

**Gaston Welisch**  
Master Thesis 2019

**Creating Worlds:**

**Exploring  
Participatory  
Behaviours  
in Gaming  
Communities.**

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Master Thesis 2019

The Glasgow School of Art  
Masters of European Design

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Word count : 9 792

# Synopsis

This thesis explores participatory behaviour in gaming communities, and seeks to draw parallels between the motivations of players to participate in a game's experience, and the civic values that get citizens to participate in the life of a city.

The first chapter looks at how the Internet has facilitated collaborative creation, and then show how games encourage participative behaviours.

The second chapter looks at the reasons behind why games are inciteful of participation. It reflects on the creation in games through the lens of "worlds", as defined by Hannah Arendt, and explores the effects of digital reproduction on the "aura" of a game. Finally it looks at appropriative behaviours, such as modding and the creation of identity.

The third chapter looks at games through the prism of "places", as defined by Marc Augé, and draws parallels with forms of participation to urban spaces. It concludes with the approaches of designers to participatory projects and gamification in a city context.

# Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank all those without whom this thesis would not have been possible : thanks to Bruce Peter, for helping me structure my writing and suggesting insightful reading material; Mil Stricevic, for helping me make sense of my studio project; Kevin Pass and Ross Brain, for welcoming me in West End Games and taking the time to share their experience running the shop; Christophe Moineau, for his references, as well as proofreading this thesis; Ernest Welisch, for his philosophy references and more proofreading; Charline Roussel, for her invaluable support and her perspective on design and urban spaces; Santiago Taberna for his advices and references on games ; Fred Wordie, for his experience of Second Life and online identity; Freyja Harris, for yet again more proofreading and emotional support; Murray Robertson, for the final proofreading; Francesco Fontana, for his professional experience working in the game industry.

# Foreword

The starting point for this thesis stemmed from the research I've carried out last year on the Nordic game industry, and our changing behaviour towards digital consumption<sup>1</sup>. One of the findings was that players were getting together to shape their experience of gaming by sharing resources, modifying the game and adding new content. This thesis arises from an exploration of these key findings.

As a designer, exploring the participatory and creative behaviours in games has a direct value to my practice. Co-design, co-creation and participatory projects have become design buzzwords. Therefore it was valuable to explore the role of users within an area of interest, games. I set to find out whether these participatory behaviours were intended by the designers of these games, or whether they happened organically. I also explored what made games incitative of participatory behaviours.

Finally, my research evolved in parrallel with my studio project, for which I designed a game to re-appropriate surroundings, in the context of Glasgow International 2020 (contemporary visual arts festival). The goal of this game was to add a layer of narrative to the city by (re)discovering it in a group. Players participated in the creation of a collaborative artwork which defined a new understanding of Glasgow. As I continued my research, I began to see parallels between games and the dynamics of civic engagement and participation in a city context.

<sup>1</sup>G. Welisch, *Ordinary Games for Ordinary People*, published online, 2017, <http://coid.aalto.fi/ordinary-games-for-ordinary-people/>, (accessed 18 April 2019)

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# Introduction

This thesis seeks to draw parallels between the motivations of players to participate in a game's experience, and the civic values that get citizens to participate in the life of a city. I will analyse the city and the game as two "Worlds", as defined by Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>: a common, man-made place, constituted of human artifacts, that defines the relationships between those who inhabit it. As part of this exploration, I will try to understand the way these worlds are experienced, and what constitutes them. I'll discuss the role of the people within these Worlds (citizens and players) and show how participative behaviours in games can mirror that of cities and vice-versa. The idea behind this parallel is to see how participatory behaviour can be developed both in games and in cities.

I will focus on games' social and community aspect, rather than looking at them through the lens of commodity value. However, as an introduction, and to underline their cultural relevance, it is important to mention that games, and in particular video games, are a very important industry. 2018 saw 137.9 billion USD of revenue for the video game industry<sup>2</sup>, compared to 135.6 for the movie industry<sup>3</sup>. 51% of these revenues were for mobile games, which can be played on the go, at anytime and anywhere. This statistic does not include revenue from e-sports (multiplayer video games played competitively for spectators) which are also growing as a form of entertainment.

There's no doubt that video games have become a mainstream mass media. In fact, it can be argued we are in a similar point in our relationship to videogames than the relationship to films in the days of the early twentieth century german philosopher and cultural commentator Walter Benjamin<sup>4</sup>. Changing technologies have made it a medium of new possibilities, yet it has been around long enough that it is enjoyed by the masses. Benjamin analysed the relationship to art in 1935, when mechanical reproduction changed the way it was perceived. I will also reference the late twentieth century American video artist and writer Douglas Davis who analysed the impact of digital reproduction on art<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1998 (originally published 1958)

<sup>2</sup>Newzoo, *Global Games Market Report*, [website], 2018, <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/global-games-market-reaches-137-9-billion-in-2018-mobile-games-take-half/>, (accessed 11 April 2019)

<sup>3</sup>Ibisworld, *Global Movie Production & Distribution Industry*, [website], 2018, <https://www.ibisworld.com/industry-trends/global-industry-reports/other-community-social-personal-service-activities/movie-production-distribution.html>, (accessed 11 April 2019)

<sup>4</sup>W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969 (originally published 1935)

<sup>5</sup>D. Davis, *The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995)*, Cambridge, The MIT press, 1995

Games have a variety of definitions, but for the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on games, digital or physical, which have an intrinsic element of online community. That element is not necessarily part of the gameplay but can be peripheral to the game, like an online forum, while still being essential to its experience. The contemporary American game designer Jesse Schell, in his book *The Art of Game Design, a Book of Lenses*, goes through several definitions of a games, from several authorities on the study of games, such as psychology scholars Elliot Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith. Here are his takeaways, the inherent qualities (Q) of games:

- Q1. Games are entered willfully.**
- Q2. Games have goals.**
- Q3. Games have conflict.**
- Q4. Games have rules.**
- Q5. Games can be won and lost.**
- Q6. Games are interactive.**
- Q7. Games have challenge.**
- Q8. Games can create their own internal value.**
- Q9. Games engage players.**
- Q10. Games are closed, formal systems.<sup>1</sup>**

While these can apply to most games, I take issue with the last point, which he borrows from game designers Tracy Fullerton, Chris Swain, and Steven Hoffman. While most games have set rules and boundaries, it closes all consideration of what happens outwith the game, even if it is an integral part of its experience.

Schell does argue however, that there is no single right answer, as our understanding of what a game is fluctuates and there is a variety of different opinions. Schell's definition of a game is:

**A game is a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude.<sup>2</sup>**

While, like Schell, I do not have the pretention to propose a comprehensive definition of what a game is, it is useful to understand the prism through which I will analyse them. This is my analysis and synthesis of the aforementioned definitions.

**A game is a system facilitating an activity which is performed for its own sake with a playful attitude.**

<sup>1</sup> J. Schell, *The Art of Game Design, a Book of Lenses*, Burlington, Elsevier, 2008, p34

<sup>2</sup> *The Art of Game Design, a Book of Lenses*, p37

This is the definition I will use throughout this thesis. An example of a system can be rules and physical tools, like in a sport or a board game. With video games, the system is the program and the computer which facilitate the act of playing. The word facilitating is important, because it underlines the contribution of players. Without them, there is no game, and their participation defines their experience (and that of others when it is a multiplayer game).

## **-Structure**

After having introduced games and their place in society in this introduction, in the first chapter, I will go through what constitutes a “participatory” game. Then, in the second chapter, I will explore whether they allow players to feel ownership of a virtual world. In the third chapter, I will draw parallels between citizen participation in city life, and player participation in game worlds. I will conclude the thesis by arguing that gaming communities develop a sense of civic .

## -A (very) brief history of games

**PLAY is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing.<sup>1</sup>**

In this passage of his book *Homo Ludens : A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian, states that play predates our culture. As we began to build language, tools and systems, it is natural that play, which for Huizinga is biological, was to be organised into games, which are cultural.

The Game of Ur is one of the oldest examples of a game we still know the rules for, although there are traces of games going back to pre-historical times. It is a racing game, with elements of strategy and luck. It was played all over the Middle East from at least 3000 B.C and declined in popularity towards the end of antiquity. At the time, it was likely to be as universal as chess or backgammon is today, with most people being familiar with the rules. The game is a common ground, a language tool for people to get together and play. According to Dr. Finkel<sup>2</sup>, curator at the British Museum in London, in a setting like a bar in a multicultural merchant city, people of different origins would have been able to play even if they may not have shared the same language. Already this example shows appropriation of a game by players: it is quite likely most people would have made their own version of the board, as evidenced by the graffiti versions found on buildings of the era<sup>3</sup>. The tablet deciphered by Dr. Irving Finkel is also detailing “house rules”, a more sophisticated variant of the game with elements of betting. This example is particularly interesting for this thesis because it shows games as a medium through which people connected, something universal which could be used to make connections with strangers.

Sports are another example of games which have existed for a long time. Some sports have the specificity that they can be enjoyed by playing them, as well as watching them. An example would be the Roman Games (Ludi), which were a cultural institution at the time. Ludus, the singular form of Ludi, could refer to both play, games or sport. The Colosseum, which was built for public games, could sit more than 55 000 people. Ludi always had a

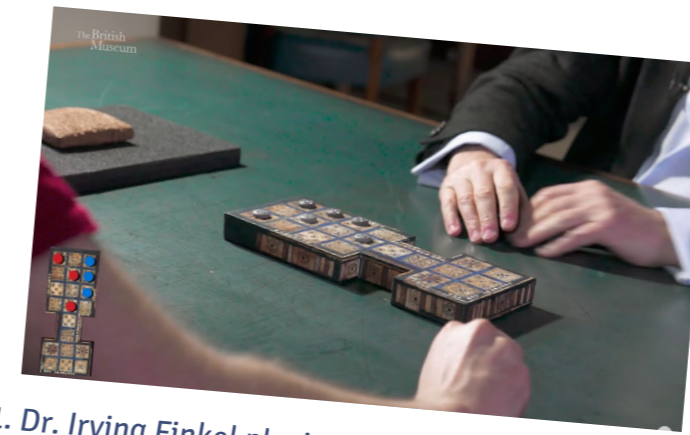
<sup>1</sup>J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens : A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980 (originally published 1944), P1

<sup>2</sup>I. Finkel, *Deciphering the world's oldest rule book*, [Youtube video], 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHjzvnH54Cw>, (accessed 11 April 2019)

<sup>3</sup>W.Green, *Big Game Hunter*, Time, 2008, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1815747\\_1815707\\_1815665,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1815747_1815707_1815665,00.html), (accessed 18 April 2019)

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Bunson, *A Dictionary of the Roman Empire*, Oxford University Press, 1995, P331-333

<sup>5</sup>J. Grout, *Essays on the History and Culture of Rome*, published online, [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia\\_romana/gladiators/gladiators.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/gladiators.html), (accessed 19 April 2019)



1. Dr. Irving Finkel playing a replica of the game of Ur



2. Game of Ur, The British Museum

component of entertainment, but could have religious or political connotations. Some of them were meant to honor gods, while others commemorated wars or notable events. Gladiatorial combat had complex rules and ways in which they unfolded. An aspect of Ludi which I find relevant to this thesis is the participation of audiences in gladiator fights. The crowd could “demonstrate its wishes”<sup>5</sup>, by turning thumbs or shouting for mercy, or lack thereof. The role of the audience will be mentioned again when discussing videogames which are played to an audience (video game live streaming).



3. Mosaic of Roman gladiators, 3rd century, National Archaeological Museum in Madrid



I will now skip ahead a few millenia and discuss two 20th century games which have had a significant impact on the games of today, and have introduced or popularised a new way of player participation.

Jesse Schell makes a distinction between traditional games and video games, in that the rules do not need to be enforced by the players themselves or a referee. The computer takes care of it for the players, which allows for a higher level of complexity in the rules, while making it an easier experience. The computer facilitates the process.

**One of the most significant differences between videogames and more traditional games is how the rules are enforced. In traditional games, rules are primarily enforced by the players themselves or by an impartial referee (...) With computer games, it becomes possible (and sometimes necessary) for the computer to enforce the rules. This is more than a convenience — it allows for the creation of games much more complex than was traditionally possible, because now the players don't have to memorize all the rules about what is and is not possible (...) In a sense, what used to be a "rule" now becomes a physical constraint of the game world.<sup>1</sup>**

One of the earliest video games is *Spacewar!*, which was developed in 1961. It was developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on early mainframe computer, the PDP-1. It was the first game to have a controller and to be installed on several computers. It was selected along ten other video games to be part of a Game Canon. Game Canon is a list of games initiated by Henry Lowood, curator of the History of Science and Technology Collections at Stanford University, which highlights games of important cultural significance. The mechanics and rules of *Spacewar!* are still quite simple (two players shoot at eachothers' spaceship), but this demonstrated the potential of the computer. In a collaborative effort, the game went through several iterations, with students and employees adding various features like the gamepad (physical game controller) or different strategy elements.

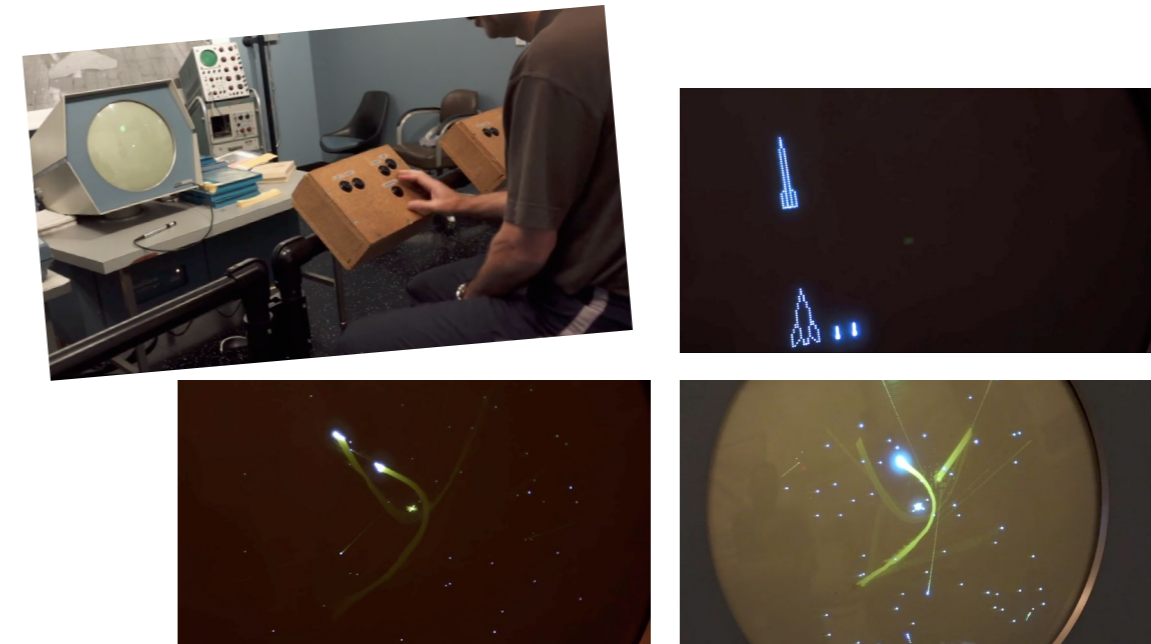
Another game which has had an important influence on contemporary games is *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is a physical role-playing game, one that is played to this day and arguably the most influential. What makes it especially relevant to this thesis is that it is

<sup>1</sup>The Art of Game Design, a Book of Lenses, p147-148

<sup>2</sup>H.Chaplin, *Is That Just Some Game? No, It is a Cultural Artifact*, New York Times, 2007, [https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/12/arts/design/12vide.html?\\_r=4&ref=technology&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&oref=slogin](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/12/arts/design/12vide.html?_r=4&ref=technology&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&oref=slogin&oref=slogin), (accessed 18 April 2019)

<sup>3</sup> D. Waskul & M. Lust, *Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing*, published online, 2004

<sup>4</sup>*Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing*, p336



4. Spacewars! on the PDP-1



5. The 1974 edition of Dungeons & Dragons

based on player participation to create its narrative. While there is some prescription from the creator in that it is based in a fantasy fictional universe, the game has no clear end or goal<sup>3</sup>. The characters are created by the players and their story is controlled by a referee, the "Dungeon Master". In a way the players are a part of the system and together they shape the game. The dungeon masters "create the worlds, plots, and scripts that generate a make-believe setting for game play"<sup>4</sup>, while the players are in charge of managing their fictional identity, decide their actions and collaborate to find solutions. *Dungeons & Dragons* will be mentioned again in this thesis for its participative qualities.

To conclude this brief overview of the history of games, we can say that games have always appeared to have social stakes, both at an individual scale (the Game of Ur and its house rules) and at a broader one (the Roman Ludi, their political background and the role of the audience). Nowadays, if computers facilitate the gaming experience by allowing more complex rules (as in *Spacewar!*), players may still play a major part in defining a game's system (like in *Dungeons and Dragons*).

# 1/ Participatory games

**Participatory: allowing people to take part in or become involved in an activity<sup>1</sup>**

Let's start by stating the obvious: Games are participatory in nature due to their interactive quality. In contrast to a film, where no action is required from the spectator beyond the consumption of content, a game requires active participation and allows agency. I am however, interested in cases where players participate beyond the act of playing the game, by shaping the experience of the game for themselves and/or others. So there is participation both during, but also before and after the act of playing. This is what I'll refer to as participatory in this thesis.

I will first show how the Internet has allowed new types of collaborative creation, and then research games where participation of users is an integral part of the playing experience. This will include the building of communities as well as user-generated content for within the game and outwith the game. I will explore games that are “story machines”, as described by Jesse Schell<sup>2</sup>, and games with existing fictional narratives and worlds. I will draw upon research that analyses other types of participatory behaviours to understand the motivation behind people putting time and effort into existing games.



<sup>1</sup> Cambridge dictionary, *Participatory*, [website], 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/participatory>, (accessed 11 April 2019)

<sup>2</sup> *The Art of Game Design, a Book of Lenses*, p265



# -Collaborative creation and Internet

A lot of the participative nature of the games I will reference throughout this essay relies on the Internet to facilitate it. As such, I find it important to start by discussing how Internet allowed participation from users all over the world and now shapes many of our interactions.

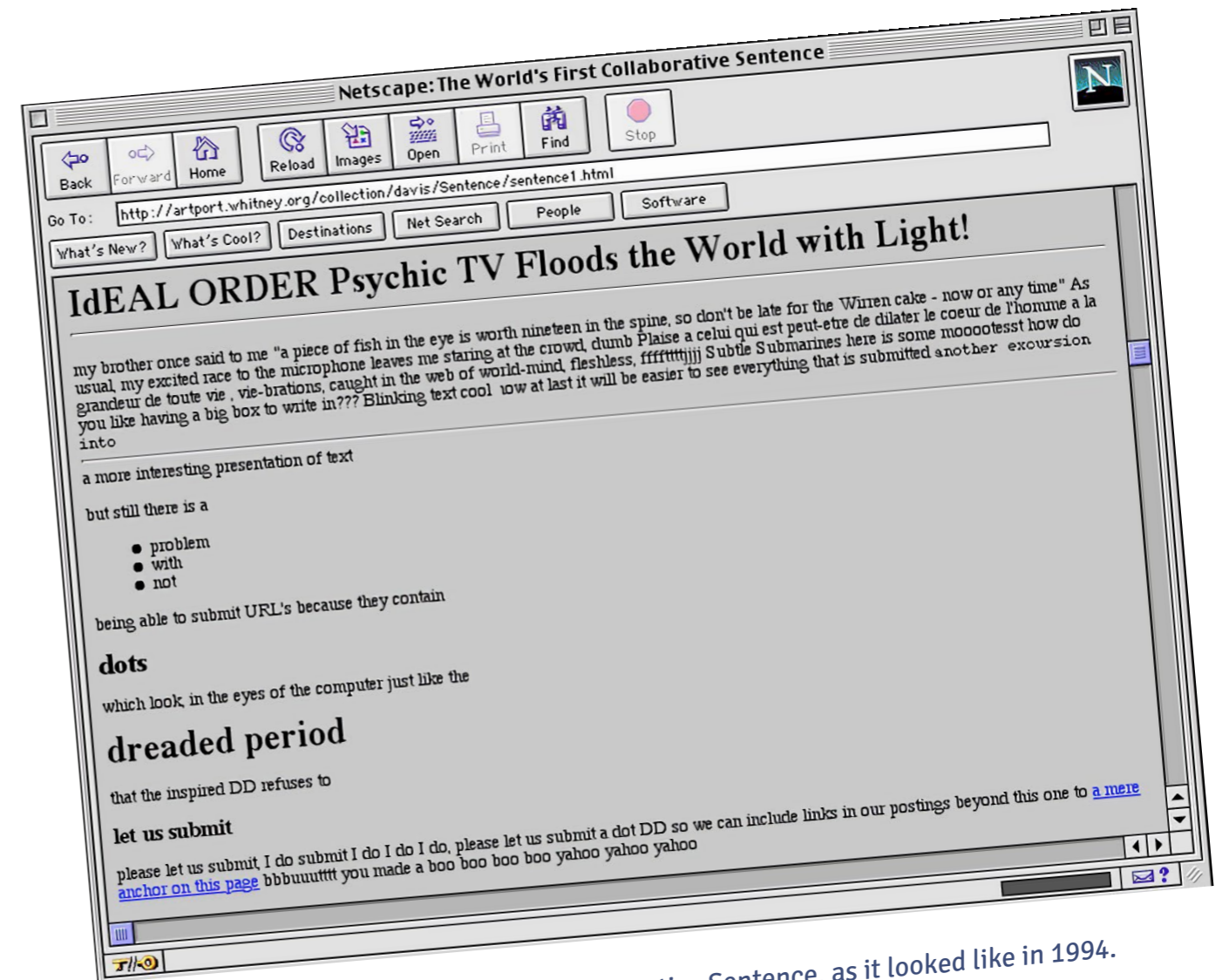
Douglas Davis is an American artist, who realized early on the potential of the Internet for broad participation and creation from the masses. In 1994, he created *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*<sup>1</sup>, an online page for people to write and share links, videos, music, files and web addresses. Discussion emerged, criticising, for example, the impossibility of writing a dot, which kept the “sentence” open, but stopped users from sharing URLs. The program was hacked, allowing people to put full stops in. People started putting pictures of themselves and linking to their homepages. Unfortunately, most links are now no longer working, which shows the ephemerality, and performative aspect of the work. It is quite hard to find a narrative and a clear train of thought between users contributions. Without moderation, facilitation or a clear purpose, it became this mass of expression from all around the world. It is unclear whether Davis anticipated the randomness of the participations, but it is clear however, that he embraced it:

**The Sentence has no end. Sometimes I think it had no beginning. Now I salute its authors, which means all of us. You have made a wild, precious, awful, delicious, lovable, tragic, vulgar, fearsome, divine thing.<sup>1</sup>**

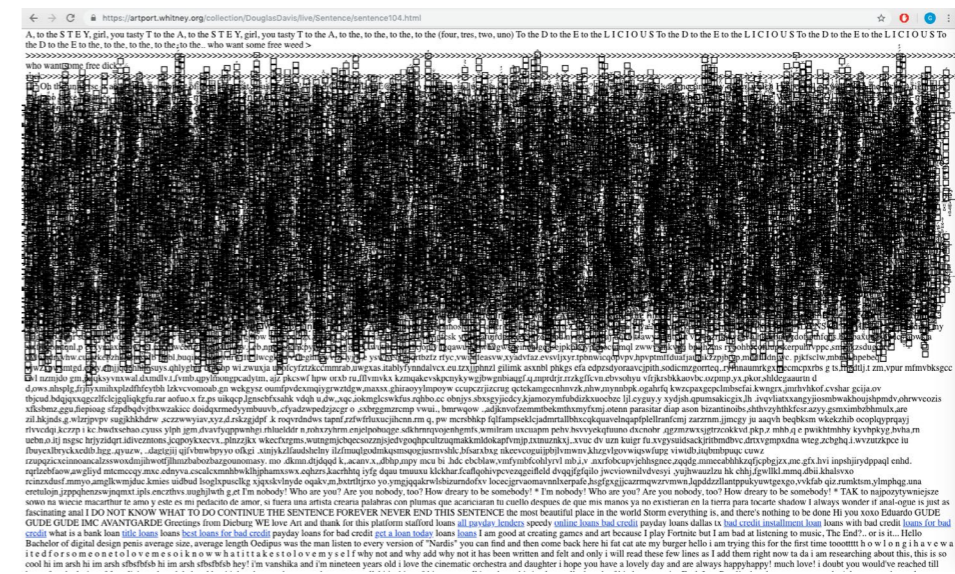
The 2013 version “restored” by the Whitney Museum of American Art has even more apparent signs of trolling (deliberate online provocation), with several pages full of copied-pasted text from wikipedia, unintelligible text, racist messages ... It can be argued that the work has lost its original purpose and novelty, and therefore it has lost an element of respect in the eyes of participants. The Internet is also no longer the place it was in 1994, and genuine calls for participation are often met with trolling. A famous example is the poll by the Natural Environment Research Council to name their £200m polar research ship, which ended with RRS Boaty McBoatface winning the vote, by four times as many votes as the nearest option.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. Davis, *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*, 1994, restored 2013, <https://whitney.org/artport/douglas-davis>, (accessed 11 April 2019)

<sup>2</sup> H. Ellis-Petersen, *Boaty McBoatface wins poll to name polar research vessel*, *The Guardian*, April 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/apr/17/boaty-mcboatface-wins-poll-to-name-polar-research-vessel> (accessed 22 April 2019)



6. A part of *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*, as it looked like in 1994.



7. The current last page of *The World's First Collaborative Sentence*, (accessed 22 April 2019)



The ship ended up being called RRS Sir David Attenborough instead. Is this proof of the failure of Internet as a medium for participation? I would disagree, but it shows the limits and pitfalls such unstructured approaches can have.

Most collaborative creation on the Internet happens in a less obvious, clear-cut way. Social Media, and image sharing websites, blogs and homepages before that, allow Internet users to express themselves through sharing images, videos, text ... Corinne Vionnet, a Swiss visual artist, collected the pictures of popular tourist destinations that were shared online. In *Photo Opportunities* (2005 - ongoing), she merged them to show the repetitive pattern of our collective representation of these landmarks. Vionnet's work and commentary on the Internet has a more bittersweet tone than that of Douglas Davis. Rather than celebrating the individuality and randomness of each contribution, she shows the repetition and the normative power of images in the time of Internet.<sup>1</sup> Although Vionnet's work is mainly about the power of the image, the Internet as a medium to share images has participated to their ubiquity. She questions the point of taking and sharing such similar images: What is the point of this collaborative imagery if we just repeat it? She begins an answer in a 2011 interview:

**It is still important for us, even if we already know so much about the Eiffel tower, to do this picture, to assimilate the moment we are there, and to discover by ourselves this famous monument.<sup>2</sup>**

Even if there are thousands more of the same image, posting a new one signifies “I've been there, I've seen it”. This introduces a new idea: participation as a means of appropriation and ownership. This is a theme I'll discuss more in the second chapter of this thesis.

I find it important, however, to conclude with a more recent example, as social media has changed and accelerated some of those dynamics of expression. On the morning after the 15 april 2019 Notre-Dame fire, André Gunthert<sup>3</sup>, historian of visual cultures, was discussing how social media was being used as a medium for “participative, collective mourning”, on a scale that had not been possible before. Images, words and videos were shared live, widening the audience of the catastrophe on a global scale. Exerpts from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* were shared, as well as paintings, tourist's pictures of previous trips and even video game footage from *Assassin's Creed Unity*, which features a digital recreation of the Notre Dame cathedral. According to Gunthert, mourning is a collective act in which one shares

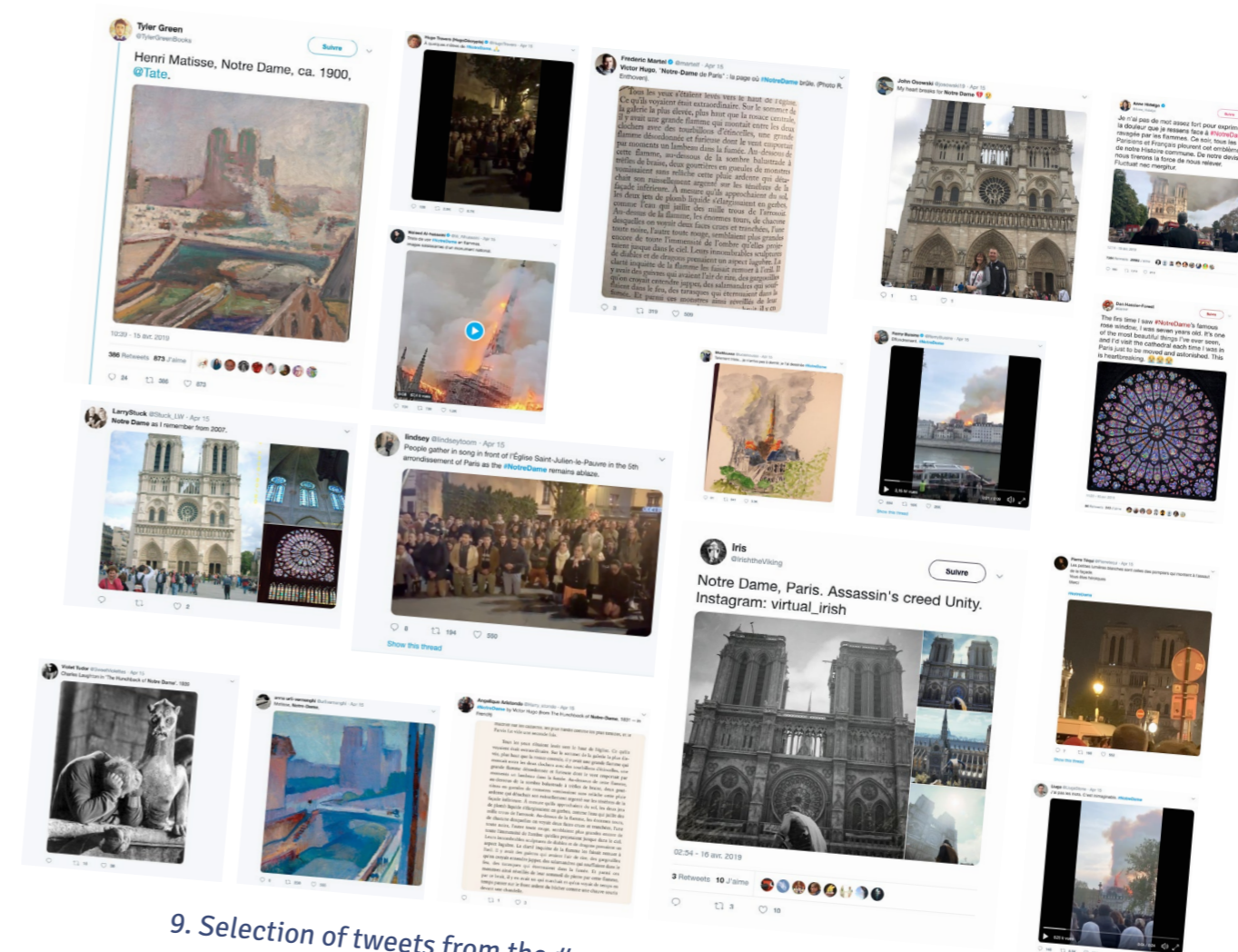
<sup>1</sup>M.Y. Preston, Corinne Vionnet's website, <http://www.corinnevionnet.com/photoopportunities.html>, (accessed 22 April 2019)

<sup>2</sup>Euromaxx, Photographer Corinne Vionnet, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StC20kNdptw&ab\\_channel=DWNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StC20kNdptw&ab_channel=DWNews), (accessed 22 April 2019)

<sup>3</sup>France Inter, *Notre-Dame : deuil participatif sur les réseaux sociaux*, (radio podcast), 16 april 2019, <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/l-instant-m/l-instant-m-16-avril-2019>, (accessed 19 April 2019)



8. Corinne Vionnet's *Photo Opportunities*, San Francisco, 2006 (left) and London, 2006 (right)



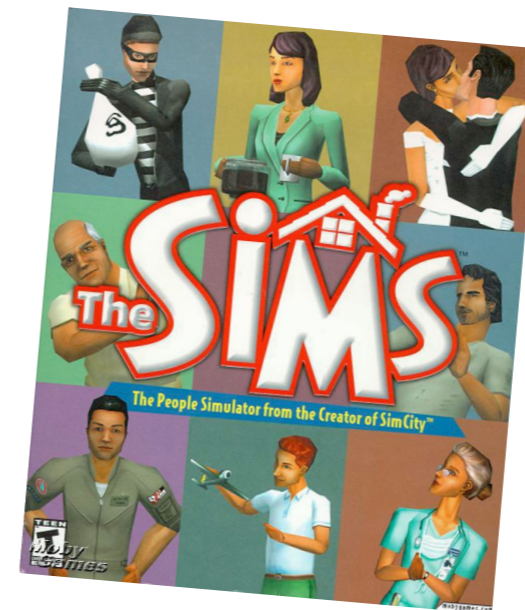
9. Selection of tweets from the #notredame, Twitter, 15-16 april 2019



their grief, so it is natural that social media would be an appropriate medium, especially for the loss of a cultural symbol. Participating in this collective mourning, again, has a function of appropriation:

What happens when one shares a moment of this scale, it isn't only the sadness of the loss of an heritage monument, it is that everybody feels that the moment is historical (...) we know it is unique and it will stay (...) It is truly a moment of sharing ... We'll say "where were you on the 15th of April?" and everybody will remember, it is our participation to history.<sup>1</sup>

By sharing, one signals that they were part of this moment, and belong to this part of history.



10. The Sims, 2000



11. A party going terribly, screenshot from The Sims

## -Games as story machines

Think of the thousands of stories created by the game of baseball or the game of golf. The designers of these games never had these stories in mind when they designed the games, but the games produced them, nonetheless. Curiously, the more prescribing the designer puts into their game (...), the fewer stories their game is likely to produce.<sup>2</sup>

I will now talk about story machines, a term coined by Jesse Schell to describe games in which, by design or incidentally, a layer of narrative is created by the player. This, to me, is a category of participatory games, as the system includes the player in the creation of meaning. *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was mentioned in the introduction, could be considered a story machine, although there are some elements of narrative prescription in the game.

*The Sims* is a perfect example of the story machine. Its gameplay and the reason behind its title is a "life simulator". In the game, you are to take care of a sim (humanoid character). You take your sim through life, education, career, relationships, ... The game has no end. Even when the initial cast of characters has died, you can keep on playing with their offspring. Compared to other games, it appears less game-like in that it has no clear goal, no defined narrative arc. *The Sims* relies on you to apply meaning to its tasks. This lack of obligations, and the customisation tools within the game makes it a perfect storytelling device. Every game is different and allows

<sup>1</sup>France Inter, Notre-Dame : deuil participatif sur les réseaux sociaux

<sup>2</sup>The Art of Game Design, a Book of Lenses, p265



Joey \_ 1 week ago  
I love it when the sims talk and Deli makes up their dialogue... She really makes it believable! Lmao 🥰💕  
87 REPLY

12. Let's play video for the Sims 4 on Youtube



the player to create a new story, while maintaining game mechanics and challenges.

A demonstration of the appeal of this type of gameplay is the number of “Let’s Play” videos featuring The Sims. Let’s Play videos are a form of content derived from video games: they are videos of players narrating while they play, for entertainment. These are often shared on Youtube when pre-recorded, or on Twitch when recorded live (in which case they are referred to as streams). As an example of why the game is particularly suited to this type of video, the Sims speak simlish, an incomprehensible language. This lets players imagine what is actually being said, and in the case of Let’s Play videos, narrate it back to their viewers.

This introduces the theme of user-generated content, which we’ll come back to later. Participation happens not only within the game, but with players using the game as a medium to create new content, allowing people who might not have played the game to experience it. Will Wright, the game designer behind the Sims, has incorporated mechanics to promote generation of content from several of his games:

**The tools are getting strong enough to where players can start creating little things in the game (...) characters, or little objects, or stories that they might share. And most of it is not going to be great, but some percent of it is actually gonna be extraordinarily good. And we’ve actually seen that, with things like the Sims (...) The Sims allowed people to be very expressive and creative. They could tell their own stories, create their own characters, replay their own life in the game.<sup>1</sup>**

The Sims makes participation a core element: it is up to the player to define what their goal is, what they want to explore and achieve. The apparent lack of prescription is by design : Wright is also the designer behind SimCity, a 1989 game in which you build and take care of a city. He goes further in an interview<sup>2</sup>:

**What’s neat about it is that they have to come up with their own goals. In SimCity we don’t say “you have to do this to win” or “if you do that you lose”. The first thing you have to do when you sit down is decide what you want. Do you want the happiest citizens? Do you want the biggest city? Do you want the most aesthetically pleasing layout? So just having to sit down and go through your own value judgements. (This) is something most people don’t do when they play computer games.**

<sup>1</sup>BBC, *Interview With Sims Creator - Will Wright*, [Youtube video], 2006, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luq9oX3nBwl&ab\\_channel=TiMeCapsule123](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luq9oX3nBwl&ab_channel=TiMeCapsule123)

<sup>2</sup>EA, *Sim City 2000 Will Wright Interview*, [Youtube video], date unknown, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcgV4YolDkg&ab\\_channel=10tfee](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcgV4YolDkg&ab_channel=10tfee), (accessed 18th april 2019)



13. SimCity, 1989



14. An example of «value judgement» (screenshot from Youtube video):

«of course killing them by drowning, or starving them as they stand in a pool of their own urine, or setting them on fire is a rite of passage for any simmer (...) their life is literally in your hands»  
 Lazy Game Reviewer



Players get to decide what they assign value and meaning to. This goes against usual conceptions of how games function. With *Spacewar!*, which we mentioned in the in the brief history of games, the goal is set: destroy the enemy ship. There can always be, of course, ways to subvert the game or add a narrative, but that is not the way it was designed. With *Simcity* and the *Sims*, however, the game gets you to define the goal (or no goal at all).

## -Collaborative creation in video games

Thanks to the Internet, as demonstrated in the beginning of this chapter, participation from players has been granted a new scale, both in the variety of players, and the speed at which it can happen. We'll discuss one last game by Will Wright which demonstrates how a broad pool of participants can take part in adding to its experience.

In *Spore* (2008), you play a simple organism which evolves, forms civilisations, until they reach space. Through the games, there are several elements which can be created by the player: the creature which you control, the buildings of your civilisation, your vehicles and spaceship. Although it is a single-player game, the other creatures you interact with are also user-generated. The creatures, buildings, vehicles and spaceships that populate the galaxy of the game are all created by other users. This allows for a much greater variety of content that would have otherwise been possible.

Although *Spore* initially received a lot of criticism, it ended up being a popular game, selling 3.2 million<sup>2</sup> copies 9 months after release (although it pales in comparison of the more than 100 million copies sold for the *Sims*). It was updated in 2017 and the servers are still running as of 2019, with a dedicated community and forum.

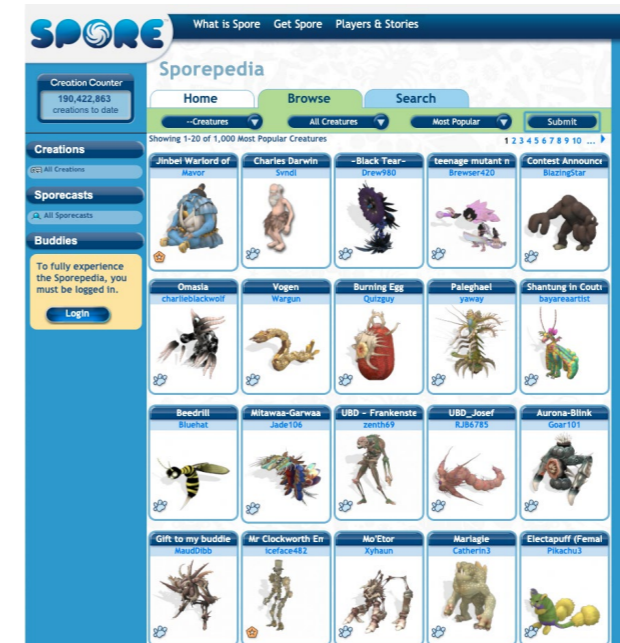
Wright was aware that a lot of the users' creations may not live up to the expectation of players. As a way of curating the vast amount of creations, the most popular are ranked through a voting system. The best ranked creations end up in everyone's games. To advertise the game, the creature creator was released for free before the launch of the game, allowing *Spore* to have 3 million creatures by launch<sup>1</sup> (190 million creations as of 27th April 2019). With later updates, players were able to create and share missions, stories and dialogues. This essentially lets them create games within the game.

<sup>1</sup>D. Takahashi, EA's *Spore* game creature uploads strong, but game sales now on the decline, 2009, <https://venturebeat.com/2009/05/04/spores-creature-count-hits-100-million-what-does-it-portend/>, (accessed 27th april 2019)

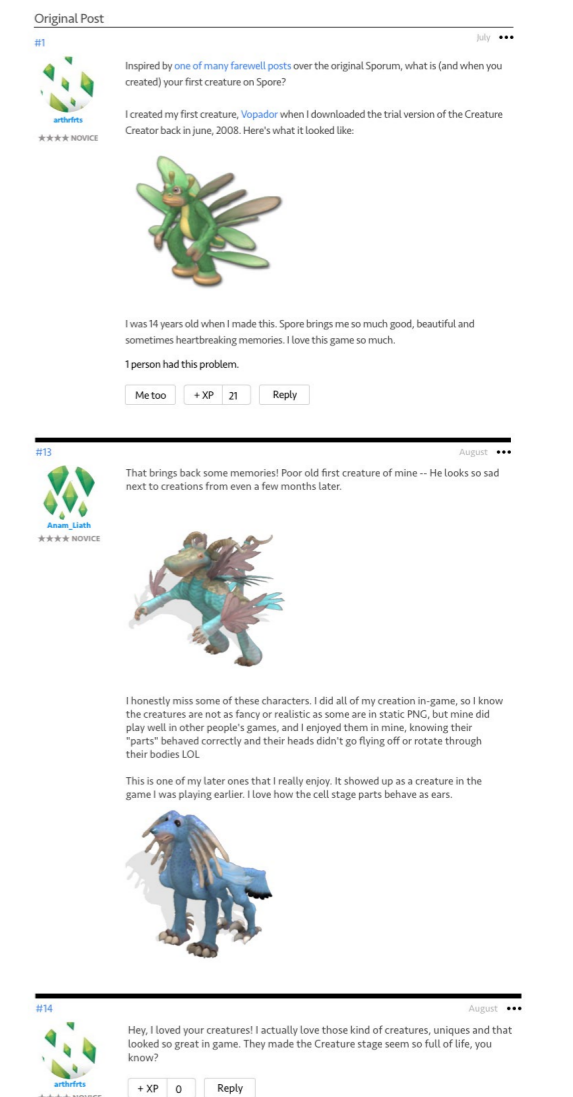
<sup>2</sup>Gamespot, *Spore* spawns 1 million sales, [Website], 2008, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/spore-spawns-1-million-sales/1100-6198159/>, (accessed 27th april 2019)



15. *Spore*, 2008



16. The Sporepedia (accessed 27 April 2019)



17. *Spore* forum thread, 10 years later: Your first creature, 2018 (accessed 27 April 2019)

## -Conclusion

We can conclude that leaving a creative role to players is not an infallible way to get them more engaged, but in the case of the games we have discussed, it has helped in building communities that have surpassed the expected lifespan of a videogame. In the case of the Sims, the involvement of players has taken forms beyond those initially planned. It can be argued that the participation of community helps prolong the attraction of a game. In the second chapter, we'll discuss other forms of participation which let players appropriate and gain a form of ownership of the game, and some of the motivations behind players spending time creating content and taking part in gaming communities.

## 2/ Why are games participatory? Ownership/appropriation of fictional and digital worlds

I will now explore whether players feel an ownership of the world of the game they participate in. By ownership, I refer to players feeling like the game belongs to them (having a sense of control over it) as well as feeling like they belong to it (they fit within the game, occupy it).

Appropriation is “the act of setting apart or taking for one’s own use”<sup>1</sup>. I’m interested in the term “one’s own use”. What makes a game relevant to one’s uses? Is it necessary to re-appropriate a game, to modify it to better suit one’s needs, in order to feel ownership?

I will first explore why games encourage participative behaviours. I’ll then offer a definition of the term “world”, inspired by Hannah Arendt’s terminology, and draw parallels with the fictional worlds that make up games. I will argue digital worlds can have an “aura”<sup>2</sup>, although in a different way to physical places. I’ll then give the example of modding (modifying a game), an appropriative practice in which players adapt games to their uses. Finally, to show the place of individuals in game worlds, I will discuss the creation of people’s identity and the place of individuals within digital worlds.



<sup>1</sup>Collins English Dictionary, *Appropriation*, [website], <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/appropriation>, (accessed 26 April 2019)

<sup>2</sup>*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*



## -Why games?

Why do games incite participative behaviour? In the previous chapter, we saw several examples in which the designers made a conscious decision to encourage players to shape their experience of the game. I will now explore why, and I'll argue that games are inherently a suitable medium for participation. This is an important point to introduce at this stage of the thesis, as it helps understand some of the unique characteristics of games, and later to understand the implications in the context of appropriation of worlds.

First we'll go back to Will Wright, and his reasons behind implicating players more creatively in the gaming experience:

**What we're trying to give the user is a substrate that they can build really neat things with, and then they have an ownership. They build this thing and it is their city or their ant colony or whatever and they empathise with it. Because they built it, because they created every little road in that city they care about what happens to it. And this is a very different dynamic than if you pop them into a world and say "blast aliens". (...) When they actually design something and it is something that they envisioned (...) the implementation of their dream city. That empathy with it engages them much more effectively.<sup>1</sup>**

**I think Play is very much based on agency: the fact that I'm touching, I'm making a decision, I'm driving, I have the steering wheel. (...) games have an emotional palette that I think for the most part is inaccessible to storytellers. I felt things playing games, I felt pride, I felt guilt, I felt accomplishment.<sup>2</sup>**

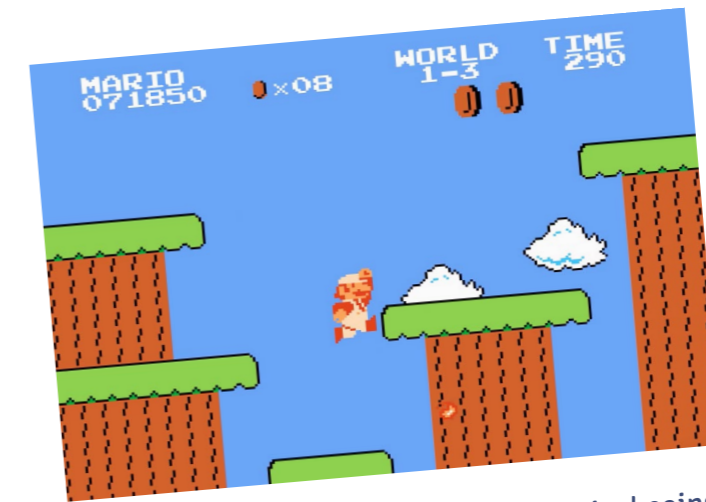
Here, we come back to the interactive quality of games. There are several points which Wright stresses : first, the fact that players go through the experience of creating something themselves gives them greater empathy and understanding of it. Then, going through an experience while driving the decision-making begets engagement and emotion: games create involvement.

<sup>1</sup>EA, *Sim City 2000 Will Wright Interview*, [Youtube video], date unknown, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcgV4YolDkg&ab\\_channel=10tfee](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcgV4YolDkg&ab_channel=10tfee), (accessed 18th april 2019)

<sup>2</sup>BAFTA Guru, *The Sims Creator Will Wright | A Life in Pixels*, [Youtube video], 7th April 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YLJLwfhe78&ab\\_channel=BAFTAGuru](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YLJLwfhe78&ab_channel=BAFTAGuru) (accessed 18th april 2019)

<sup>3</sup>G. Costikyan, *I Have No Words & I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games*, in *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, Tampere University Press, Tampere, 2002

<sup>4</sup>B. Solinski, *Ludologie : jeu, discours, complexité*, Université de Lorraine, 2015, p124



18. Why would someone care about pixel coins?  
Super Mario bros, 1985

**[A game is] an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires players to struggle toward a goal.<sup>3</sup>**

Greg Costikyan, a contemporary American game designer, explains that the endogenous meaning is the value derived from within the game. When we play, we care about things that have no relevance to the world outside of the game, and the "interactive structure" gives it meaning. The player is active within the game, and works toward a challenge. That's why people get invested in virtual coins, in the fate of a fictional world, or in a wooden chess piece.

The fact that value comes from within the game also suggests a separation from the outside world. Games are "not for real". For Boris Solinski, contemporary doctor in communication studies, they have no consequences, and therefore, they can get people to adopt a new set of values and behaviours.<sup>3</sup> People can get invested in the illusion while still realising that they are just playing. This, according to Solinski, allows players to project their dreams into the game, while they are freed from the constraints of the "real world". This asks the question of the place of the individual and its identity within the world of the game, which we'll come back to in this chapter. Solinski also points out that "creativity is the appropriation of constraint". "Constraints" are the rules that the player accepts, and give meaning to the act of playing. Discovering and taking advantage of these new constraints allows players to become creative.

Although its arguable that there are no consequences to actions within a game, (actions which have negative consequences on other people's lives, such as harrassement or scamming, are usually banned and can have real legal implications) there is a threshold of actions that can be performed. Death, for example, is often played with or even an integral part of many games. Games can encourage people to play against their friends and lie to eachother.

This makes games the perfect “playground” for experimentation. Gilles Brougère, a contemporary French scholar in educology, discusses the relationship between playing and learning. According to Brougère, going through an experience is a better way to learn than to be explained it. When playing there’s no right or wrong answer. Playing allows the discovery of the world and others. Kurt Squire, a contemporary American doctor in game-based learning, explored the ways games can be used for learning environment, but also inspire more engaging teaching methods.<sup>2</sup>

To conclude, games provoke ownership and empathy because players have agency over what happens. They create emotions by actively involving players in an illusion, a world with values of its own, with no consequences to the outside world. They encourage creativity and allow players to project their dreams onto the game world. Finally they provide a space for experimentation and learning because they actively engage the player in their experience.

## -Creation of worlds

In the previous subchapter, we’ve mentioned the notion of the game as a world that players enter. But what is a world?

**(...) the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.**<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>K. Squire, *Changing the Game: What Happens When Video Games Enter the Classroom?*, (published online), Innovate, 2005

<sup>2</sup>K. Squire, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*, 2011

<sup>3</sup>H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1998 (originally published 1958), p52

<sup>4</sup>H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1998 (originally published 1958), p55

<sup>5</sup>M. Foucault, *Les Hétérotopies*, France Culture, 1966 (author’s translation)

If we condense the attributes of the human world to Hannah Arendt, we can arrive with the following takeaways : a common, man-made place, constituted of human artifacts, that defines the relationships between those who inhabit it. Games as systems, fall in Arendt’s definition of a world. While Arendt talks about a singular common world, there is a multitude of game worlds, some more permanent and world-like than others.

There is one key difference between “game worlds” and the concept of a world according to Arendt: permanence. Indeed one of the characteristics of a world is that it outlives and endures beyond our daily lives.

**The common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die.**<sup>4</sup>

Chess, backgammon, and the game of Ur certainly have outlasted many generations. However, a game world may not always transcend “the life-span of mortal men”, but it transcends individuals’ experience of it: I may “log-off” or put the game away, but the world keeps existing as long as others are playing. I could put it this way: The game world is what we enter when we start playing and what we leave behind when stop.

In a way, games are worlds within the human world, and they could be linked to Michel Foucault’s definition of “Heterotopias” (from the greek heteros: other and τόπος: place):

**The heterotopia (...) juxtaposes, in a real place, several spaces which should normally be incompatible. Theatre (...), on the rectangle of the scene, creates a succession of a series of foreign places. The cinema is a great rectangular scene, at the bottom of which, on a two dimensional space, is projected a space which is three dimensional again.**<sup>5</sup>

The game projects the player, from the place he plays in (in front of a screen, a board or cards, at home, during commute or in a public space ...) into the game world. The key difference with theatre and cinema is that the player gets to interact in and with this new space.

Foucault’s heterotopia is a place with a different sense of time and behaviour. Those are different to the norm and unique to that “other place”. There’s a different sense of time in games; things that are common parts of our daily routines, like commute or eating, are avoided or shortened unless they are fun or add to its experience.

Finally, like Foucault mentions, heterotopias have “systems of opening and closing to isolate them from the surrounding space”. How do we enter those worlds? There is often a form of physical interface (again, the screen, board, cards or dice ...) but most importantly there are



modalities of play: the rules.

Minecraft is an example of a game where worlds are created by the players themselves. It was initially created in 2009<sup>1</sup>, and published in 2011, with incremental updates being published to this day. It can be played alone but its main draw is the community aspect. There are user-generated downloadable maps, which are landscapes. They can be original creations, or based on existing places (fictional or real). People can choose to experience other's creations. Multiplayer maps are also landscapes, but they can host several players, from a small group of friends to thousands. People can set up shops and communal buildings to help the community. They can trade, or even define in-game currency systems. They collaborate to build structures which will be used by others. One can see the parallels with Arendt's world: worlds in *Minecraft* are common places, constituted of man-made artefacts, which are built to last longer than a single player's experience. These game worlds define the relationship between their inhabitants.

As a conclusion, and the most relevant aspect of Arendt's philosophy to this thesis, is the implication of the responsibility of man to assure the world's longevity, to renew and transform it with each generation. In other words, to participate. If a game's system is amputated of a key element: the player(s), then there is no participation in a game; it stops being a world and becomes a cultural artifact, like the game of Ur in the British Museum.

## - Games' Aura

Because those worlds are heterotopias, in the sense of worlds within worlds, they do not have a single point in space where they can be accessed. There is no "original", instead, there are many reproductions of that world (digital in the case of the videogame).

In that sense, to understand how it impacts the experience, it's interesting to introduce the point of view of Walter Benjamin, who analysed how the reproducibility of the work of art impacted the way it was being experienced. For this purpose, I will consider games as creative production, although like cinema in Benjamin's analysis, many games are also commodities.

Aura can be resumed to the authenticity which is lost when reproduced: "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of distance as described by Benjamin is greatly reduced with games. They are accessible from the home, in the arcade, wherever their interface may be (anywhere in the case of mobile games).

As Benjamin puts it when discussing cinema and photography, "the work of art

<sup>1</sup>G. Smith, *The First Moments of Minecraft*, PC gamer, 2012, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-first-moments-of-minecraft/>, (accessed 29th april 2019)

<sup>2</sup>*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*



19. "Imperial City" by Minecraft user Rigolo, 2012



20. A multiplayer map, screenshot from Let's Play video, 2018



"I think I want to plant more potatoes, and less carrots"



"Open for business yet?"



reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility”<sup>1</sup>. Commercially produced games certainly are designed for reproducibility, and so is the user-generated content mentioned throughout this thesis.

The American artist Douglas Davis, mentioned in the first chapter for his mid 90’s collaborative Internet artwork, argues instead that in “the age of digital reproduction”, the aura comes from that exact reproduction, the multiplicity of experience:

**Here is where the aura resides - not in the thing itself but in the originality of the moment when we see, hear, read, repeat, revise.<sup>2</sup>**

Digital reproduction allows modification, editing. That’s its aura and value. There is no “authentic” original, instead an infinity of different variation and possibilities, each of them unique in the way they are experienced. This will be important, as we’ll see, because a lot of the following examples we’ll discuss will rely upon this digital aura, the infinity of different variation and possibilities. These variations allow people to appropriate themselves the work in their unique experience.

As Davis mentions, this shift has not eliminated our attraction to the authentic. There is a niche market for “original copies” of “vintage” games, which I explored in my research on the video game industry.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, new consoles which read those old titles (often cartridges) are being released, with claims of offering an authentic experience.

Perhaps more surprisingly, digital reproduction also allows the author(s) to edit and redefine their own work to propose a new version of that “original”:

**By finding the means to transfer my early video works from analog to digital media, I can contemplate revisions on my computer that will allow me to change my mind, two decades later, about points where I erred long ago. This allows me to produce a “post-original original”.<sup>4</sup>**

Like Davis reconsidering his earlier work, video game companies offer remastered versions of old titles. Those are essentially “post-original originals”, with updated graphics and compatibility, a new way to experience an old classic. The aforementioned Minecraft creations also go through several iterations, each of them edited by multiple players.

<sup>1</sup>The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, p6

<sup>2</sup>The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995), p386

<sup>3</sup>G. Welisch, *Ordinary Games for Ordinary People*, published online, 2017, <http://coid.aalto.fi/ordinary-games-for-ordinary-people/>, (accessed 18 April 2019)

<sup>4</sup>D. Davis, *The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995)*, Cambridge, The MIT press, 1995, p383

<sup>5</sup>BBC, *Remote St Kilda islands recreated in Minecraft*, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-39627872> (accessed 29 April 2019)

If we consider the game world as a world within a world, then the medium through which it is accessed matters less than the individual and collective experience that happens within. Each of those “reproductions” is a unique and original experience. That is where the game’s aura resides.



21. World of Worlds Minecraft map by Zeemo, Ryugyong Hotel, Pyongyang, North Korea (left) and Helsingin päärautatieasema, Helsinki, Finland (right), 2017



22. The deserted Hirta Island, on the archipelago of St Kilda

23. Minecraft re-creation by studio ImmersiveMinds, 2017

A literal form of digital reproduction in games is the recreation of physical spaces. For example, the remote islands of St Kilda, one of Scotland’s six World Heritage Sites, were recreated by the digital company ImmersiveMinds in collaboration with archeologists in 2017<sup>5</sup>. This was commissioned by Dig It! a non-profit which showcases Scottish archaeology, and the map is available for public download.

This re-creation allows the access of the player to this otherwise non-accessible area, but also to its history, through experiencing key events and interacting with villagers. It’s a



reduction of distance in time and space, as discussed by Benjamin. However, something is added in the process: another understanding of the place, another way of experiencing it. The Minecraft experience of St Kilda can not be the same as that of 1930's islanders, but to interact with the islands in a game format allows a discovery at the player's own pace and perspective.

## -Modding

Modding is creation of new content directly for the game by players, in a desire to have something that the game does not yet offer. Parallels can be done with "Urban hacking", a type of reappropriation of Urban spaces in which citizens will adapt the city to better fit their needs, beyond its original intended uses. It is also "user generated content" which goes beyond what was designed and built. Some of those practices are driven by functional goals (illustration 24), while others are more militant in nature (illustration 25). In the third chapter of this thesis, I will go deeper into the parallels between participation in city life ; how the role of the player can mirror that of the citizen, and vice-versa.

There are financial incentives for the developers of the game as well, as modding prolongs the life and appeal of a game. This can explain why developers choose to embrace the modding scene. Bethesda Softworks for example, the game developing studio behind the *Elder Scrolls* (1994-2017) and *Fallout* (1997-2018) series, releases internal content-creation tools to encourage modding. This practice started in 2000 with the release of the *Elder Scrolls III, Morrowind*, which was shipped with *The Elder Scrolls Construction Set*, an editor tool.<sup>2</sup>

**Towns, landscape, weapons, lights, dialogue, quests, races, classes, non-player characters, skills, animation, menus, sound, and so on. Everything. All of this data can be changed, added, deleted, whatever. (...) I think it really extends the life of the game (...) The reason is twofold really. First is to tweak the gameplay experience. You can change formulas for movement, combat, magic, levels, and all of that. So it's actually a cool way to tweak the game (...) Second, people can create their own add-ons for the game. I think most of these will take the form of a quest or story, and many times it will be with new game environments to play in.**

**Todd Howard**

<sup>1</sup>Gamespot, interview with game designer Todd Howard, 2000, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/morrowind-editor-qanda/1100-2585018/>, (accessed 30 April 2019)

<sup>2</sup>Bethesda, *Fallout 4 mods*, <https://bethesda.net/en/mods/fallout4/>, (accessed 30 April 2019)

<sup>3</sup>J. Donnelly, *Creation club backlash*, PC Gamer, 2017, <https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/i-know-people-are-upset-but-mods-are-and-will-continue-to-remain-free-says-bethesda-on-creation-club-backlash/>, (accessed 30 April 2019)



24. Liverpool fans use roadworks barriers to get a glimpse of the Liverpool team training session, 2005



25. "Charging bull" statue in Wall Street yarnbombed by artist Olek, 2011

User created mods for *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (2011) are even featured on Bethesda's website, as they provide a moderated community platform for them.<sup>2</sup> Although mods have been free for a long time, there have been recent attempts to monetize them to provide revenue for the creators of the mods as well as the publishers. This would reward modders for their participation in the world of the game, but it has proved to be controversial, sparking debate and negative online reviews of Bethesda's games.<sup>3</sup>



26. *Fallout 4*, 2015



27. ANDREWXCX, "SimpleGreen" mod for *Fallout 4*, "designed to reflect spring with shorter vibrant green grass, green ground plants & flowers, and bright green trees.", 2016



28. Kazfoxsen, "Gunfetti" mod for *Fallout 4*, replacing bullet holes by colourful stars, 2016



It is interesting to dive into why players get into modding, as it requires digital literacy and long hours of creative labor. Modding allows players to redefine their experience, appropriate the game and feel a sense of ownership of its world. There are however several motivations behind the act of modding, as explored by the American media scholar Hector Postigo in his 2010 paper:

**Modding is a way of entering a deeper world in gaming, (...) where they get to decide how a game looks, what its narratives will be and how it will represent the world. Modding is empowering.<sup>1</sup>**

But Postigo also lists other motivations, such as “developing the skills and portfolio needed to get a job in the video game industry”. Although such examples are rare, the modding team behind Counter-Strike, a 2000 mod of Half-Life (1998), were hired by Valve<sup>2</sup> (the developer behind Half-Life), and their intellectual property was purchased. The game was later turned into a franchise, with several installments. Finally Postigo mentions the love of craft. Modders can use the game as a creative tool, a canvas, which can motivate them beyond the interest in its original content.

As a case study for this thesis, and to get an idea of how games can serve as a medium for social interaction outside of Internet, I interviewed the owners of West End Games<sup>3</sup>, Ross Brian and Kevin Pass. West End Games is a physical store in Glasgow, which sells games, serves coffee and food, and organises regular gaming events.

In the interview, the subject of modding came up, as I asked whether Kevin and Ross would like more input into the creation of games. Kevin mentioned that often players took matters into their own hands, implementing the changes themselves. It can even be argued that “pen and paper” games are easier to change, as it doesn’t require the digital literacy that modding does. Such changes are commonly called “house rules”:

**At that point, I don’t think people are too precious. Like with Monopoly for example, people have their own house rules (...), people change things to suit the way they want to play. That kinda happens with a lot of games, people say “I love this game, but this bit is crap”. They’ll just house rule it, change it. The rules aren’t gospel.**

**Kevin Pass**

<sup>1</sup>H. Postigo, *Modding to the big leagues: Exploring the space between modders and the game industry*, published online, 2010

<sup>2</sup>J. McLean-Foreman, *Interview with Minh Le*, 2001, [https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131481/interview\\_with\\_minh\\_le.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131481/interview_with_minh_le.php), (accessed 30 April 2019)

<sup>3</sup>Kevin Pass and Ross Brain, interviewed by the author, 2019

<sup>4</sup>B. Solinski, *Ludologie : jeu, discours, complexité*, Université de Lorraine, 2015

Ross then mentioned such changes were sometimes shared online, and when they proved popular enough, would be published as third-party material for the games. “House rule” changes can be made to make the game more fun to the players, but it can also serve to introduce new elements that don’t exist within the game, or to make a new game based on the mechanics of an existing game.

So we can conclude that modifying games allows players to re-appropriate themselves a title they are invested in and make the changes they want to see, but also gives them a creative tool or a canvas to build on.

## -Identity creation

A characteristic of games is that they allow players to play their identity<sup>4</sup>. By identity I mean the sense and presentation of self. Be it in a roleplaying game, where incarnating a new role is the key of the experience, or in a strategy game, where new values can be experimented with.

During my interview with the West End Games founders, we discussed identity in games and the place of the individual within the game world. One of the aspects that was mentioned was how people who might not otherwise feel represented in an existing fictional world can create their own representation by placing themselves inside of that world and creating new narratives:

**[discussing role-playing games] Some people want the appropriation, for example, Star Wars was always slated for having really poor female cast, and until recently, having very few racial diversity. So it [has] allowed that sort of thing for people of non-white descent, to be “you know what, I want to play a badass character in a star wars universe that I can identify with. (...)” (...) Or there are people who go : “I want to take a franchise that I’m happy with and I want to insert someone that I can associate with. I want to see a homosexual jedi.” So I think it does allow people to bring their fanfictions [fan creation based on existing original work] out of their heads and put it into a safe space and play around with someone they could associate with, in a franchise they’re invested in. Where maybe they don’t feel like they are being represented.**

**Kevin Pass**

This is another form of appropriation than that mentioned in the previous subchapter. In this instance, it is not the world in itself which players adapt, but its inclusion of themselves as individuals. The game allows them to express their identity.

Internet has brought new possibilities to that aspect. It not only makes it possible for people to play with strangers, but it also offers a barrier of protection and anonymity. Avatars typically offer more choice over how players can represent themselves than they'd have in real life, and they can choose not to disclose their "real life" identity. This idea is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the 2003 MMORPG (massively multiplayer online game) Second life, by Linden Labs. It's concept is a virtual world in which players can have a virtual "second life", with highly customisable avatars. There is even an in-game economy of virtual goods created by users. The virtual currency (Linden dollar, L\$) can be bought with and exchanged for "real world money". At the time of writing this essay the servers are still working and there were more than 600,000 active users as of 2017.<sup>1</sup> The British Information Science researchers Liam Bullingham and Ana C. Vasconcelos, in their 2013 study of online identities in blogging and Second Life, found that while most respondents chose to re-create their offline self online, some aspects of the self were edited to either "fit-in" with the online community, or to explore the benefits of anonymity:

**(...) various expressions were 'given' by respondents that emphasize certain aspects of the self (such as being particularly feminine, creative, fun, professional, proficient, candid or belonging to a particular group) and minimize others. (...) certain qualities could be suppressed while these qualities were emphasized, thus offering opportunities for editing the self. These accounts suggested different gradations in edits of the self and perhaps a thin boundary between persona adoption and more emphasized editing of certain aspects of self. Embellishment of self can be viewed as a subtle and limited form of persona adoption (...)**

Sometimes however, they note, the avatar can be a freeing way of expression:

**(...) the 'true self' being the persona in SL [Second Life] when the user's offline self is subject to family or social pressure.**

<sup>1</sup>C. Lee, *Who still hangs out on Second Life? More than half a million people*, 2017 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/who-still-hangs-out-on-second-life-more-than-half-a-million-people/article35019213/>, (accessed 30 April 2019)

<sup>2</sup>L. Bullingham and A. C. Vasconcelos, 'the presentation of self in the online world': Goffman and the study of online identities, *Journal of Information Science*, Sheffield, 2013, p110



*"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."*

29. Peter Steiner, published in July 5th, 1993, New Yorker cartoons



30. Avatar creation in Second Life



31. A party in Second Life



During my interview with the West End Games founders, I could also understand that the sense of community that was built around playing games made it a safe space in which expression of identity was more easily experimented with:

[People] can be themselves here. We have a guy who comes, and he wears his Viking helmet the whole time he's here. (...) when he comes and plays his card games, he'll come and he'll shout at people and we'll have a laugh with it. We have (...) trans people (...) and they'll come in with their shirt and tie, coming from work, where they maybe feel it's not acceptable to dress in a trans way. And they'll come here, change into a dress, and they'll sit here and play their games in a way that they feel comfortable presenting (...)¹

Kevin Pass

Although because it was a physical space there was not the same sense of anonymity, it can be argued that the possibility of entering new worlds makes it more comfortable to project another self.

## -Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored why games are participatory. I have defined what constitutes game worlds, how they are experienced, and how players participate in them by modifying them and creating within them. I've touched upon the notions of appropriation and ownership, arguing that with participation, players become a part of the game world. Finally, I've explored the place of the individual in looking at the opportunities that games can provide in terms of defining one's identity.

We can conclude that the sense of agency and the creative opportunities present in participatory games foster engaged communities of players. This engagement often surpasses the intents of the game designers. In the next chapter, we'll look at parallels between game worlds and the city in order to gain insights into how to design for civic engagement.

¹Kevin Pass and Ross Brain, interviewed by the author, 2019



32. West End Games



33. A game night, photo from West End Games' facebook page

### 3/ Citizen participation in city life - Towards a sense of the “civic” in games?

I will now draw parallels between cities and digital worlds, citizens and players. I will theorise that games, because they get us to adopt a new set of values and behaviours, are a great medium for creating communities. People get together to adapt and change them according to their needs and their vision. A sense of civic responsibility emerges and people take ownership of a game. By civic I mean the “duties or feelings that people have because of belonging to a particular community”.<sup>1</sup>

I will also borrow from Marc Augé, the contemporary french anthropologist, and his analysis of the “spaces of supermodernity”<sup>2</sup> to show there are “Places” as well as “Non-Places” within virtual worlds. I will argue that for games to be Places, Participation is required from players.

I will then show forms of engagement in games and virtual worlds which mirror those of “real-life”. To reflect on its cost, I will discuss clashing perspectives on the phenomenon of participation. Finally, I will look at designer’s role in the city by discussing collaborative creation and urban space, as well the gamification of cities.



<sup>1</sup>Collins dictionary, *Civic*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/civic>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>2</sup>M. Augé, *Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, La Librairie du XXe siècle, Seuil, 1992



## - Games are "places"

In order to introduce the link between cities and game worlds, I would like to discuss the concept of "places", as described by Marc Augé. I will argue that, in some contexts, participatory games can be considered as such:

**These places have at least three characteristics in common. They want to be - people want them to be - places of identity, of relations and of history. (...)**

**At regular weekly intervals, on Sunday or Market Day, the centre 'comes to life'. (...) [they are] 'places for living' where individual itineraries can intersect and mingle, where a few words are exchanged and solitudes momentarily forgotten (...)**

**We include in the notion of anthropological place the possibility of the journeys made in it, the discourses uttered in it, and the language characterizing it. (...) the words, too, of all who speak the same language, and thus recognize that they belong to the same world. Place is completed through the word, through the allusive exchange of a few passwords between speakers who are conniving in private complicity. (...) 'Anthropological place' is formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how; (...)**<sup>1</sup>

We can summarize Augé's concept in the following: "places" are defined by the identity of individuals through their relation to each other, their shared language, rules and references. In contrast, "non-places" such as airports, define the identity of those who go through them. They are neither "relational, historical, or concerned with identity". They refer to everyone as a standard person. They are impersonal and normed. In other words, they leave no room for participation.

At a first glance, games are closer to non-places, as described by Augé, because they are commercial products, normed, impersonal and globalised. They are mass replicated and identical. They are a product of what Augé calls "Supermodernity". Certainly online communities, including those formed in games, have contributed to a further "shrinking of the planet", as they allow players from around the world to play together. But while playing,

<sup>1</sup>M. Augé, *Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, La Librairie du XXe siècle, Seuil, 1992, p69-p127

<sup>2</sup>Matthew Bunson, *A Dictionary of the Roman Empire*, Oxford University Press, 1995

<sup>3</sup>Reddit, *The combined Horde fought off several Alliance raids to have a wedding in Stormwind Cathedral*, 2016, [https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/4iksla/rp\\_the\\_combined\\_horde\\_fought\\_off\\_several\\_alliance/](https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/4iksla/rp_the_combined_horde_fought_off_several_alliance/), (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>4</sup>L. Johnson, 'World of Warcraft' Turned Its Auction Houses into Discos for a Day, 2017, [https://motherboard.vice.com/en\\_us/article/evd9a4/world-of-warcraft-turned-its-auction-houses-into-discos-for-a-day](https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/evd9a4/world-of-warcraft-turned-its-auction-houses-into-discos-for-a-day), (accessed 2nd May 2019)



34. World of Warcraft's Stormwind, 2017



35. World of Warcraft's Stormwind, 2010



36. Wedding in Stormwind's cathedral, 2016



37. Auction house dance party, 2017

people become inhabitants of the game worlds, smaller communities are built. One key difference with non-places is that games do not have to meet the expectations of efficacy and productivity that "Supermodernity" requires. As we have established in the second chapter, games are futile, played for their own sake.

Is it by chance that online meeting places happen to replicate those described by Augé? Online forums (message boards) reference the Roman forums, open public spaces of exchange where Romans met to discuss public matters and conduct business.<sup>2</sup> These were at the center of Roman cities, highlighting their importance in the life of the city. Town centers in cities are often the place of choice for players in MMORPG's to meet, discuss, exchange and plan. An example is the town of Stormwind in World of Warcraft (Wow), a MMORPG, initially released in 2004. Wow is a fantasy game, based on traditional roleplaying games, but some mechanics have been added to facilitate social activities, like the ability to dance, shout or whisper (in chat form), hold weddings, or simply sit down. Like Augé's "Market Day" in rural France, communities in games set up events which bring certain areas of the game to life. Weddings for example, can be small, but sometimes guilds (association of players) organise large events (see illustration 36), like this wedding of an enemy faction in Stormwind's cathedral, which required intense planning.

Blizzard, the developer behind Wow, tries to facilitate those dynamics by creating "micro-holidays" in which areas in the game are temporarily transformed to create new dynamics and gather players. One such micro-holiday is the "Auction house dance party"<sup>3</sup>, in which the auction



house, normally reserved for trading objects for virtual currency, was turned into a dance hall.

As discussed in the previous chapter, games have a form of anonymity that could be linked to non-places. People play through an avatar that, depending on the game, can be impersonal or project another identity. It is only after the contact that an identity can be assigned to another player. But it can be seen in another way: having new rules and the barrier of the screen is a form of protection, like the one that visibility provides in public places.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of places is the shared references and history. An example in the context of World of Warcraft, could be the viral video<sup>2</sup> depicting a guild about to enter a dungeon, strategising. A player that was “AFK” (away from keyboard), suddenly rejoins the party, shouts “allright, let’s do this! Leeroy Jennkins!” and runs in, ruining the strategy. Although it was later revealed that the video was staged by the players, its viral nature gave World of Warcraft a large visibility in popular culture. It has become a part of the history of the game, and Blizzard has made a character and a quest based on the video. This, to me, along other insider references, can be seen as a form of “claimed historical depth” as mentioned by Augé. It could be argued, however, that this history is manufactured, a form of commercial instrumentalisation by the game developer.

Games also provide a topic for people to talk about. So like Augé’s places, they offer a common ground and they have a language that strangers can share, (like the aforementioned Game Ur):

**Something that I never anticipated when I opened this place is that we get used so much for first dates, tinder meet-ups. (...) We offer the extra edge of giving you something to do. They’ll be coming in and they’ll play Scrabble, or Jenga. It’s a talking point. It’s not just sitting there staring at somebody and talking together, it gives you an activity to do together. It’s a built-in icebreaker.**

**Kevin Pass**

**Gaming is always a very welcoming community. You can just turn up; there will always be someone who can teach you the rules. Magic is a fantastic thing that you can take a Magic the Gathering deck to any store in the world, turn up, sit down, play a tournament and make new friends.**

**Ross Brain**

<sup>1</sup>C. A. Steinkuehler and D. Williams, *Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as “Third Places”*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2006

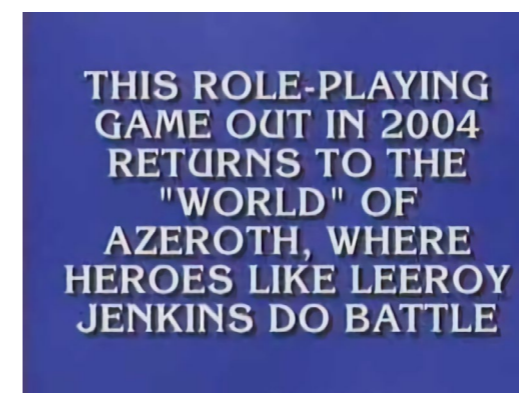
<sup>2</sup>Wikipedia, *Leeroy Jenkins*, [https://wow.gamepedia.com/Leeroy\\_Jenkins\\_\(video\)](https://wow.gamepedia.com/Leeroy_Jenkins_(video)), (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>3</sup>Kevin Pass and Ross Brain, interviewed by the author, 2019



Leeroy Jenkins  
47,330,979 views

38. Initial video published on WarcraftMovies.com on May 11, 2005, reuploaded in August 2006 on Youtube



39. Reference in Jeopardy! , November 16, 2005



40. Leeroy Jenkins as an in-game character

Although these games are harder to think of as places (especially with the example of Scrabble and Jenga, which have no existing narrative), they are entirely defined by the identity of those who play them. New layers of stories are built on the game by its players.

To conclude, like in Augé’s places, it is the possibility of appropriation and the sense of community that brings a sense of “place” in games. To the impersonal language of the developers adds itself the more niche and targeted language of the players that participate.



## -Re-creating forms of engagement?

If we look at games as places, we can also look at examples where engagement mirrors forms that happen in the “real world”. Virtual reality churches, for example, show how new forms of interaction and media can regroup around existing culture. VR Church is an American church which happens on the virtual reality platform AltspaceVR.

**Feel free to dance! Last week I saw some people doing some really cool moves. Get your emoji on (...) on that side we've got some hearts and some clapping. For you guys nothing but love for everyone. So let me have a word of Prayer, a blessing for everyone in here and then, after I pray, feel free to unmute your mics and let's hang out and chat and then meet some new people. (...)**

**Sometimes there will be tech glitches, and I just hear him say the most random things that you would never hear anyone say in an actual Church (...) like “hey Mike what happened to your arms? your arms disappeared” or (...) “you're stuck in the grass again” (...)**

**I think that people are more authentic because they have their avatar. There's a sense of anonymity with that, and I think that's because of the nature of the platform that people can feel comfortable speaking about anything.<sup>1</sup>**

With this new way of interaction comes new norms, new language and new rules. When Bishop D.J. Soto speaks to the participants of the church, one can see that body language, as well as where people are looking, is ambiguous, and leads to people interrupting each other. But this is in part replaced by the emoji, the avatar and the new possibilities of connection. People from remote and isolated areas can, for example, get support and human contact in such virtual reality communities.

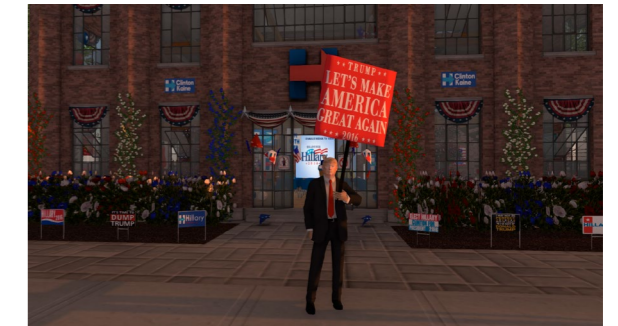
As another example, during the 2016 U.S. elections<sup>2</sup>, in Second Life, the Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Bernie Sanders all had unofficial campaign headquarters and activism in Second Life. During the 2008 elections<sup>3</sup>, there were similar efforts made by Second Life players for the Barack Obama campaign, with virtual t-shirts and hats created and distributed,

<sup>1</sup>BEME news, *Is Virtual Religion the New VR?*, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0llmB0glIt&t=147s&ab\\_channel=BEMENews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0llmB0glIt&t=147s&ab_channel=BEMENews), (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>2</sup>M. Fahey, *Here's How The Presidential Election Is Playing Out In Second Life*, Kotaku, 2016, <https://kotaku.com/heres-how-the-presidential-election-is-playing-out-in-s-1788714977>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>3</sup>S. Wheaton, *Obama Is First in Their Second Life*, The New York Times, 2007, <https://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/03/31/obama-is-first-in-their-second-life/>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

as well as specially designed campaign headquarters. Whether such online grassroots movements really impact people's opinion is not documented, but this shows how existing issues and views can be transposed in digital and game worlds.



41. U.S. election in Second Life, the unofficial Hillary Clinton headquarters, 2016



42. VR church in AltspaceVR, 2018



43. The Robloxian Christians, Church in Roblox, a 2005 game creation platform



## -Participation at all costs?

Although I have mostly highlighted positive types of participation, it is worth noting that not all is well and unambiguous, at least when seen from the perspective of the system (game or city). Trolling, harassment and predatory behaviour are present in online gaming communities, partly due to the same qualities that make them incitative of more positive behaviours. Giving more visibility and freedom to participation risks highlighting those behaviours too.

This is not unlike public spaces, where civic values can drive participative engagement, but other, more nefarious purposes are also manifesting themselves. I will not go into the ethics of such acts and define the line between what is civic and what is not, but it is important to consider a few examples in order to see the possible consequences of participatory behaviours. Sometimes there can be a gray area. Practices can have different connotations depending on one's perspective.

Graffiti, for example, is seen as a way of re-appropriating public space by those who practice it, yet it is seen as vandalism and it is outlawed by authorities. From the perspective of the city, it has a negative visual impact and is costly to remove. A 2006 court case<sup>1</sup> against a law that banned those under 21 from possessing "Graffiti Instruments" (spray paint or broad-tipped markers) is a good example of how these different perspectives can clash.

**Through April 2006 the City has received over 13,000 requests to clean graffiti. In the United States it costs approximately \$15 to \$18bn annually to remove it. (...) Graffiti is a quality of life crime that plagues every major city in the world. It's time that we stand up to these spray-painting punks and take our cities back.**

**New York City councillor Peter Vallone**

**Nowadays, urban public spaces are reserved for those who have enough money. Advertising dominates the urban landscape, and we are constantly bombarded with slogans from multinationals everywhere we go. Architecture and the streets are shaped by commercial interests, not by the residents of the city. It is impossible to avoid, the public have no access to these spaces, that is, unless we claim them for our own. Graffiti and street art are the only ways that people can interact with public spaces actively.**

**Felix, member of reclaimyourcity.net**

<sup>1</sup>BBC, *Graffiti: Free speech or vandalism?*, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4946378.stm>, (accessed 28th april 2019)

<sup>2</sup>T. J. Lueck, *Judge Rules Against New York City Ban on 'Graffiti Instruments'*, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/02/nyregion/02graffiti.html>, (accessed 28th april 2019)

<sup>3</sup>T. Noir, *The story of the Berlin Wall*, <http://www.galerie-noir.de/ArchivesEnglish/walleng.html>, (accessed 28th april 2019)



44. Bruce Davidson, *Subway, New York City, 1980's*



45. Tamás Urbán, *West Berliners spray paint messages on the Berlin Wall near Zimmerstrasse, 1988*



46. Peter Matera, *Keith Haring painting his Berlin Wall Mural, 1986*

In some cases graffiti was embraced by cities, like on the Berlin Wall, which was seen as a form of protest and an even a tourist attraction. Thierry Noir<sup>3</sup>, one of the first artists to paint the Berlin wall, testifies his account of the mid eighties on his website: "At Mariannenplatz, Potsdamerplatz, Checkpoint Charlie, and Waldemarstrasse, the paintings became an important symbol of Berlin's charm and character. The city hall of Berlin used the wall-paintings to do publicity for Berlin in the tourist booklets."

Here we can see the ambiguity of graffiti as a form of participation to urban spaces. On the one hand, it helps those who feel underrepresented and alienated by public spaces to reclaim and appropriate it. On the other hand it can lead to costs for the city for removal and it also alienates those who are not familiar with its visual language and culture. Unlike a game, which is joined willingly, the inhabitant of the city has no choice but to experience the graffiti.

The 2018/2019 Gilet Jaune protests in France are another example where participation can be a grey area. The protests have started as a reaction to an oil tax, but have evolved into a broader social movement. Although the political impacts are still to be seen, the social impacts are mixed. In Paris, they certainly have not had a positive impact on the life of city and



its image abroad. Tourism, local shops, restaurants, and businesses have all been impacted more or less severely depending on the area. As of the 3rd of december, between 3 to 4 million Euros of damages on public structures had been done in Paris alone.<sup>1</sup> Each weekend full areas of Paris and other french cities were blocked, along with roundabouts and tolls. What cost is acceptable for expression?

Some examples are a bit more clear cut, like the white nationalist rallies in Charlottesville in 2017 against the removal of a confederate statue, where crowds chanted “Jews will not replace us”. Ku Klux Klan members and neo-Nazis participated in the rally. A car ran in to a crowd of counterdemonstrators, killing a woman and injuring 34 people.<sup>2</sup> Even then, Donald Trump, the U.S. president, initially failed to condemn the white nationalists, claiming there were “very fine people on both sides”.<sup>3</sup>

On a lighter note, acts of civil disobedience and protests by Extinction Rebellion have been widely hailed despite arrests. They have pushed the dialogue regarding the climate. Following the protests, in the UK, the Scottish National Party, Labour and the Welsh Assembly have declared “climate emergency”.<sup>4</sup>

An example of a destructive use of participation in games is the 2006 “raid” of Habbo by members of the Internet message board 4Chan, including the group Anonymous. Habbo is a 2000 “virtual world”, social network and game. Habbo is a virtual hotel in which players can create and decorate rooms, roleplay, interact with each other and create mini-games<sup>5</sup>. 4Chan users organised themselves to block the pools in Habbo, saying that “Pool’s closed due to AIDS”. They created avatars with dark skins, afros and a suit, and blocked the pools (players could not go through another avatar), sometimes in swastika formation.<sup>6</sup> For several years, on July 12th, other such raids were organised in Habbo, and sometimes in real life, (illustration 55), in an event organised in front of Sulake’s (Habbo’s parent company) headquarters in Finland.<sup>7</sup> The multiple distasteful connotations of the raids do not need to be explained. Those

<sup>1</sup>Franceinfo, «Gilets jaunes» : sept chiffres qui montrent l’impact du mouvement sur l’économie française, 2018, [https://www.franceinfo.fr/economie/transports/gilets-jaunes/gilets-jaunes-six-chiffres-qui-montrent-l-impact-du-mouvement-sur-l-economie-francaise\\_3082753.html](https://www.franceinfo.fr/economie/transports/gilets-jaunes/gilets-jaunes-six-chiffres-qui-montrent-l-impact-du-mouvement-sur-l-economie-francaise_3082753.html), (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>2</sup>S. G. Stolberg and B.M. Rosenthal, *Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence*, The New York Times, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white-nationalist.html>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>3</sup>LA Times, *Transcript of President Trump’s remarks at Trump Tower on Charlottesville*, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-charlottesville-transcript-20170815-story.html>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>4</sup>D. Carrington, ‘Do it now’: UK must set zero-carbon target for 2050, say official advisers, The Guardian, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/02/do-it-now-uk-must-set-zero-carbon-target-for-2050-say-official-advisers>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

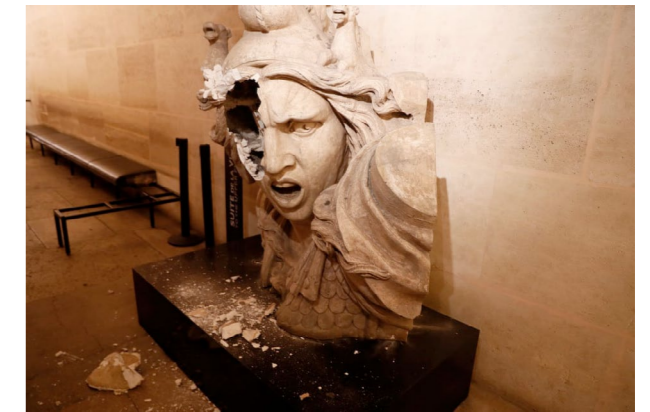
<sup>5</sup>The Guardian, *Ten years of virtual worlds: Habbo hits a decade*, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2010/jul/05/habbo-virtual-worlds>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>6</sup>R. Singel, *Palin hacker group’s all-time greatest hits*, Wired, 2008, <https://www.wired.com/2008/09/palin-hacker-gr-2/>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>7</sup>KnowYourMeme, *Pool’s Closed*, last updated 2018, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pools-closed>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)



47. Benoît Tessier, graffiti reading ‘the yellow vests will triumph’, sprayed on the Arc de Triomphe, 2018



48. Etienne Laurent, vandalised statue of the Marianne, 2018



49. Geoffroy van der Hasselt, Riot police officers in the La Belle Armée restaurant, 2018



50. AFP, Extinction rebellion protest “mass die-in” at the Gendarmenmarkt square in Berlin, 2019



51. Andrew Cabbalero-Reynold, Klu-Klux-Klan in Charlottesville, 2017



52. Samuel Corum, «unite the right» protest in Charlottesville, 2017

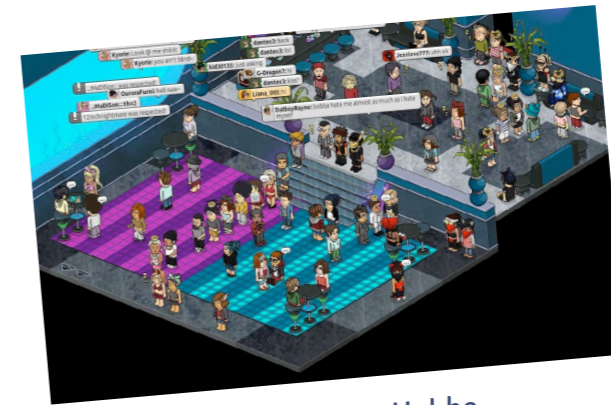


actions, however, took advantage of the place of participation in the game. They blocked the chats using profanity, came back when banned by moderators. The impact of these behaviours on the world of the game is purposefully negative, since the goal of trolling is deliberate provocation.

Kurt Squire, a contemporary American doctor in game-based learning, is currently exploring how the engaging nature of games can be harnessed to create positive impact:

**That's part of why I think games are such a key piece of what we call a participatory media, the idea that you are actually shaping the content, shaping the experience, helping shape the world. (...) We are starting to see some evidence that players after playing games like this will (...) put down the computer or look outside and say, "Well, why are things the way they are? Why is the economic system or the political system the way it is?" (...) So, what we want to do with educational games are design games that try to do that, but really build them around critical, kind of current issues, and then get kids to be motivated and have the skills to go out and start to solve these problems as a direct result of having played the game. (...) Kids in online spaces are really having the opportunity to take on adult kinds of roles and do a lot of complex sort of information management. (...) I think as educators we can leverage what games do and really foster civic engagement.**

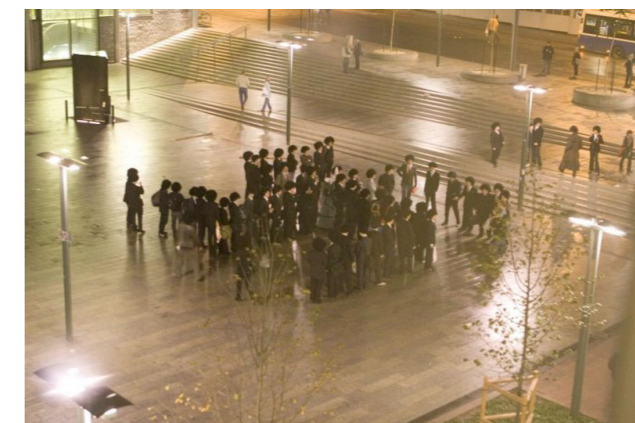
Squire has helped develop a free educational game called Citizen Science, which teaches the root causes behind the pollution of a local lake, and how to get involved to save the lake. Squire's approach, although focused on learning environments, shows a way games can be used for civic engagement.



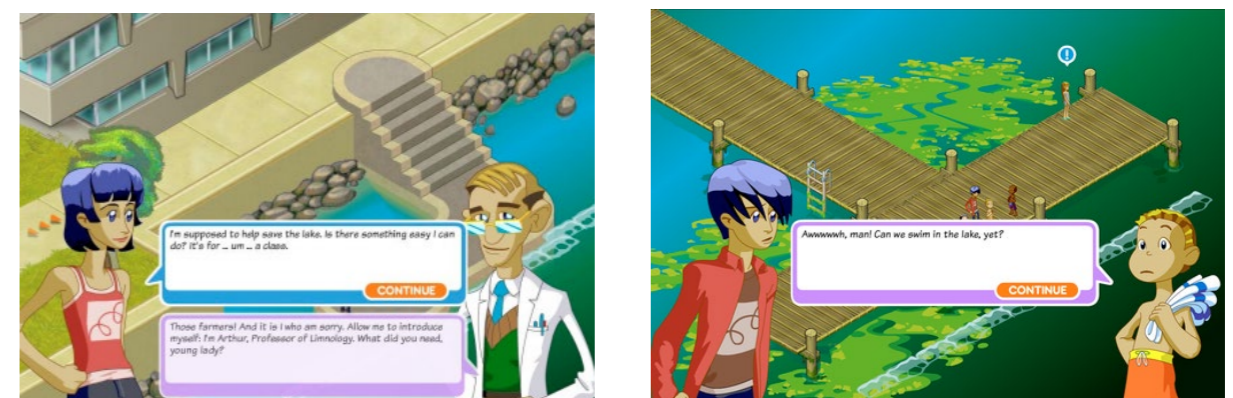
53. Club in Habbo



54. "Pool's closed raid"



55. 4Chan members with afro wigs in Swastika formation outside of Sulake's headquarters, Helsinki



56. Filament Games, Kurt Squire, Citizen science, 2011

<sup>4</sup>Edutopia, Kurt Squire on Civic Engagement Through Digital Games, 2013, <https://www.edutopia.org/video/kurt-squire-civic-engagement-through-digital-games-big-thinkers-series>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)

<sup>5</sup>Games for change, citizen science, 2011, <http://www.gamesforchange.org/game/citizen-science/>, (accessed 2nd May 2019)



## -Collaborative creation and urban spaces

I find there are interesting parallels to be drawn between the participation of inhabitants in the life of their city, facilitated by designers, and the participation of players in a game's world. It's can be argued that how designers engage with inhabitants in a participatory design project is reminiscent of games in some ways : interactive, structured, often playful. It seems that, like with games, some cities, or at least initiatives within cities, embrace and try to foster the participatory behaviours of citizens.

Charline Roussel, a french designer who focuses on design for cities, town planning, and urban policy, in her 2017 analysis of the participatory making of public space, discusses post-modern views on the design of cities. Her approach is relevant to this thesis because it shows an emerging view of the role of inhabitants' participation. Roussel shows there is a boundary between how much facilitation designers need to provide, and what space and freedom they need to give inhabitants. She shows the impact that a different design perspective can have in involving local actors in the process. She studied the case of *Faites la place* (make the place), a participatory project commissioned by the city of Paris, in which the collective "Faites!", composed of architects, designers and service designers, diagnosed and co-designed the future "place des fêtes" public square with its inhabitants.

**Cities should be constructed considering that inhabitants have the faculty to create, imagine, and will express it in the space of the city. A city space should accept and facilitate its inhabitants' appropriation. (...)**

**Participatory making of public space seems to be an interesting way to involve all [of its] actors. Public spaces are living environments where inhabitants can, by simply acting in them, create a change. (...) public spaces are made by the uses and activities generated by social interactions. (...) This led me to think of the making of the city as a social work rather than a design process. (...) participatory [design] involves inhabitants in making their city's space (...) what directs the design decision is the study of people's uses of the space.<sup>1</sup>**

Charline Roussel

<sup>1</sup>C. Roussel, *Participatory making of public spaces: how can designers encourage inhabitants to re-appropriate public spaces?*, Glasgow, Glasgow School of Art, 2017, p36



Temporary games



57. YA+K, The CAPLA, a "tool of citizen involvement" and transitional architecture, Paris, 2016



Mobile kitchen, co-created for and with local actors



58. Boijot.Renauld, *Nos incroyables vacances dans le 9.3.*, 2017



Designers, however, are not alone in engaging local inhabitants to redefine an understanding of a territory. There are also artists who engage and collaborate on urban projects. The artist duo *Boijeot.Renauld*, constituted of Sébastien Renauld, architect and performance artist, and Laurent Boijeot, sociologist, sought to question the perception of the Seine-Saint-Denis department, a popular suburb of Paris, with their performance “*Nos incroyables vacances dans le 9.3.*” (our incredible holidays in the 9.3.). They crossed the entire department and built furniture with the inhabitants along the way; they ate and interacted with them. They lived and slept on the furniture in the streets, reclaiming public space. In the month it took them, 300 pieces of furniture were built, most of them given back to the inhabitants. Their intervention is more provocative than that of the collective *Faites!*, but ultimately it stems from the same desire to question the role of public space, to redefine the relationship in a way that better suits the needs and uses of citizens, and actively involve them in the process.

Co-design and user-centred design approaches can be a way of working towards that goal. Of course, there are other implications when discussing participation in the scale of the city. For one, as Roussel mentions, such projects, when commissioned by politicians, raise concerns of political instrumentalisation.

## -Gamification of cities

Gamification is “The process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems.”<sup>1</sup> However, it is a process criticised by the French media and game scholars Maude Bonenfant and Sébastien Genvo, because of the contemporary use of gamification by companies as a way to make profit from engaging people through games, through the collection of data gathered, adverts shown during the time in which the user is kept connected, or engagement with a brand.<sup>2</sup>

Along this thesis, I have worked on a project for which I designed a game to re-appropriate surroundings. As a part of this project, I have researched other examples where

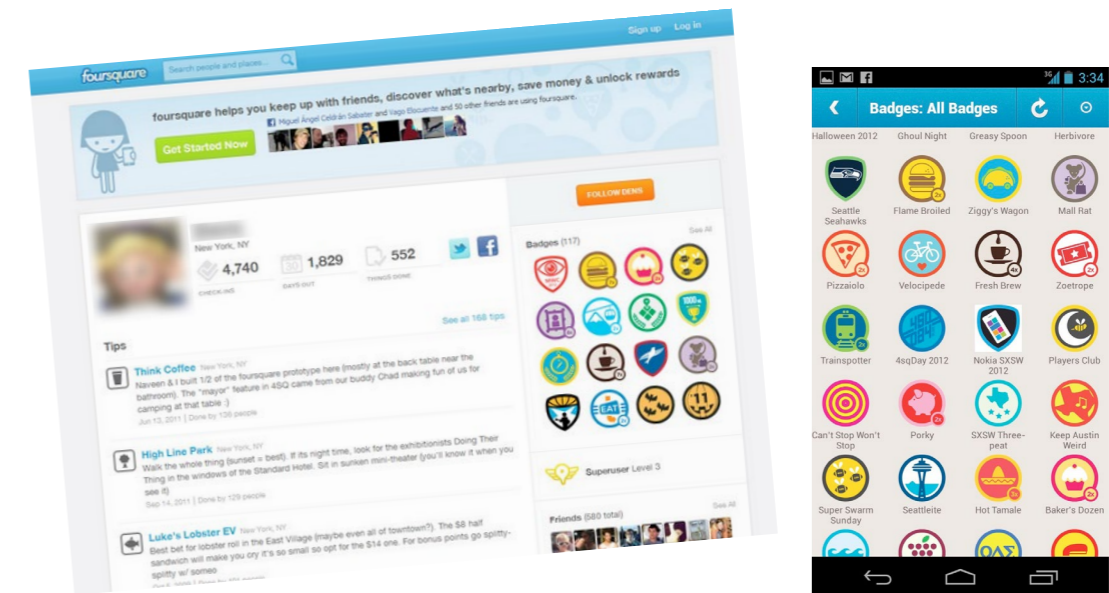
<sup>1</sup>Nos incroyables vacances dans le 9.3., Boijeot.Renauld website, 2017, <http://www.boijeotrenauld.com/actions/10-toutes-nos-realizations/141-nosincroyablesvacancesdansle93.html>, (accessed 1st May 2019)

<sup>2</sup>G. Renault, *Le duo Boijeot.Renauld case la baraque*, Libération, 2017, [https://next.liberation.fr/theatre/2017/04/13/le-duo-boijeotrenauld-case-la-baraque\\_1562613](https://next.liberation.fr/theatre/2017/04/13/le-duo-boijeotrenauld-case-la-baraque_1562613), (accessed 1st May 2019)

<sup>3</sup>G. Zichermann and C. Cunningham, *Gamification by Design, Implementing Game mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps*, O’Reilly Media, Sebastopol, 2011

<sup>4</sup>M. Bonenfant and S. Genvo, *Une approche située et critique du concept de gamification*, Sciences du jeu, [published online], 2014

<sup>5</sup>J. Frith, *Turning life into a game: Foursquare, gamification, and personal mobility*, University of North Texas, 2013



59. Foursquare

game mechanics have been employed to create engagement in a city context, and help users redefine their understanding of the world they live in. I will conclude this chapter by giving some of the notable examples I have found.

Foursquare, is a location-based social network which rewarded people with “mayorships” (which were rewarded to those who checked in a place the most in a 60 day period), badges and discounts for checking-in certain locations. Branded badges are provided when companies or institutions sponsor foursquare to incite users to go to a certain location or event.

**(...) the addition of gaming elements to their experience of space did alter the lens through which they viewed their surroundings. A local bar can be read as a prize to be won; a new Mexican restaurant can become a location to be collected to achieve the Level 2 Hot Tamale badge; a nearby town can be the last piece one needs to collect to earn a tourism badge.<sup>5</sup>**

Jordan Frith



A “user-generated” example of gamification of the city is the anonymous contribution of an anonymous engaged citizen in my hometown of Uzès, France. My hometown’s streets are often littered with dog waste. This unknown person decided to play a cat and mouse game, chasing and placing flags on stars with thank you notes written on them (illustration 60). So far, they have not proved successful in solving the problem, but it has the merit of raising the issue. It makes a daily nuisance into a fun discovery: the anonymous dog poo vigilante has struck again!

As part of this research, I tested Geocaching, a location based GPS treasure hunt game. The game is based on user-generated content. The goal is to find “caches”, which are small hidden places, which are GPS located and sometimes contain items. Both players and Institutions can set up their own caches. In Glasgow, I have found caches by community gardens, hostels, and the city council. For example there was “Interesting Glasgow buildings”, a series of 20 caches, and “Glasgow libraries”, another series of 10 caches, both hidden the Glasgow city council. The one in illustration 62 was hidden by a private user, Susie.Susie.Sue. Sue, who is not affiliated with any institutions. She has hidden 93 caches since 2015. This one was hidden near the Clyde Bridge, which she wanted others to discover. It had over 70 logs between July 2018 and the beginning of March 2019. Another user had visited on the same day as us. She had dropped off a “travel bug”, an object players can take and drop off in another location later. Geocaching has a secret quality in the fact that those who are not in the know can not see what is hidden. Players can define a new narrative for the city, which exists only for those who play. Like the digital games mentioned throughout this thesis, it creates a game world with the world of the city.

Lastly, I was interested by “Stop and PLAY”, a project by the Copenhagen collective. They are an experimental non-profit game collective based in Denmark. For Stop and PLAY, they created a series of small social minigames in the city, inspired by popular videogames:

**Stop and PLAY is a project with which we are trying to change the perception of the public spaces. By providing extraordinary experiences we disrupt the “normal and ordinary” and wake up a sense of exploration that could lead people on their own quest of discovery what their city has to offer, who it is designed for and what is their place in it.**

**Copenhagen game collective**

In their blog they document the challenges of organising games in public space, including bureaucratic and political red tape, concerns of public safety, visual conflict with commercials and political signs, as well as vandalism.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Copenhagen game collective, *Stop and PLAY*, 2015, <http://www.copenhagengamecollective.org/2015/12/06/stop-and-play/>, (accessed 1st May 2019)



60. Thank you note on dog poo, anonymous contribution, Uzès



61. The contents hidden inside of a “cache” (left) with its log (right)



62. Copenhagen game collective, Portable Oculus Setup



63. Copenhagen game collective, Stop and PLAY, 2015/2016



## Conclusion

To conclude, only when games are analysed as systems, can one see the qualities and actors that shape its experience. Beyond the act of playing, the users of a game (players) participate in different ways in shaping it. Participative behaviour can be of a social and/or creative nature. Those activities challenge the traditional definitions of gaming and play. Those are not necessarily futile or for their own sake, as they can have consequences outside the world of the game. The game facilitates not only the act of playing, but also creates social capital. The act of participation builds the game world. In that sense, parallels emerge between games and qualities of cities and public spaces.

We have seen that the participatory nature of games can be facilitated by its designers, but it can also emerge directly from its players with appropriative behaviours. Another parallel can be drawn with cities, where freedom of participation can be given (e.g. co-design) or taken (e.g. graffiti), sometimes with destructive consequences.

Games, because they create engagement, can offer a framework for designers seeking to encourage civic engagement in a city context. There are existing projects which look at gamification and cities, but none (to my knowledge) which seek to give citizens the creative tool to participate in the world of the city.

This is what I've explored in my design project, "Stroll", which is a continuation of this thesis. The participatory games which have been discussed in this thesis are part of my references. For my project, I'm creating a game experience for Glasgow, in which the goal is to add a layer of narrative to the city by (re)discovering it in a group, in order to appropriate it. Players participate in the creation of a collaborative artwork which defines a new understanding of Glasgow. They are rewarded with their own unique artwork "souvenir", a representation of their experience "playing Glasgow".



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## -Interview transcript (10/03/2019) With Kevin Pass and Ross Brain, owners of West End Games

Kevin: We didn't use to be opened on Sundays, when the store opened; we decided Monday would be our close day because we thought we'd get people in the weekend. But Sundays we don't even have enough money to cover the wages. So we closed on Sundays and then opened on Monday night, and it was a lot more successful. But just recently, we've got other things we want to do, like games that weren't Dungeons & Dragons. Because we have Dungeons & Dragons few nights a week and they're all sell-outs, so we had to find time. To mitigate our losses, we only do the half-day on Sunday. If it ends up being popular, we might do the full day.

Gaston (author): Every time I come back home, this is the only place that's open and full.

K: It's because this is how we do our business. Because during the day, we just sell board games, card games and do the coffee shop thing but in the evening, we become an event center. And people come here to play their Dungeons & Dragons games or card game tournaments. That's when people come after work. This is the geeky after work football. (...) It's actually justified to people, to spend all this money on cardboard. It's your hobby; it's your entertainment. If you have a gym membership and you're paying 6-7-8 pound a week to go to the gym, it's the same thing (...)

G: Besides D&D (Dungeons & Dragons), what other kinds of games do you play here?

K: We host a range of tabletop role-play games, so D&D is obviously the biggest and the most famous one but if you look up on the wall there, there's Star Wars role-play games, there's a game called Monster of the Week, which plays out like a 90's monster show, like Buffy (the Vampire Slayer) or Supernatural, every week there's a new monster, let's deal with it as a party. There's some more abstract ones, like world building games. As a group you start and you go: "let's talk about a village that exists in this fictional world, let's play out a story from that village". The next session you'll go: "next to that village there's a river, let's play out a story that happens in that river". Every session, you're building up this world until eventually you've got a full living breathing place that you've made by telling stories. It can be as abstract as that to playing characters out of Star Wars in your own little Star Wars adventure. D&D is by far the most popular. It's also a bit more restricted as far a roleplaying games go. The other ones that are quite popular are all the card games, so Magic the Gathering is a really big one. It's the flagship trading card game that Wizards of the Coast launched in 94'. It's pretty much what every card game has tried to copy from that point. Pokemon cards is probably the most popular game that people who aren't in this circle have heard of. That was actually made by Wizards of the Coast to get kids into card gaming. They bought the license to put images of Pokemon into their cards in 98' or 99' and kept it for 4 or 5 years before selling it back to the Pokemon Company. Yu-Gi-Oh is another that people have heard of but then there's other more niche ones, like there's the Warhammer card game, the Final Fantasy card game, which came out a few years back as well. DC (comics) had their own card game as well (...) which they've stopped producing. We support Dicemasters, which is kind of a DC/Marvel game but it uses

dice instead of cards. We host wargaming as well. The one that's popular is Warhammer. We surprisingly do not very much of that. That actually has to do with us being a cafe; it's just the space it takes up. Because if people are coming to play a game of Warhammer, that takes 2-3 hours to play. But that means you're giving up 6 foot by 4 feet of space just for 2 people. Since we're a cafe, it's not economical really. People can book it and if it's a quiet day like today and people want to play Warhammer I'd say yeah, it's fine. But we tend to lean more toward skirmish-y wargames, like Kill Team, which is the Warhammer skirmish game (...) One that we've been supporting for a while is a game called Guild Ball, which is a fantasy football game. It's in a fantasy setting, and they're all playing a game of soccer, it's how that game plays out, but they're all animated fantasy type characters, walking about with weapons and beating each other up.

Ross: It's a Scottish game designer. He actually went to Glasgow University. The company Steam Forge is from the southeast of England.

G: Do you consider the games you play to be creative?

K: Well definitely. D&D and other role-play games are creative in the sense [of] interactive story telling. Sometimes it's because you're working together to tell a story, like world building, and sometimes it's basically, like, improvisation. Where the game master acts like a director who sets the scene, and the players are the actors, they guide the story. With your card games, they're creative in the way that they're strategy games. You've got complete customization over what goes on in there. So, when you play a game of chess, there's strategy, but there's no creativity. Every single game, you have the same tools. But with a card game, you decide what cards you bring to that game. From week to week, you can swap cards in; you can swap cards out. (...) You can tailor your decks from week to week. You change your experience. That could be just to get an edge, because it's a competitive game, but a lot of people they do it because they enjoy the game. So maybe they don't care about winning, but they want to get a certain experience for themselves. Some people like to win by getting five cards and they all work together, so this card makes this card better and if I've got these two cards (...) they want to build a combination, and it doesn't matter if they lose all of those games if in one game they're able to go "oh look, now I've got one million, and I do one million damage" (...) They get their satisfaction out of building that engine. So week-to-week you can change your strategy, adapt it to how you feel. So if you want to go "I just want to win tonight" (...) with card games, since there's so much customization, like Magic the Gathering has over 45 000 cards. Because the Game has been going since 94'. Your card pull is innumerable, so when you imagine that you build a 60 card, but you've got a choice of 45 000, how many combinations do you have? (...)

G: What is your role in organizing this place and shaping the playing experience?

K: So, it's quite interesting because me and Ross, we set this place up because there are a couple of places in Glasgow that were running these sorts of events, but we felt they weren't doing it well enough. Our association with each other is organizing these big events, so when we were both at Glasgow University, Ross would run the Sci-Fi society and the videogame society and I ran the gaming society, so the board games and the card games side of things. There was a lot of crossover of membership, so it meant we made a lot of crossover events. We were just working together. So we were like "we both graduated, we're both independently working, we both independently have money, let's try and do it better". So the interesting thing

about how this shop is run is that day-to-day now, me and Ross aren't here. We do a lot of the handling side of things with the suppliers (...) our role isn't running the shop, it's about the Meta stuff. It's about making sure that we are still on top of what we're doing. We are still the best at providing a player experience. The way that we do that, how we keep our finger on the pulse is that we've got four staff members, and each of them are deputized a different role. Brand is our card gaming guy, so he'll say "people want X, Y or Z, or people aren't happy with this, and then me and Ross will then mastermind it, "how can we stay ahead of the curve" (...) Our role as the store owners, is building these events and environments that people want to come to. (...)

G: Do you think there's something special about playing in a physical space with other people?

K: Ho, definitely, definitely. When I was in high school, I would play a lot of videogames, online/offline. But as I got older, as I started going to University, having a part time job, and now working full-time. I don't want my free time to be an isolated event, which I feel a lot of video gaming can be. Even if you're playing with friends, you're still playing in front of your computer on your own. If you're playing a single player game, it's a completely isolating experience. I want to build social time into the time that I'm not working. I think a lot of people have that drive as well. And that's what the tabletop gaming does, whether that's card game, role-play game or just playing a board game with friends. It allows you to have that face-to-face contact, but still scratch that gaming itch. A lot of these guys are hardcore gamers, and I think as well, we bridge that gap. Some of these guys might have social anxiety. They actually feel more comfortable going to a place like this than they would going to a pub or something like this. It's like-mindedness. "There might be people there who have the same anxieties as I do". We actually have a staff member who, as a part of his interview, told us about this initiative that he runs called gay-mers. It's an inclusivity thing. He runs events in Glasgow and Edinburgh for the LGBT community, and he's helped bring a lot of these initiatives here, he's done a lot to make it a safe space as well. (...)

R: It's a theory in café and restaurant design. It's called third space theory. You've got three spaces, home, work, and where you are when you are not in one of those two. We want to be the third space for people because you want to do something other than just being at home or work. It is especially important to meet somebody physically, I think. It is a social thing as well, because I very much come home from work and go "fuck well I haven't seen anyone". Coming here is my actual social interaction. (...)

K: [Having a window front] That was a big thing for us, because when we started this places there were two places in Glasgow that were doing similar things. One of them was in a basement, it was an underground store, and the other one was in a side alley in the south side. One of the things when we set out to do this was that it has to be obvious and welcoming.

R: It has to have a window.

K: Yeah, you want people to look in and say, "I wonder what's going on in there". Because the other two kind of set an atmosphere of "what you're doing should be hidden away". The nerds in their mom's basement, it's that kind of thing. (...) [The visibility] It's a big part of building the community. People see it and go "people are doing that? That guy looks quite normal."

R: That's the thing that I hear constantly "I drive past, and you're always jam packed at 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock". There's a lecturer from the Art School, who gets his coffee here because



we're open so late. Because he always comes back from work at half past 9 at night and gets his coffee, because he lives upstairs.

K: Between 12 and 5, we are a coffee shop where you can play board games, a board game café. In the evening we become an event center. It's a destination. You're coming here to do evening's activity. So instead of going to the cinema, or to the bowling alley, or playing football, whatever, this is your destination.

G: What do you put in place to foster this sense of community?

K: We work a lot on our social media. That's a big part of it. On our Dungeons & Dragons nights, we've got a wide range of ages as well as gender and races. When people see what we're doing on our roleplaying nights, they'll see 14-year-old kids, they'll see retired people. In fact there's a guy who comes with his grandpa to play, and they both play D&D together. [It's] the same for our card gaming nights (...). There's been a big thing in the card gaming community, in the last decade of trying to encourage women to come to these events. A really good thing happened less than a month ago. Mythic invitation, they're run quarterly, so every 4 years. It was the first time a woman won it, and it was a trans woman. That's done a lot for the trans community. But I think we're quite indicative of that. Because we have male players, we have female players, trans-female, trans-male players. And we try to reflect that kind of community. So that regardless of race, age and gender, people can see themselves in the store. Because we get a lot of people, especially on the younger and older end of the spectrum, that are anxious about "Am I going to be the youngest person here", and they're 15-16, so not at all. And we get a lot of retired people coming in. So they'll start coming in, they'll maybe play a couple games of chess or backgammon, and then they'll say, "What else do you do here?" (...) A guy who was 68, won our last in store championship.

R: We are very welcoming to new people. It's very much a growing community, the fact that you can turn up. If you come in more than once or twice, we're probably gonna learn your name. You're gonna know our names, etc ...

K: I feel bad when I don't know someone's name. If I've seen someone in here more than twice and I don't remember their name, I feel bad.

R: There's a guy, he used to go to the art school, he lives over there, he'd walk past, he'd get his coffee and then slowly we get chatting to him. And he's like "Oh, I play 40k Warhammer". We don't do a lot of that, but we can facilitate it. And he's like "what's this card game everyone is playing?" "It's magic the Gathering" "Oh, I think my older brother played that". And he turns up a week later with a box of his brother's cards. And now he's one of our best customers. You assimilate people into the community and you constantly grow.

G: Do you have a lot of people who play these more traditional games?

K: We have people coming in to play chess regularly. It's just trying to capture that audience. We'd love to run a chess club. (...)

Something that I never anticipated when I opened this place is that we get used so much for first dates, tinder meet-ups. My theory on it, it's a public space. We do coffee, we do toasties, the kind of normal first date meet-ups. We offer the extra edge of giving you something to do. They'll be coming in and they'll play Scrabble, or Jenga. It's a talking point. It's not just sitting there staring at somebody and talking together, it gives you an activity to do together. It's a

built-in icebreaker.

G: What are motivations for people to come in and play?

K: For a lot of people it's the community. They'll have a love for the game, and they'll want to meet like-minded individuals. We're quite lucky where we are, that we're right next to university. So people will use this as their community center. Because if people just moved to Glasgow and they don't know anybody, but they play D&D, or Magic the Gathering, or a board game, they'll come in and ask us "when are your nights for that thing?". It's a way for people to continue what their hobby already is, but also to create a new friend group. I think over the last five years D&D has had a massive resurgence, thanks to Stranger Things, people have become interested about it. And what we run on Mondays and Wednesdays, is a drop-in sessions. A lot of time D&D, you have someone who runs a game every week for their friends. What we do on Mondays and Wednesdays, it's not a regular game. Every time you come you play with a different group of people, you may have a different game master, the story isn't necessarily continuous. You come along you build a character; your character is a mercenary. So whatever you show up for that night, you get sent on a mission by your guild. So the idea is you don't need to commit to be there every week (...) The thing that we've seen from running that, is that people have met through that and then they have externally made their own D&D group and met in other people's houses. And then they'll book other times to come in and play with that group of people. It forges its own little community. (...) People will come in here because (...) of the environment we've built over the last three years, they can be themselves here. We have a guy who comes, and he wears his Viking helmet the whole time he's here. He's just a laugh, he likes to do LARPing, when he comes and plays his card games, he'll come and he'll shout at people and we'll have a laugh with it. We have (...) trans people who come in from work, and they'll come in with their shirt and tie, coming from work, where they maybe feel it's not acceptable to dress in a trans way. And they'll come here, change into a dress, and they'll sit here and play their games in a way that they feel comfortable presenting and maybe they don't feel comfortable doing that outside.

R: Gaming is always a very welcoming community. You can just turn up; there will always be someone who can teach you the rules. Magic is a fantastic thing that you can take a Magic the Gathering deck to any store in the world, turn up, sit down, play a tournament and make new friends.

K: I know a guy who comes in here, and he knows nothing about Magic the Gathering, but he loves talking about it, because, just talking to someone who has a lot of enthusiasm and interest for it is just interesting, even if you know nothing about it. I know very little about rugby, but I'm sure if a rugby enthusiast came and talked to me about rugby it would be an interesting conversation because they have the knowledge and enthusiasm to carry that (...) people come to talk to me about Magic the Gathering, who have no idea about it, but know that I am so invested in the franchise. And it's the same with people talking to me about role-play games I've never played, like the Game of Thrones system, and talk to me about how great it is, and they tell me all their stories from their games, and it's just how engaging somebody who's telling you their passion. (...)

G: Does the creative aspect of games allow people to appropriate themselves the games' fictional worlds?

K: Definitely, because you see people coming here, with a character in mind that “I want to play in Game of Thrones, and I think this character that I’ve dreamed up would be really cool to see how they interact with the world around them.” Some people want the appropriation, for example, Star Wars was always slated for having really poor female cast, and until recently, having very few racial diversity. So it’s allowed that sort of thing for people of non-white descent, to be “you know what, I want to play a badass character in a star wars universe that I can identify with. I want an Asian gunslinger, I want a black Jedi.” I know Samuel Jackson did, but if we’re going back 15 years he didn’t. There weren’t black Jedis. Or there are people who go : “I want to take a franchise that I’m happy with and I want to insert someone that I can associate with. I want to see a homosexual jedi.” So I think it does allow people to bring their fanfictions out of their heads and put it into a safe space and play around with someone they could associate with, in a franchise they’re invested in. Where maybe they don’t feel like they are being represented. (...)

R: It exists for people to write their own fanfiction and go as far as they want. It is fantasy, do whatever the fuck you want.

K: People who would write fanfiction, they can bring it to life. People can insert themselves in a world. When you’ve got these fandoms, like Harry Potter or Sonic the Hedgehog or whatever. “I want to tell the story of how I’m Harry Potter’s best friend” “well let’s do that then!”

R: There’s a role-play system that will do that.

K: You’ll make your characters, and we’ll tell the story of you and your friends at Hogwarts, and Harry Potter is your best friend!

R: There are roleplaying rules for about anything. The famous system is GURPS (Generic Universal RolePlaying System), so if you want to have Space Marines riding unicorns attending school at hogwarts, the source book exists that you can smash that together and mechanically that game functions and works. GURPS is utterly ridiculous that you can take anything you want. It is the roleplaying system that the first two Fallout games use as an engine.

(...)

R: There are different games that provide different immersion, like D&D can be very mechanical based, it can be very roleplay based. Or you get other roleplay systems like Wicked Age, or Fiasco, which is entirely roleplay based. There’s almost no dice at all in Fiasco. It depends on what you want. Fiasco is used by a lot of actors for practicing improvisation.

K: Talking about Fiasco you’re making me think of another cool one called Dread where there’s no dice, you play with a Jenga pile. It’s always a horror or a thriller setting. So you’re telling a story, you’re playing out, doing improv’ basically, as actors, and the game master says “what do you do now?”. But everytime you do something, you take away a Jenga block. “I’m gonna go into the spare bedroom” “ok, take out a Jenga block, see what happens.” “I’m gonna get in my car”. But then as soon as the Jenga pile falls, “I’m gonna go let the dog out” if it falls “you open the back door, and this horrific thing happens” Because it builds up the tension, and then suddenly this horrific thing happens, and it drives the plot. Then you build the Jenga pile up and it builds up again. It builds up this sense of Dread, and you can see that things have been going too good for too long, just like when you play Jenga and you see the pile wobbling. “Oh no, somebody is gonna die”.

G: Would you like to be able to change things to the game or give input to its creators?

R: The amount of diversity that there is amongst games, if you’re not happy with something, the better game exists somewhere else. And the big companies that provide the big games, Wizards of the Coast, and Konami, have a very open feedback loop, as in we just ring them up and say “This is crap, what are you doing about this”, and if enough people ring them up and say this is crap than they’ll fix it (...) They’re very open about changing things constantly. (...) It is an ongoing feedback cycle. (...)

K: But I feel like you’re more talking about the people who create the games, the game designers. At that point, I don’t think people are too precious. Like with Monopoly for example, people have their own house rules for Monopoly, people change things to suit the way they want to play. That kinda happens with a lot of games, people say “I love this game, but this bit’s crap”. They’ll just house rule it, change it. The rules aren’t gospel. If you’re playing with a new play group, you might have to say that. There’s a roleplay game called vampires of the masquerade, where you all play as a group of vampires, kinda like lostboys, and it’s all the hierarchy of vampire culture. It has a system for what happens to you if you don’t get blood. And a lot of it has people, as vampire, just going feral on a murdering spree. I played a game where the guy wasn’t happy with that and he said, “you know what I don’t like that, it takes a lot out of your creativity”. So he changed the rules on that so every time you choose not to feed when you can, you get these demerit points and you have to make decisions for you character that are more monstrous based on the amount of these demerit tokens that you’ve got. So he decided that his play experience would be better if he tweaked the rules slightly. He said to the players “I’m doing this, these are my proposed changes to the rules, are you happy with this?” and it was great. He was totally right. He identified something he thought could be done better and proposed a change and did it.

G: Is that sometimes shared online?

K: Yeah, you see that a lot, especially with D&D, because the game is so big and it’s been going on for so long, people will just make up their own things. People will say D&D don’t have rules for this monster I want to put in it. Here’s my interpretation of how powerful that monster would be.

R: And the bigger stuff eventually becomes published, so people share online, through Reddit, through the D&D wiki and things like that. There are whole homebrew sections for things like various different editions, and the big stuff gets published as third party material. So there is liken the Lord of the Rings sourcebook for fifth edition D&D. it’s an entirely third party thing, it’s not done by wizards of the coast.

K: Sunday is anything but D&D. With Star Wars, that guy who messaged yesterday, he messaged the shop, he said “I want to run a Star Wars game, but I’m going to use a D&D ruleset, because it’s the one I’m comfortable with, but it’s not going to be based on any D&D universe. It’s a Star Wars game, but I don’t want to learn a new ruleset.” He sent me all the resources. Somebody online has written a 150-page rulebook for Star Wars, using the framework that D&D has laid down. It’s the same as videogames, where if people want something, they’ll mod it in. They’ll just write a bit of code that changes the game to how they want it. It’s just the same with pen & paper. (...)



