper is to examine the ways in which board games represent urban destruction and people's responses to catastrophes – natural or man-made - that happened in cities. In games, the catastrophe is usually connected with postapocalyptic themes, and the cities are shown as ruins and symbols of lost civilisation (Thibault 2019). I would like to focus on another aspect of disasters: games that show the results of a catastrophe not as ruins - historical remainders of the past - but as something that has to be overcome. In order to do this, I would like to analyse two board games – Vital Lacerda's Lisboa (2017) which focuses on rebuilding the Portuguese capital after the devastating earthquake of 1755, and Filip Miłuński's *Warsaw: City of Ruins* (2016) in which players develop Warsaw's infrastructure throughout 6 epochs, two of which simulate the destruction of the city during the World Wars. These games show how urban destruction can be conceptualized in board games in a different way. The main goal of Lisboa and Warsaw is to restore the cities after a disaster. In Lisboa, the game starts after the destruction, with different cubes placed on the map of the city during setup to represent the effects of the earthquake and the following tsunami and fires in the city. In Warsaw, destruction of the city is something that occurs twice: between the third and the fourth, and fourth and the fifth round, players have to discard some of their tiles to metaphorically simulate the historical events. Both games show disasters as a result of outside forces threatening the city's stability and homogeneity.

Both memory studies and Walter Benjamin-inspired reflections on urban spaces highlight how traces of catastrophes and destruction of urban landscapes factor in the cities' development, historicity, and establishing collective memory (Pensky 2005, Ferraro 2021). Benjamin is also important for Emili Fraser (2016), who writes about depictions of destructions of urban spaces in digital games as a way to subvert their capitalistic and hegemonical nature, allowing players to develop estranged perspective on cities, thus subverting their cultural meaning. Both perspectives depict the destruction of the city as something significant and possible to be framed in a positive way. However, in the games I would like to analyse, catastrophe is a negative force whose traces have to be erased from the landscape of the city. The historical significance of those events is diminished in order to emphasise the act of rebuilding and the return of the status quo. The materiality of the city, once disrupted by a catastrophe, has to be restored, and so the destruction has to be forgotten. In both cases, traces of the catastrophe (cubes left on a map of Lisboa, or empty spaces in player's tableau in Warsaw), if still present at the end of the game, mean that the players have not been playing optimally. Instead of showing urban space as a palimpsest in which past can be uncovered, these games perpetrate the myth of a city as monolithic, and immune to changes and forces originating outside of it (Pensky 2005). The only way to restore the memory of the catastrophe is to restart those games, and witness the catastrophe and its effect anew.

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KACPER KARWACKI (UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW)

PLAYING AND NOTHINGNESS – AESTHETICS OF EMPTINESS IN GAME-WORLD'S CONSTRUCTION

PANEL 9: **THE END OF SPACE** (DAY 2, 13:30-15:00, ROOM 11)

The presentation aims to survey the operation of emptiness in constructing a game-world (Vella, 2015), also referred to as the void, as an aesthetic approach. Aesthetics in this piece is not understood as a discussion of beauty; instead, it focuses on aesthetics as qualities and conditions of a video game experience (Niedenthal, 2009). Using the close-reading method, further enhanced by Kłosiński's (2022) hermeneutic approach to game analysis, I will argue that void, within video games, operates as an antithesis of *heterotopia* (Foucault, 1984) – a social construct intended to contain dangerous phenomena. Instead, I will employ my concept of heterokhora. *Heterokhora* operates under the same principle as heterotopia, i.e. it contains possibly order-subverting phenomena, but changes the nature of spatiality. Heterotopia is a defined place (Casey, 1998), anchored within a certain temporal and geometrical position. In contrast, heterokhora is an undefined space; it disregards time and geometry. Places within the game-world, contrary to heterokhora, are established as safe harbours that shelter from the unknown elements of the experience. *Heterokhora* is an example of the Freudian *unheimlich* (Freud, 1919), a dimension of the mysterious, unknown, and ambivalent.

Using this concept, I'll illustrate that the void within the video game experience is used as an existential threat towards the being of the game-world – its rules, identity, and temporality. I'll use three examples – *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011), *Dishonored* (Arkane studios, 2012), and *Control* (Remedy Entertainment, 2019) – and provide a set of approaches that utilise emptiness as such.

1) **Void as a non-place (Augé, 1992).** This approach utilises emptiness as a space without function, which disallows the player to construct their and the world's identity. *The Restricted Area* (*Control*, 2019) lacks a definite purpose other than being. It is a liminal space between the unheimlich and heimlich. Similarly, in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*, the realm of the void exists outside of space and time. An age of Darkness in *Dark Souls* is a state of reality where time and places cease to exist.

2) **Void as the deconstructor.** The emptiness is used as a direct threat to the game-world and the player. In *Control*, the *Hiss* threatens to deconstruct the identity of places, thus rendering them uninhabitable. The *Hiss* forces the *unheimlich* into the *heimlich*, taking away the known world from its inhabitants. Likewise, *Dishonored's* void is threatening, as it deconstructs the social order of the game-world. Age of Darkness in *Dark Souls* is dangerous, as it deconstructs the Kantian human experience's prerequisites (1781) – time and place.

3) **Void as the realm of the divine**. The void is utilised as the realm of the transcendent. In *Control*, beings such as *The Former, The Board or Ahti* – entities appearing as transcendent – exist in or are accustomed to the emptiness. The mortal realm is made

out of temporal and geometrical places, while the realms of the divine exist without such categories. In *Dishonored, the Outsider* appears as the ruler of the emptiness and its prisoner. *The Outsider*'s existence within the emptiness started when he achieved godhood. *Dark Souls'* Age of Darkness is home to two types of divine creatures – the dragons and the primordial serpents. Both types of entities operate outside of temporality and geometry. The mortal realm appears to them as a threat or a temporary state of the universe.

Contrary to the Foucaultian intuition, place's purpose is to be lived in (Stevens & De Meulder, 2018). *Heterokhora* embodies the inhuman, transcendental aspects of the game-world. This threatens the normative possibility of experience. Video games allow their recipient to explore these other spaces and face their primordial fear of nothingness.

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JAROSLAV ŠVELCH (CHARLES UNIVERSITY)

A LIQUOR-POWERED SCENE: THE BECHEROVKA GAME COMPETITION AS A CULTURAL INTERMEDIARY IN THE 2000S CZECH GAME INDUSTRY

PANEL 10: **GAME JAM SPACE** (DAY 2, 13:30-15:00, ROOM 307)

Between 2000 and 2008, the Becherovka Game competition was a fixture of the Czech independent and freeware game scenes. Every year, local creators submitted dozens of games that were released as freeware and evaluated by a jury consisting mostly of game journalists and developers. The winners could take away generous prize money of up to 100,000 CZK, which was about 8 times average monthly salary in 2000. The games racked up tens of thousands of downloads and many of the participants went on to secure jobs in the game industry. There was, however, a catch: The competing games had to implement the branding of Becherovka – a traditional Czech brand of herbal liqueur produced by the company Jan Becher – Karlovarská Becherovka, which bankrolled the whole competition. Originally devised as a marketing/PR effort, the competition became a high-profile event that contributed to the popularity and the professionalization of the local freeware and independent game development scenes.

This paper is a part of a larger ongoing grant project on the historiography and preservation of Czech games, including freeware games and advergames. In the paper, we build on the following material: (1) interviews with actors involved in the competition, including the organizers, competitors, and jury members, (2) press coverage of the competition from both specialized and mainstream press, (3) selected titles from the competition, especially the winners. So far, we have conducted four out of seven interviews, did a first pass of analysis on all 114 relevant press articles, and analyzed most of the relevant games using common game analysis guidelines (Fernández-Vara 2015). Material collection will finish by June 2025.

To explain the significance of the competition, we interpret it not only in the context of advergames (see Hera 2019), both also as a notable cultural intermediary (Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2018). According to the interviews with Becherovka representatives, the main PR goal of the project was to stop the flight of young demographics from Becherovka towards imported liquor brands, which proliferated on the market after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Over eight instalments, the competition generated dozens of advergames, some of them very popular, such as the point'n'click adventure game Miracle Cure (Enteron 2000), in which the protagonist must retrieve the recipe for Becherovka in a post-apocalyptic world in order to cure a pandemic of nervous stomach. For local developers, the competition played the role of a cultural intermediary, a concept devised by Bourdieu (1984) and introduced into game studies by Parker, Whitson, and Simon (2018). Similarly to the "Megabooth" studied by Parker et al., Becherovka Game acted as a broker that facilitated connections between producers, consumers, and other market actors. Given the participation of professional developers and journalists, the competitors received useful feedback on their work, and sometimes

even job offers. Moreover, the prize money could sustain the operations of individual developers or small studios, often comprised of students. Some popular titles, such as Aquadelic GT (Hammerware 2007), first competed in Becherovka Game and later came out as commercial budget titles on the Western markets. While many of these secondary effects were unintended by Becherovka, they contributed to the competition's high profile and enthusiastic coverage.

This history of Becherovka Game may remedy some of the notable omissions of game historiography. Despite some interest in game jams (Lai et al. 2021), sponsored game development competitions have not been covered yet. The paper will also contribute to the understudied phenomenon of freeware games and local freeware scenes, which were in many ways predecessors of indie scenes (Juul 2019; Ruffino 2020) and today's communities around platforms such as Itch.io.

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THAT'S NOT FAIR!": CULTURAL HERITAGE, EUROPEAN VALUES, AND YOUTH'S SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT AT A CULTURAL GAME JAM

PANEL 10: **GAME JAM SPACE** (DAY 2, 13:30-15:00, ROOM 307)

This talk will present the process and results of a Cultural Game Jam held at the ARoS Art Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, on March 3–7, 2025. The participants – 45 undergraduate students from Aarhus University – worked in teams to create 11 'value-sensitive games for culture' in response to the Cultural Game Jam's theme: "That's Not Fair!". The video games were created through embedding European values into the gameworld and gameplay, as well as drawing on cultural heritage from contemporary art installations exhibited at ARoS. The event took place as part of the EPIC-WE project – a Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Action (2023–2026), aiming to empower youth as participants in, and co-creators of, European culture through game-making.

Cultural heritage is increasingly important to professional game developers in Europe (Eklund et al., 2024). Some national governments offer financial aid in schemes approved by the European Commission, requiring that supported video games express national cultures and/or European culture (O'Brien, 2023). Accordingly, games are now frequently seen as national or regional products by players and journalists (Suominen, 2020), and also by scholars (Mochocki et al., 2024; Navarro-Remesal & Pérez-Latorre, 2022). However, it has not yet been emphasized that cultural heritage in games can be studied through its connection to many different entities: nation-states, supra-national organizations, Indigenous peoples (see Laiti et al., 2021, for an example related to a game jam), etc. And answers to the question "whose heritage?" are often parts of power struggles (Blake, 2000; Smith, 2006). The talk will address this in the analysis of three Cultural Game Jam creations: "Us & Them", "Your Filtered Life", and "Know Your Neighbour (?)" (all published online and free to play).

For instance, in "Us & Them", the player spends the night at home watching a seemingly suspicious neighbor. The game's aesthetics and a constant need to manage multiple threat meters situate this title in the global horror genre, but the game also draws from an art installation displayed in the same city and prepared by a Swiss artist (Pipilotti Rist's 2005 "Dawn Hours in the Neighbour's House"), and it can be read as a criticism of negative attitudes toward immigrants in Denmark, in keeping with the declared European value of human dignity. Hence, the creators have used a piece of transnational but locally situated heritage to discuss nationally important issues through globally recognizable game conventions.

We call the above titles 'games for culture' to highlight game-making as a form of culture-making that allows participants to actively explore, reinterpret, and reconfigure current and past challenges or themes from culture and society through 'empowering gameplay' and 'cultural gameworlds'. The participating youth are thus invited to imagine alternative futures, challenge norms, and foster

empowered participation. This is in line with youth's increasing engagement with games not only as players but as co-creators of cultural worlds; further, positioning game-making as culture-making and inviting youth to create 'games for culture' through the use of cultural heritage and European values allows exploring how games, cultural heritage, and cultural transformation intersect (Holflod et al., 2024).

In keeping with its Design-Based Research methodology, the presented EPIC-WE project foregrounds the researchers' active and situated roles throughout the design process within a cultural quadruple helix innovation ecosystem (Nørgård & Holflod, 2024). We will reflect on our facilitation of, and participation in, the co-creation of games – the actions that shaped the design iterations and influenced the outcomes while engaging the youth in democratic, participatory, and civic processes (Eriksson et al., 2024). We will acknowledge the socialness of hosting participatory events (Procter & Spector, 2024) in order to avoid reproducing the myth of positionless knowledge, so astutely critiqued by Donna Haraway (1988).

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MIKHAIL FIADOTAU (TALLINN UNIVERSITY)
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THE GLOCAL GAME JAM? A VARIANTOLOGICAL LOOK AT THE LOCAL HISTORY OF GAME JAMMING CULTURES IN POLAND AND JAPAN

PANEL 10: **GAME JAM SPACE** (DAY 2, 13:30-15:00, ROOM 307)

In both popular and academic discourse, game jams are often framed as (1) a phenomenon that originates from the US, and (2) has since spread all around the globe. At a surface level, both assumptions seem to be true. The first self-described game jam—0th Indie Game Jam—took place in March 2002 in Oakland, California; and just months later, in August 2002, it was duplicated in Kaunas, Lithuania - demonstrating that game jamming became international almost immediately (Lai et al., 2021). Furthermore, since the establishment of the annual Global Game Jam (GGJ) in 2009, it has spread to hundreds of locations worldwide: e.g., the 2025 instalment had 805 sites in 98 countries (Global Game Jam, 2025).

This framing, however, obscures the fact that game jamming is far from a culturally homogeneous phenomenon, its history is not linear, and its genealogies may vary between different parts of the world. Even the ostensibly worldwide event such as the Global Game Jam displays variation across different regions and cultures, where it is adapted to the local context (Yamane, 2013). After all, when spreading to different regions, game jams had to integrate into the broader fabric of the pre-existing game development practices – in a process of cultural glocalization (Hopper 2007).

This paper will discuss two central questions:

1. What pre-existing game development and creative computing cultures did game jams build on in different regions?
2. What regional differences did game jamming cultures develop?

It will examine these questions by comparing two local cases, Poland and Japan, in terms of the contexts in which game jams emerged there and subsequent developments in their regional game jamming cultures. This will be done through a variantological lens (Zielinski, 2019). In other words, the paper's aim is not to establish a clear chronology or genealogy, but instead to take phenomena "that are not part of the established history of progression and look at them not as dead ends but as variations, alternative modes that present alternative ways of thinking" (Hancock, 2015).

The first part of the paper will examine earlier contexts related to grassroots-level game creation and creative computing more broadly. In Poland, like in many European nations, one of the most prominent such contexts is the demoscene, which was thriving starting in the early 1990s and was in many ways intertwined with game development communities (Marecki and Cieślewicz 2020; Pigulak, 2023; cf.; Tyni & Sotamaa, 2014). In Japan, while community spaces for game creation were not common until the late 2000s, dōjin events such as the Comiket brought together thousands of popular culture fans,

including hobbyist game creators eager to share their work (Fiadotau, 2019). The online furīgēmu (freeware game) scene was another notable context for hobbyist game creativity; while CodeFest 2005 in Tokyo is an early example of a time-limited community event focused on rapid prototyping.

After outlining these contexts, the paper will discuss the emergence of game jams in the two countries and the distinctive features their respective game jamming cultures have developed. In Japan, for example, game jams quickly attracted mainstream media attention (Shin et al., 2012) and spread outside of major urban centers, often serving to mobilize the local community or draw attention to local issues (e.g. 2011 Fukushima Game Jam).

This study - while methodologically influenced by media archeology – is predominantly based on traditional historical methods, such a critical and contextual analysis of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including archival materials, oral history interviews and academic publications in relevant national languages.

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ŠTĚPÁN ŠANDA (CHARLES UNIVERSITY)

IF THE ASTRONOMICAL CLOCK STOPS, THIS COUNTRY IS DONE FOR: GAMEWORLD, OTHERWORLD AND MYTHOLOGICAL SITES OF HROT

PANEL 11: **MYTHOLOGICAL SPACES** (DAY 2, 15:30-17:00, ROOM 11)

When we emerge from the underground tunnels of a bunker at the beginning of Hrot (Spytihněv, 2023), we find ourselves on the platform of a Prague metro station. Due to the setting of the story in 1986 after an unspecified disaster, it is called Kosmonautů. Hrot's episodes depict more or less familiar sites of Czech culture. Many of them – like the Palace of Culture or housing districts with panel houses – could be seen as the socialist modernism applied within the former Eastern Bloc defined by transformation of urban space (Kühne, 2018, p. 213-215). Czech culture and history formed Hrot's aesthetic significantly (Švelch, Houška, 2025, p. 11) as it is set in a recent and contested period.

So called normalisation and its photographic representation carries a certain photogenicity, which brings with it different points of view and thus different pasts (Činátl, 2014, p. 216). Hrot's unpolished, languid, brown-palette visuality may point to a certain view of the period as of times of decline. By mytholudical approach, formed and used on tropes as heroes or monsters (Ford, 2022), my paper analyses mythically charged landscapes as those are constantly in player's sight (Martin, 2011) and so expanding the mythological analysis in the field of game studies. It also contributes to the recent turn to local themes in computer games and how those connect with the country's broader culture.

Titles set in the modern world – which Hrot is – not only provide escapism against the constraints and frustrations of living within a particular political system, but also allow for coping with it through a variety of interactions (Bailes, 2023, p. 16). However open, the game world is structured as an object constrained by rules, and these are necessarily both culturally and ideologically conditioned (Murray, 2018, p. 175). In relation to the tradition of landscape representation, it is important to note that landscape functions as a secondary representation. Before it is translated into a particular media form, this translation is conditioned by the lens of culture that gives meaning to nature as such (Mitchell, 2002, p. 14). At the same time, this representation is naturalising, portraying the environment as a given rather than an encounter of the action of various social and natural forces.

It is with naturalisation that the mythological view comes into play. Several of Hrot's missions take place in places intertwined with Czech history. Those form Hrot's gameworld and they are usually transformed to labyrinth structure (Švelch, Houška, p. 14) not only to align with the boomer shooter genre but also to contribute to the environment weirdness. Gameworlds in general can be seen as mythological otherworlds (Ford, 2022, p. 71) where other rules operate and through which we affirm the normality of our own world. Using a dual view of this construction and a dual relationship – gameworld as otherworld and mythic environment in gameworld (ibid.) – my paper identifies specific mythological sites built on real-world representations in Hrot. Despite all its poignancy, it communicates a grand story about, for example, a fight with evil forces in Czechoslovakia, or rather

Czechia, as the final return to order in the centre of the world – Prague's Old Town Hall and the Astronomical Clock – shows.

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DALE LEORKE (UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING)

NAVIGATING LORE AND LANDSCAPE: LUDIC MYTHOGRAPHY AND PLAYER PILGRIMAGES IN *DARK SOULS* AND *BLACK MYTH: WUKONG*

PANEL 11: **MYTHOLOGICAL SPACES** (DAY 2, 15:30-17:00, ROOM 11)

This paper explores 'ludic mythography' – the practice of interpreting and engaging with myth through the spatial and narrative structures of video games – through an analysis of player discourse surrounding two videogame series: *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware) and *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science). Moving beyond a textual analysis of these games, in this paper I focus on how players themselves articulate, extend, and materialise their engagement with the games' mythology and lore by visiting real-world locations that both appear in, and act as architectural or aesthetic influences on, the game environment.

Drawing from forum posts, Reddit threads, YouTube videos, and travel blog entries, the paper identifies a recurring phenomenon: players using in-game landscapes as frameworks for real-world exploration. In the case of *Dark Souls*, players trace the games' Gothic and Romanesque architecture to European cathedrals, medieval towns, and wartime ruins. Online essays, discussion boards, and visual comparisons frequently point to Duomo di Milano, Mont-Saint-Michel Abbey, and St. Peter's Basilica as spatial analogues for game locations like Anor Londo or Irithyll. These acts of identification are sometimes accompanied by physical pilgrimages, documented in personal photography and reflective travel writing that blends myth-centred 'lore hunting' (Ford, 2024) with historical commentary.

Conversely, Black Myth: Wukong presents a more explicit engagement with place. Developed using 3D scans of Buddhist grottoes, temple complexes, and natural sites predominantly across Shanxi Province, the game inspires Chinese and non-Chinese players alike to seek out the real-world foundations of its mythic realism. Forum discussions and vlogs reveal a spectrum of player responses, from aesthetic appreciation to cultural rediscovery. Some describe visits to locations like the Yungang Grottoes or Nanshan Temple on Wutai Mountain as extensions of their in-game journeys – part lore deep-dive, and part heritage tourism.

This paper positions these behaviors within the broader framework of ludic mythography, arguing that players are not only decoding myth in digital spaces, but actively re-inscribing that meaning into physical geography. These practices represent a hybrid of affective tourism, spatial interpretation, and participatory cultural scholarship (Briciu et al, 2020; Jenkins, 2004; Reijnders, 2016). By analysing player-driven discourse and behavior, the paper contributes to the emerging scholarship on video game-induced tourism (Dubois & Gibbs, 2018; Ramirez-Moreno & Leorke, 2021; Yamamura, 2018), by exploring how myth and architecture can function as connective tissue between virtual and real worlds. It argues that Dark Souls and Black Myth: Wukong signal a new kind of mythic geography – one co-authored across players, texts, and terrains, both physical and digital.

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PLAYABLE HERITAGE: A CASE STUDY OF EMBEDDING FOLKLORE INTO GAME DESIGN FOR CULTURAL MEDIATION

PANEL 11: **MYTHOLOGICAL SPACES** (DAY 2, 15:30-17:00, ROOM 11)

This paper explores how video games can serve as a tool for cultural mediation and preservation through the case study of an in-development game, focused on Hungarian folklore. Similar to the "heritage approach" in historical game studies (Mochocki, 2021), we examine how interactive media may preserve intangible narratives left out of dominant historiographies. While historical and cultural representations have been dominated by Western themes, reinforcing a narrow perspective in game narratives (Pan et al., 2023), recent projects with lesser-known cultures are emerging. Following the example of *Skábma: Snowfall* (Red Stage Entertainment, 2022) and *Tchia* (Awaceb, 2023), this project is anchored in the local culture of Hungary.

The paper contributes to historical game studies and cultural heritage research by proposing a design-led methodology embedding underrepresented folklore into digital games. It outlines how research-through-design processes can produce playable artefacts and transferable frameworks for heritage engagement, grounded in site-specific research, local collaboration and iterative evaluation. Drawing on the FRACH model (Carrozzino et al., 2017), the project illustrates how games can balance engagement with representational responsibility: the presentation will focus on how this methodological approach can be adapted for similar contexts, offering insights into integrating archival sources, site visits, folk studies, expert interviews and co-creative design into player experiences. It also addresses practical questions of authenticity and accessibility that arise when translating cultural heritage into interactive media.

The study positions video game development as a form of research-through-design, where the creative process becomes an integral part of the methodology. The proposed artefact is a video game that immerses players in Hungarian folklore: the player is invited to take on the role of the *Garaboncias*, a traditional figure of a travelling student of the supernatural and arcane arts, and deal with spirits and other mystical creatures on behalf of the village inhabitants in the Carpathians. With a particular focus on historical and traditional accuracy, the project aims to build a playable prototype that translates knowledge of the folklore into game mechanics, sound design, art, narrative, and environmental storytelling.

The development process is structured around the FRACH framework, offering guidance in the design, development and evaluation of immersive serious games in cultural heritage. FRACH emphasises a modular design methodology, coherent cultural representation and mixed-method evaluation. These principles support the game's dual goal: offering players cultural insight and an emotionally engaging experience.

To achieve this, the artefact aims to depart from the traditional "serious game" approach, and provide an engaging gameplay experience: explore a rich 2.5D environment, engage with the local community of the village, consult your grimoire and investigate the mysterious occurrences to bring balance between the spirit world and ours.

Evaluation will include playtesting with culturally diverse audiences, measuring cognitive and emotional engagement (Camuñas-García et al., 2023), and the effectiveness of heritage communication. The project is informed by critical approaches to cultural memory and game production. Hammar (2019) argues that access to and control over memory production in

games is shaped by economic structures, leading to "mnemonic hegemony" where dominant narratives prevail. By focusing on the folklore of a small nation, this research aims to counter that trend, highlighting the importance of localised storytelling in games. As Barwick et al. (2011) emphasise, digital games—while ephemeral in format—can serve as long-term cultural artefacts. This reinforces the value of embedding lesser-known traditions, such as Hungarian folklore, into game narratives as a means of extending their cultural lifespan.

This paper contributes a grounded case study to the field of historical game studies, showcasing how games can function as active instruments for cultural transmission. It aims to offer a replicable framework integrating folklore and site-specific heritage into game design, especially for underrepresented cultures. By combining academic research, community collaboration, and experimental design, thus democratising memory.

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KAROL POPOW (UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW)

CARDBOARD GAMEWORLD: SPATIALITY AND MATERIALITY IN BOARD GAMES

PANEL 12: **ANALOG SPACES** (DAY 2, 15:30-17:00, ROOM 307)

Board games do not simply depict terrains or settings; they actively craft spaces alive with meaning. Through tactile elements, intricate rulesets, and communal gameplay, these games produce local phenomenologies—spaces that arise only through shared play. Such spaces bind physical game components to the imaginative worlds constructed in players minds. While previous analyses largely emphasized narrative, mechanical or historical dimensions of board game, the rich interplay of material and procedural space has remained underexplored. Addressing this lacuna, the paper examines how board games shape space and what part is played by their design, aesthetics, and mechanics.

Building on a materialist framework inspired by Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (2017) and Ingold's theory of "things" (2012, 2015), I approach board games as hybrid interfaces – both symbolic representations of token-gestures (Wake 2019) and ontologically active playthings (Sicart 2021). Drawing upon material game studies (Wake & Germaine 2022) and ludo-textual analysis (Booth 2021), this research combines tactile media, procedurality, and situated play.

I identify three overlapping layers of spatial construction in board games:

Aesthetic-material representation: the visual, tactile, and symbolic properties of game pieces—boards, cards, tiles, and tokens. This layer highlights material affordances that guide functional play while shaping players' sense of presence and agency. It foregrounds semiotic representation—iconography, typography, flavor text, and detailed illustrations—that narrativize terrain and characters. It clearly separates representational elements (maps, thematic art, flavor text) from interface tools (score tracks, resource displays) and emphasizes how specific gestures—drafting, rotating, stacking, placing—encode spatial logic and transform topology of gameworld.

Procedural layer: rule-based systems that structure how space is created, transformed, and apprehended during play. Some mechanics represent space and assign ludic meaning, such as movement costs in Tainted Grail or area control tracks. Others generate space through creation or discovery, as in the tile-laying of Carcassonne or modular map setup. Others transform space over time—terraforming in Terraforming Mars, growing a city in Everdell, or building zoo enclosures in Ark Nova. These enactments also shape spatial epistemology—whether the world is fully visible or discovered turn by turn—and define both cognitive frameworks and affective rhythms through which players engage with and learn the gameworld.

Ontological-experiential layer: cardboard gamespace is constituted through assamblage of acting components and players embodied engagement. This network shares rhythms of play, and shifting positions—physical, cognitive, and representational. This includes performative rituals around setup

and movement, the pacing of turns, and the temporal flow of tension and resolution. It also concerns how players inhabit roles—whether as avatars, external strategists, or abstract presences—and how this shapes their orientation toward the gameworld.

This study uses overlapping lenses—Ludo-textual analysis, semiotic spatial reading (Škrdla 2025; Ferret 2021), and procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007). I applied the same three-step protocol to spatially contrasting titles: *Kingdomino* (2016), *Scythe* (2016), *Terraforming Mars* (2016), *Inis* (2016), *Everdell* (2018), *Tainted Grail: The Fall of Avalon* (2019), *Ark Nova* (2021) and *Dorfromantik* (2022). Second, a semiotic and composition-based inspection of components (Rose 2016; Elkins 2003) uncovered how aesthetics and symbolism cue spatial rhetoric. Third, following Kłosiński's (2023) hermeneutics of gameplay and Bogost's procedural rhetoric, I documented full play sessions, recording spatial qualities and dynamics.

Cross-case comparison revealed specific shared patterns and unique design moves. For instance, in Spirit Island, expanding Blight, and in Scythe, infrastructural growth transform spaces from static backgrounds into active, procedurally animated resources or opponents. This creates a dynamic spatial economy of risk and timing, where each tile actively works with or against players.

This study argues board games are powerful spatial media. Their materiality, procedural systems, and embodied, repeatable play generate distinctive localities instance of cardboard gameworld. Games do not merely represent space—they actively make space happen. This three-layered model of spatiality captures not only how space is represented, but also how it is procedurally enacted and experientially lived—offering a novel contribution to material gamestudy of board games.

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KONRAD AUGUSTYNIAK (AGH UNIVERSITY OF KRAKÓW)

WAS SHERLOCK HOLMES FROM WROCŁAW? LOCALITY AND THEMING IN POLISH ESCAPE ROOMS

PANEL 12: **ANALOG SPACES** (DAY 2, 15:30-17:00, ROOM 307)

This paper offers a critical cultural analysis of physical games - escape rooms (Nicholson 2015) in Poland, focusing on the tensions between local specificity and the homogenizing tendencies of global aesthetics, often referred to as disneyfication (Bryman 2004). The study aims to explore how escape rooms negotiate spatial and narrative authenticity, particularly in contexts that reference local history, culture, or urban mythology. While some rooms deliberately evoke specific historical or regional settings—such as Betrayal in Breslau (Exit19.pl) or Warsaw Uprising (Black Cat Escape Room)—most gravitate towards transnational, genre-based tropes (e.g., ancient Egypt, Sherlock Holmes) (Stasiak 2016), revealing a shift away from site-specific immersion toward commodified spatial universality. This tendency can be further understood through the lens of the tourist gaze (Urry 2002), whereby spaces are curated and aestheticized not to reflect local complexity, but to cater to externally shaped expectations of exoticism, mystery, or familiarity. In this sense, many escape rooms reproduce a touristic mode of spatial consumption, framing even local narratives within globally recognizable and commercially viable forms.

The research employs qualitative content analysis of escape room descriptions and user reviews gathered from LockMe, the leading European escape room aggregator and review platform. The selected sample includes approximately 100 best Polish escape rooms (based on reviews on LockMe) thematically tied to either local or global imaginaries. Particular attention is paid to titles, plot summaries, and aesthetic cues present in marketing materials, as well as to the affective language used by players in their reviews. The framework for interpretation draws from theories of space and place, for example non-places (Augé 1995) and production of spaces (Lefebvre 1991), the concept of heterotopia (Foucault 1986), and recent discussions in game studies regarding localization, spatial storytelling, and the politics of memory (Swalwell 2021; Mandiberg 2021).

The paper argues that while escape rooms offer a unique opportunity for cultural spatialization and the embodiment of local narratives, they often fall short of this potential. As Konrad Augustyniak (2024) observes, the Polish escape room industry tends to reduce national motifs to aesthetic tokens, reflecting a broader trend toward commodified representations of heritage. However, as Kubal and Pawlusiński (2016) argue, escape rooms need not be seen as threats to cultural representation—instead, they may serve as creative tools for promoting both tangible and intangible heritage. With Poland's rich cultural history as a reservoir of inspiration, escape rooms have the potential to not only engage domestic audiences but also gain international recognition through the uniqueness of their locally grounded narratives. When approached with care and contextual sensitivity, they may contribute meaningfully to the development of creative tourism (Richards & Raymond 2000; Richards 2011), offering immersive, participatory experiences that connect players with local stories, places, and

symbols. This positions escape rooms as more than entertainment venues—as spatial narratives that invite both residents and visitors to interact with heritage in active and memorable ways.

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'D&DFICATION' OF LOCALIZED SPATIALITY: (DE)CONSTRUCTING 'KASHUBIANNESS' IN *DUNGEONS OF THE AMBER GRIFFIN*

PANEL 12: **ANALOG SPACES** (DAY 2, 15:30-17:00, ROOM 307)

This work analyzes the functions and properties of in-game spatiality in the Polish role-playing game Dungeons of the Amber Griffin (Frozengem Studio 2025; further abbreviated as DotAG). The claim is that this locally-themed, state-sponsored game uses the design framework of the globally recognized Dungeons&Dragons franchise to evoke regional mythos through a spatial rhetoric inherited from the hegemonic high fantasy setting. The main goal of the paper is to assess how the discursive features established by the D&D systemic heritage influence spatial design in a production aimed at reimagining Kashubian geography and folklore. The following approach builds on the notion of ludomorphing, which means "turning a contemporary, historical or fictional landscape into a gameworld" (Aarseth, 2019), and engages with post-colonial readings of game space, especially the works of Souvik Mukherjee and Tomasz Z. Majkowski (Majkowski, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017) on a methodological level.

Space in video games has already been recognized as an important locus of meaning and has been assessed through various approaches, from Henri Lefebvre's theory of modalities (Günzel, 2019) to the epistemology of non-Euclidean environments (Backe, 2021). The following work acknowledges diverse contributions to the field of spatial studies in games and implements the notion of gamescapes (Magnet, 2006); it also takes into account previous assessments of mapping practices in digital games (e.g. Lammes & Smale, 2018).

DotAG implements elements of first-person, party-based and grid-based real-time dungeon crawling gameplay. It is profoundly influenced by both classics such as the Eye of the Beholder series (Westwood Associates / Strategic Simulations 1991-1993) and modern-day titles such as the Legend of Grimrock series (Almost Human 2012-2014), which fall within the so-called 'blobber' genre. The selected use of dark fantasy conventions, the design of the available classes and the stat-based character progression system are all heavily inspired by the pillars of D&D design (see Sidhu et al., 2024). However, this study wishes to focus predominantly on the subsumption of DotAG's spatial design into the visual (see Gillespie & Crouse, 2012) and systemic (see Bjørkelo, 2022) ideological underpinnings of D&D. This work thus aims to identify the most prominent strands of 'D&Dfication' in terms of spatiality, which could possibly be implemented in future studies of different titles.

The main research questions of this paper are: how are classic D&D formula is used to (re)shape and (re)imagine the digital realm of 'Mystical Kashubia' (a phrase used in the product description on Frozengem Studio's Steam page)? How does the game "based on true Kashubian beliefs" negotiate its "dual allegiance" (Švelch & Houška, 2025) to international and local audiences in terms of spatial design? The game features a map of Pomerania and Kashubia, offering players the opportunity to explore fantasy versions of real places, with a distinct but difficult to define (see Linkner, 2021) culture and demonology. At the same time, DotAG in its current demo version (the full version is scheduled for

release in June 2025) presents itself as a classic 'blobber', with functionalized spaces serving to enhance the combat-oriented gameplay.

In this study, ludomorphing is used to determine and problematize the topological and topographical elements of the space, and the notion of the player's subjectivity posed against the cartographic logics afforded by the game (Mukherjee, 2018) is explored to identify how local settings and geographies are re-imagined and adapted to the hegemonic fantasy conventions associated with D&D.

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