The Player as Puppet

Visualized Decisions as a Challenge for Computer Games[1]

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> This game series adapts to the choices you make.
> The story is tailored by how you play.
> Bitch please, we know this!
> *PewDiePie*[2]

Stay or go? Take the left door, or the right one? Side missions or main task? Read the long dialogue, or not? Green or grey eyes? And, anyway: Start? Try again? In computer games, players permanently face decisions,[3] yet they do not usually experience this as an unavoidable necessity but rather as something positively rewarding. It also gives them the feeling of being able to actively step into the action and be masters of fate on their own whim. However, decisions belong to the structural components of a computer game, and as such, they ought to be perceived very clearly as a designed system. At first glance, this seems to be an

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2 This reminder appears at the beginning of each episode of *The Walking Dead Season 1*. PewDiePie comments on it in the fifth and final episode (PewDiePie 2012c, at 02:25).

3 We understand decisions as "situations in which a person decides 'preferentially' be-tween at least two options", or "that [a person] 'prefers', i.e. favours, one option over another, or several others" (Jungermann/Pfister/Fischer 2010: 3).

important difference between computer games and literary texts – users of the medium are no longer confined to being powerless spectators but can influence further developments by their own interventions. Or is this, after all, only a delusion, as every possible outcome has been mapped out in a computer game, and the predefined mechanics only appear to give the player free choice from a varied range of options?

In this article, we discuss what is often overlooked by players, by casting a double perspective on game design on the one hand, which deliberately plans and programs moments of decision, and game reception on the other hand, which focuses on the players' engagement with those moments of decision. We explore this subject against the background of an increasing emphasis on moments of decision in games and explicit marketing slogans which stress that players hold the protagonists' fate, the story, and the very future in their own hands: "Make choices. Face the consequences" (*Heavy Rain* [Quantic Dream, 2010]), "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play" (*The Walking Dead Season 1* [Telltale Games, 2012]), "The smallest decision can dramatically change the future" (*Until Dawn* [Supermassive Games, 2015).[4] With such a strong focus on moments of decision, it becomes a particular challenge for games of this type to not make the player look like a puppet. This raises the question if, and in what way, the specific moment of decision is charged with strategies of emotionalization. It is highly relevant in this regard that these strategies are normally linked to the player's connection with a character (which the player does not want to lose) or the connection between the player's ego and the challenge of mastering the game (as a feasible task in which hard work pays off); they also come into effect in relation to reward or punishment, as a consequence of the decision.

This article begins with a comparative discussion of established and new forms of reception (part 2: *Games as Decision Machines*). This is followed by an analysis of the visualization of moments of decision in games by means of case studies of *Let's Play* sequences (part 3: *Visualized decisions: cases*). It is worth taking a closer look in this context at the relationship between decisions and questions of morality. These metareflexive examples are particularly well suited to addressing the question of whether games make players look like puppets – after all, game design needs to be prepared for all eventualities, for instance, it must be able to challenge players who have lost their moral sense and – as paradoxical as it may sound – also offer them an enjoyable gaming experience (part 4: *Moral Decisions*).

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4   JosPlays 2012; PewDiePie 2012a; KPopp 2015.

GAMES AS DECISION MACHINES

Visualizing the Action of the Game

Whichever type of medium we consume, reading a novel, watching a film or playing a game, we are always confronted – consciously or unconsciously – with decisions. To begin with, we need to enter a fictional world, i.e. actively become a reader, viewer or player. We decide, at that very moment, to step into the magic circle and to understand, accept and follow the rules of the fictional world laid out in literature, films or games. (cf. Huizinga 2009 [1938]) Over the entire duration of our engagement with the medium, we go through endless interpretation processes and conclusions based on what we read, see or play. Readers, for instance, do not simply decode a text, in the sense that they "perform" it by creating an imaginary world in a semiotic process, but they rather fill in the gaps in the text by making assumptions that fit in with the rules of fiction, continually checking these against what they have imagined thus far. (cf. Iser 1976) They permanently have to decide whether these assumptions can be accepted or should be dismissed; this is what constitutes fiction. This process is no different in visual media such as feature films; focal planes, tracking shots and cuts can be used to generate gaps which will then require interpreting by the viewer.

The main difference between texts and films as opposed to games is the visibility of the reception process, which in the case of texts, takes place entirely in the reader's mind, and in the case of films, in terms of gaps only, is equally played out in the viewer's mind. In games, however, the reception process manifests itself in the experienced and visualized or tangible action of the game, which can be described as a permanent reaction by the player to the game setting and, vice versa, by the game system to the player's inputs. By using the criteria of experience and tangibility as the most important distinction between games and other media (Venus 2012: 106), the term *interactivity* can be avoided. That term, though often used as a specific marker of computer games compared to other media, has proven unsatisfactory.[5]

In terms of the visibility of moments of decision, we contend that the experience and tangibility of the reception process, which is so specific to games, is intensified and becomes particularly apparent in these moments of decision. There is further evidence for this when players verbalize moments of decision in rela-

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5   Amongst several other reasons for this, it is often unclear whether the term is being used in a narrow or wider sense. (Neitzel 2012: 80).

tion to a specific action.[6] This is often the case in *Let's Plays*, which can be described as a form of visualized playthrough of a game for instruction and entertainment purposes; we will return to them as part of our analysis. It might also be worth asking whether the specific, staged format of *Let's Plays* actually encourages visualization. Certainly, moments of decision in this format come with commitments: if the audience questions them, this may lead to further *Let's Play* sequences in which other or perhaps even all possible decisions are played through. (e.g. PewDiePie 2014b)

Decision Machines

Games are decision machines. They are designed to create challenges for players and give them options, to wait for inputs (execution as an action within in-game time)[7] and to respond to a player's input decision (selecting an option) with pre-programmed reactions of reward or punishment (consequences).[8] This is based on the understanding that the selection of an option and its execution as an action normally lead towards a solution, or that they are the solution to the challenge. In games, a "decision" is therefore any kind of reaction to the game, as every input requires a prior decision. Decisions come in many different forms and can be described as routine (automatic, requiring minimal cognitive effort), stereotypical (chosen from a clearly defined catalogue of options) or reflected (requiring further information and assessment) (Jungermann/Pfister/Fischer 2010: 31-38): loading ammunition (routine), left or right door (stereotypical), stealth mode or attack (reflected).[9] As regards the visibility of decisions, routine decisions are

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6   They are – in the terminology of ethnomethodology – made accountable (cf. Garfinkel 1967).

7   "Wait" is actually the wrong term here, as the game of course continues in time; an opponent may move without waiting for the player. Even doing nothing (deciding to do nothing) becomes a decision.

8   The term "options" ("objects, actions, rules or strategies to choose from") and the term "consequences" ("all states which may result as a consequence of choosing an option") have been taken from the literature of psychology (Jungermann/Pfister/ Fischer 2010: 19; 22, our translation).

9   Because of the preprogrammed nature of games, the fourth type of constructive decisions hardly ever occurs – where "options are either not predefined at all or not sufficiently clearly defined" and "the personal values relevant for the decision are either unclear or need to be created in the first place", therefore requiring the greatest cognitive effort (Jungermann/Pfister/Fischer 2010: 35, our translation). Also, the catalog of

certainly less observable in a player's reactions, or made less relevant by the player, compared to stereotypical and reflected decisions. The phases at the beginning of a game are particularly interesting in this respect, as routines are visibly adopted at this stage through a targeted formation of patterns (see below, section *Guiding Principles*).

Games are always one step ahead, at the beginning of a round (Start? Try again?) or by predefining the structure of the game's principle.[10] In fact, many games depend on forced decisions, such as numerous Shoot 'em Ups which follow in the tradition of arcade games, with sections of a scrolling screen that never stops (e.g. *R-Type* [Irem, 1988]). Equally unstoppable are the falling blocks in *Tetris* (Alexei Paschitnow, 1984), which put the player in a difficult spot, but also always offer a new point of departure. Because of the clever spatial boundaries and flowing motion of the opponent's entities (spaceships, boulders) in these "worlds", it is often not immediately obvious that a player's moves are relatively limited within any given section of screen.

This feature is successfully used (again) in current games: in the iOS/Android game *Lara Croft GO* (Square Enix Montreal, 2015) paths are predetermined by a kind of panelled floor with tracks, this way forcing the next move with very limited rooms for decisions. Here, as in rounds-based role-playing games or simple quick time events, the principle of the game, with all its forced moves in the style of a question and answer game, becomes especially evident (cf. Bauer/Kato 2011).[11] These seemingly archaic principles form the basis of every computer game. Every possible decision is preprogrammed – in this respect, games are just like texts and films. There is only a limited number of options. Yet the players' experience is quite different – they feel that they could go anywhere, could do anything; open-world games such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997-2013) are advertised as giving players open-ended possibilities. This is, however, an illusion, as everything is in fact predefined – even

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options cannot be extended by the player. Even seemingly free inputs such as entering names are, in fact, reflected decisions with preprogrammed options (in the form of the alphabet and special characters).

10 Which then cannot be changed. (cf. also Sicart 2009: 27).

11 Strictly speaking, these are examples of a radicalization of possibilities which already exist in texts or analog games (pen-and-paper role-playing games). Supposing that text and film are constituent media of games as the super-medium, this radicalization of course would be a core feature which is then somewhat watered down in the constituent media.

the freedom in *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2009). Behind most closed doors, there is, literally, nothing.

Guiding Principles

This brings us to the question of why players fall so deeply under the spell of this illusion. Guiding principles (cf. Kato/Bauer "Hansel and Gretel" in this volume) play an important part in explaining this phenomenon. They operate in every game and serve the purpose of socializing players in their respective game world: consisting of a network of preset cues or instructions, they can, for example, help with orientation (where to go next, and how to recognize it?) (cf. ibid.), provide clues about the usefulness of certain objects (what's that shiny thing by the side of the path, is it useful for something?) or contain information about the state of wellbeing (how much life energy do I have left?). The more players are able to read these guiding principles[12], the better they can float through the world of the game with a sense of ease and routine – i.e. without the need for conscious decisions. In this sense, players take the possibility to make decisions away from the imagined representation through which their imagined avatar moves (e.g. wanting to open a drawer which is not specifically marked etc.). In the best case, players do not even notice any more that they only seem to be free, when in fact they act as slaves to the system.

Our first example, an excerpt from a *Let's Play* session of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) played by VintageBeef of which we provide a transcription,[13] shows that the game's guiding principles and the apparent freedom of decision go hand in hand – which is a distinctive feature especially of current games. VintageBeef who is known as a highly explorative player, keen to discover and see as much as possible. (VintageBeef 2013a, the transcript begins at 07:10) This is exactly what he does in the sequence quite near the beginning of the game, and he expresses this also verbally. ("Sorry, I am exploring a little bit" L01, with the focal stress on "exploring"). So despite knowing that a certain Robert (L05, conspicuously quiet-voiced) is waiting for him/his avatar Joel and

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12 In this sense, guiding principles can also be regarded as preemptive trial-and-error decisions.

13 The transcript has been created on the basis of the transcription system GAT2. (cf. Selting et al. 2009: 353-402) For the transcription conventions of this system or the meaning of individual symbols please refer to the key at the end of this article. The letter "L" is used to refer to specific lines.

his companion Tess, he deliberately decides to take his time so he can explore the space within a derelict building.

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01  VB:    sorry i am expLORing a little bit-
02         (2.5)
           \___/
               \
           walks through the room, looks at everything
03         there_s no rush RIGHT?
04         (1.5)
05         <<p> robert_robert_s WAIting.>
06         <<p> but he can_he can wait LONger,>
07         (4.0)
           \___/
               \
           a dull sound, and a small circular cue appears in the
           dark
08         <<whispers> u: what_s THIS;>
09         (4.5)
           \___/
               \
           opens the drawer, it is empty
10         ^!NOTH!ing.
11         okAY;
           \___/
               \
            the next circle appears, VB opens the drawer
12         !O!u?
13         can i TAKE that?
14         <<reads> parts to upgrade your WEApon.>
15         !AWE!^some-
16         (3.0)
           \___/
               \
           another dull sound, the focus is on Tess, who is
           waiting
17         <<ff> you_re WATching me,>=
18         =<<ff> yeah just a SEcond.>
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VintageBeef's decision to explore, for which he offers some further explanation (L03 and L06), is rewarded: a dull sound can be heard and a circle appears in a dark corner (L07). Both are cues within the system of guiding principles of *The Last of Us* – the player's attention is attracted by means of the auditory cue which signals usefulness, whereas the orientation cue in the head-up display guides the player towards a specific place, in order to do something.[14] It is espe-

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14 This pairing is essential to all games, between the further development of the action (including further instructions) and the question of further orientation, which we have

cially important at the beginning of a game for players to recognize these pattern-like cues, which are specific to each game. In this case, the player becomes aware of drawers which can be opened and which contain rewards such as component parts – an important, recurring feature[15] which appears here for the first time, and VintageBeef reacts correspondingly ("uh, what's this?" L08). However, the first drawer is empty (L09 and L10, signalled by a noticeable change of pitch) – a clever move by the game design in more than one sense, which also puts an interesting perspective on our subject of moments of decision, as it becomes clear that opening a drawer does not always come with a reward. At the same time, this strengthens the player's sense of his own decision-making ability: if a reward can not be expected reliably every time, it is down to the player to choose whether to open a drawer: the player needs to decide.

Looking at the composition of games, they may be described as systems which confront players with challenges, with the prospect of reward for success, and the prospect of punishment for failure, by providing – through game design as an intrinsically motivational design which needs to be perfected – guiding principles and their cues in the form of interpretable options; decisions may then be described as moments at which the player's acceptance or rejection of the option becomes apparent. Reward or punishment by the game system follow as direct consequences of these inputs, especially when decisions are non-routine and cognitively demanding (see above). Decisions without consequences, i.e. without a reaction by the system, are very rare as this would involve the danger of taking the basic principle of the game to the point of absurdity. But there are exceptions, one example being the well-known scene from *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm Austin, 2000-2002) in which the player's decision – to visit the ladies' toilets as a male protagonist – is rebuked but without further consequences. This example also highlights that what is possible is not always permissible: the transgression of social conventions is executed as a metareflexive *anything goes* move which ought to be possible in a game, and yet is not tolerated by the game system. Such complex moments of decision remain rare, and even the example of *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2012), with its mass of literal "dead ends", only proves that it is impossible to escape the system.

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described as *What's Next* based on *Where Next*. (cf. Kato/Bauer "Hansel and Gretel" in this volume).

15 More component parts mean more frequent upgrades to more effective weapons.

The Player as Puppet

Just as players are constantly required to make decisions, the game itself needs to confront the players which those kinds of decisions that do not make them completely feel like puppets in the process. The challenges have to be appropriate, i.e. not too easy, not too difficult, staying well within a player's frustration threshold, and at the same time, the predetermined nature of alternative results should, ideally, not become apparent in the moment of decision. However, not even AAA titles always succeed at this. Sticking with the example of *The Last of Us*, at the end of the game, which is set in a postapocalyptic North America threatened by humans who have largely turned into cannibals through a virus, Joel, the protagonist, needs to make a decision about his protégé Ellie. Together they have lived through all kinds of dangers, and she is the only person immune to the virus. So will he sacrifice her for the sake of creating a vaccine against the virus? And yet, this tragic decision is not in the hands of the player – the player's avatar is Joel and in the case of VintageBeef, for instance, there is a clear sense of identification (see above, L01: "*I am* exploring a little bit", our emphasis). The moment of decision is embedded into a long cutscene and dramatically intensified as the choice made by Joel is not shown immediately (he either needs to shoot Marlene who stands in his way as he escapes from the hospital, or give up the anaesthetized Ellie). Instead, there is a cut, and Joel is seen leaving the city. VintageBeef's initial reaction to this scene reflects his incomprehension at the prefabricated ending: "What? Uhm.. what choice did I make?" (VintageBeef 2013b, at 19:00) His following statement – "Joel turned into a kind of a Monster, I think" – is characterized by a change of perspective and shows that he has been deprived of making his own decision. In fact, as the discussion at the end of the *Let's Play* reveals, he would have decided differently ("if it was me in that position, I don't know if I would have done made [sic!] the same decision") – and there is a danger here, especially since the game as a whole has been experienced positively ("but regardless, the game was awesome, and I loved every second of it"), that the player is made to look like a puppet. This is supported by the response of another Let's Player, PewDiePie, at the end of the same game. Confronted with the decision, over which he has no influence, to lie to Ellie, he exclaims: "Ah my brain! I don't know what I feel about this. That is such a ... aah that ending. Why did you have to aah! Aah! Why did you have to end it on a lie!?" (PewDiePie 2013c, at 18:45) So has the player ultimately been lied to as well, as he is prevented from making the really important decisions?

VISUALIZED DECISIONS: CASES

Degrees and Factors of Intensification

The examples from *The Last of Us* show that moments of decision can differ in terms of their degree of intensity, no matter whether the decision is with the player or not. Many occur almost automatically and are, as such, unspectacular: they are about wandering through rooms, opening drawers, making bots wait (see above). Other moments are more intense, for instance when a player decides whether to sneak up on an enemy in stealth mode or to shoot at them with an arrow from a distance. Intensity can be brought to culmination point, with the intention of making players literally break into a sweat, even when they are not able to make their own decision (see above).

As can also be seen from these examples, there are factors which play an important part in intensifying the moments of decisions in a game. We want to explore two factors in more detail: time pressure on the one hand, and the emotional tie to the avatar on the other.[16] While time pressure as a factor is imposed solely by the game system (and is a fundamental part of many of the examples discussed in the following), the emotional tie to a player's own avatar, and to other characters in the game, is of a more complex nature. It is normally the case in games that this tie can become stronger as the game progresses, or in the words of PewDiePie at the end of his *Let's Play* of *The Last of Us*: "I'm gonna miss Ellie. And I'm gonna miss Joel. A lot." (PewDiePie 2013c, at 24:04) This bond can, however, be there from the beginning – more recently, it has become more and more the norm in games of different genres for players to mold their avatar strictly on their own ideas. (cf. X-ONE Magazine 2014) The oppressive factor of time is suspended here, and VintageBeef (2014, from 02:25), for instance, takes a long time to create his avatar in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bio-Ware, 2014). Significantly, comparatively little time is spent on choosing the race (i.e. human vs. dwarf) and classification (e.g. magician vs. warrior), or on contemplating possible combinations. In fact, he uses most of his time to adapt the look of his avatar.[17] So as the sequence begins, with VintageBeef's avatar slowly raising himself off the floor, it makes perfect sense when VintageBeef

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16 Britta Neitzel, following Hennion (2011), would use the term "Anhänglichkeit", or "close attachment" (cf. Neitzel 2012: 103).

17 VintageBeef even goes so far as to make the more detailed settings with the camera turned off. (VintageBeef 2014. at 09:00)

declares: "That's me". The numerous decisions which follow and which are all commented by the Let's Player, stem from motivations that are based on projected or desired similarities to the player's own self (cf. transcript, especially L04 and L05):

```
01  VB: o: the FRECKles look kind of !COOL!,
02      i like FRECKles.
03      freckles are SO GOOD.
04      <<p> i don't HAve any frEckles.=
05      =maybe it's because (--) maybe that_s the REAson
        i like frEckles-
06      i am JEAlous of the frEckles;>
(...)
07      i don't know if i !WANT! gold_PLAted though;=
08      =we are not like we are not !FAN!cy quanari;
09      we_re we_re (-) WORking CLASS quaNARi PEOple.
(...)
10      he looks MEnacing yet- (--)
11      <<len>^GENtle and <<p> ^DOcile.>>
12      <<p> let_s acCEPT the changes.
13      O (-) his name is> <<croaking>KAAras>?
14      NO (-) let_s call him !DA!niel.
15      whY because that is <<len> ^MY NAme>.
16      and it still sounds meaDIvely.
17      SORT of.
```

The character specifications by the game also come into play (L07-L09, with some interesting individual stresses in the descriptions of social class). When the player has finished assembling the look, he describes the avatar as "menacing yet – gentle and docile" (L10 and L11) and even gives it his own name (L14 and L15, with a noticeable change of pitch). This menacing yet gentle avatar is clearly a figure of identification, and by adopting it, VintageBeef will play the game in a way that will always reveal his own moral sense behind his decisions (cf. section *Moral Decisions*).

ENDO- AND EXOGAME DECISIONS

In our *Let's Play* examples there is a strong identification with the avatar which is expressed by a first-person commentary on the action of the game. In terms of decision-making, the relationship between the player and the game world appears to be more subtle. As the example from *The Last of Us* has shown, preprogrammed decisions may torpedo the player's identification with the avatar and force a change of perspective. Even in very intense moments of decision, which occur frequently, for instance, in *Heavy Rain*, there can be a clear distinction be-

tween decisions made in the game world as or for the avatar (*endogame deci-sions*), and decisions which individual players would make for themselves (*exo-game decisions*).

This becomes apparent in the commentary of Let's Player Danny Jesden (2013): there is a scene in which the character Ethan Mars is supposed to cut off one of his fingers to rescue his kidnapped son, and Jesden evidently struggles with the decision.[18] While other Let's Players immediately turn to pragmatic thoughts, about how to alleviate the pain or disinfect the wound after the event, and swiftly look out for suitable aids (alcohol, hot iron rod) before proceeding, Jesden spends several minutes just pondering the question whether or not he should rise to the challenge. He also repeatedly states that he is not able to do it. "Why do I have to decide" (with the stress on "have to") and "I hate these shitty decisions" – these statements vividly depict how pressurized the player feels in these moments of decision. The fact that he had failed in an earlier challenge and thus worries about the consequences, i.e. the punishment meted out by the game mechanics, ultimately makes Jesden cut off his finger. Interestingly, and in con-trast to the *Let's Plays* of other players[19], the almost voyeuristic look at the suf-fering which directly results from the decision is definitely not uppermost here:[20] instead, this player's focus is on discussing the feasibility of the decision (see transcript, German original with English translation).[21]

```
01  DJ:  JA ich tU:_s einfach ich tU:_s jetzt einfach
         yes I just do it I just do it now
         \___/
           \
          DJ looks back and forth between the camera and the
          screen
02       ich w_NUR damit ihr es wisst,
         I w_just so you know
03  FS:  sie haben noch DREI minuten.
         you have three minutes left
                            \___/
                              \
         DJ grimaces and sharply moves the controller, Ethan
         Mars screams
04       (2.0)
```

18 It is not quite clear of course how much of this may be part of a deliberate dramatiza-tion of the moment.

19 Such as in the case of PewDiePie who has given the sequence the title "*IT HURTS! ;_;*" cf. PewDiePie (2012b), at 18:48, or Sarazar (2012), at 16:35.

20 Cf. note 31.

21 The transcript begins at 03:55.

```
05  DJ:  ich würds im echten leben NICHT tun.
          I would not do this in real life
06        (2.0)
07        tut mir LEID leute aber-
          I'm so sorry guys but
08        (7.0)
09        ich bin mir sicher die alle anderen die_s let_s played
          haben haben NICHT dasselbe getan-
          I'm not sure that all the others who've let's played
          have have not done the same
10        NIEmand würde sowas tun.
          nobody would do that
11        (4.0)
12        ja wieso hat sich mein SPIEL aufgehangen.
          yeah why did my game freeze
13        (1.0)
14        mein SPIEL hat sich aufgehangen.
          my game has frozen
15        wieso denn DAS-
          why is the
16        !SPIEL;!
          game
17        wieso verARSCHST du mich.
          why are you taking the piss
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At the same time as Jesden acts (L03), which he pointedly displays by grimacing and sharply moving the controller, he lets his viewers know (L02) that he would not have acted in this way in "real life" (L05, note the repeated stress on the negative, here and further on). This statement and the following, generalized observation that "nobody would do that" (L10) both mark a clear distinction between endo- and exogame decisions. The pressures exerted by the mechanics of the game, which push the player towards a decision he would personally never have made, ironically manifest themselves in this sequence on yet another level, when the game freezes (L12) and Jesden feels that it is "taking the piss" (L17).

The intensity in this scene of *Heavy Rain* is also heightened by the game design, in the form of suspenseful, sinister music, dramatic sounds such as a heartbeat, a permanently shifting camera perspective and an input design with constantly changing quick time events which relentlessly move about. These are not inputs which require a single pressing of a button, but they often have to be repeated over a longer period in a physical display of the player's apparent determination. Additionally, there is a time allowance of five minutes, which, compared to other games, but also to other scenes within the same game, seems relatively generous. The moment of decision is extended and can be dramatized to the full, as in the case of Jesden. In this respect, the scene represents a different structure to moments of decision in those quick time events which are mostly

geared towards a player's responsiveness and skill. The intensity of the moment and thus its visibility are, however, all the more prominent here.[22]

The story is tailored by how you play

In *The Walking Dead*, yet another kind of decision can be observed. Again, time is introduced as a stress factor, when a choice usually between four answers needs to be made within a specific time frame. As opposed to the scene in *Heavy Rain*, the reward does not instantly follow the decision and is rather supposed to function as an influence on how the game unfolds, positively or negatively. "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play": this is the message shown at the beginning of all five episodes of the first season. It firmly reminds players about the importance of their decisions, leading PewDiePie to comment: "Bitch please, we know this".[23] His *Let's Plays* are proof of how a strong bond can develop with the characters over the course of a game. Unlike in *Dragon Age*, this bond is not based on the initial character creation, but on a highly narrative-based invitation to identify with the character, which the player is free to accept. The four possible answers or actions play a key role in filling these blanks: PewDiePie may not fully identify with the characters – he addresses them mainly in the second person (e.g. "take the shotgun, bro!" or "c'mon Clem, don't die!") – and yet, he feels responsible for those characters that mean something to him, and decides accordingly: "Fuck that. You know what, fuck that. Let's try that again, I don't wanna fucking lose Luke, just because – of Luke. (laughs) That's why I have the most subscribers." (PewDiePie 2014a, at 25:14) This is how he reacts to the death of the character Luke in the second season which he tries to salvage by reloading the scene. The futility of his rescue effort – every decision leads to Luke's death, albeit in slightly different ways – shows that there are limits to feasibility in games. Similarly, the ending of the first season, which did not allow a happy ending no matter the decision, revealed the predefined nature of game endings, and the difficulty with stories which can be influenced only up to a certain point.

In the second season of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2013-2014), the number of endings is increased. As one of the last decisions is reached, the five

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22 Of course this does not mean that those moments of decision which are geared towards a player's responsiveness can not be experienced in a similarly intense way. They can also be integrated into other moments of decision, as is the case in our example of quick time events in *Heavy Rain*.

23 Cf. note 1.

possible options begin to branch out. Interestingly, the choice between four deci-
sions is condensed down to two: within the usual time frame, players needs to
decide which of their two companions – who are currently engaged in a deadly
fight against another – their avatar Clementine will let live: either Jane, in which
case Clementine needs to shoot Kenny (option "Shoot Kenny"), or Kenny who
stabs Jane as Clementine turns away (option "Look away").[24] PewDiePie visibly
struggles with the decision (PewDiePie 2014a, at 17:42): the cursor goes back
and forth four times between these two choices, before he eventually shoots
Kenny. He is so overwhelmed by the consequences of his decision that he re-
mains silent and turns away from the game to hide his tears.[25] PewDiePie's ex-
planation, because of time pressure, normally follows the event but here he
seems in no condition to do this and gives it later, at the end of the game (ibid):

```
01  PDP:  i real (-) i really FEEL like (--) we made the(-)
           right choice-
02         i dunno if someone_s gonna disagree with me BUT-
03         (1.0)
04         i just feel like kenny_s time was OVer; (--)
05         he_s been through SO much FUCKing SHIT-
06         THAT (.) it would_wouldn_t be a point to keep him
           \__/
              \
            music/background noises stop, blackscreen
07         alive;
08         AND (-) he just needed to see it then; (--)
09         that_s why (.) i !DID! it;
10         and the game really !FOR!ced you to !DO! it and that_s
           why it was so HARD to dO it.
11         i FEEL like.
```

In his rationale for having decided to not let Kenny live, PewDiePie states that
the character's time "was over" and that he had "been through so much" (L04-
L06), thus using feelings rather than rational arguments to explain his decision
("feel" is mentioned three times, cf. L01, L04 and L11 with two focal stresses).
As both the decision and the acceptance of the consequences have proved diffi-
cult for him, his rationale seems to shift from explanation towards justification.
There is a clear stress on the making of the decision (L09), and he even blames
the game for pushing him (or rather: "you", the player in general) into a deci-
sion: "The Game really forced you to do it" (L10, with similarly strong focal

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24 The second option also comes into effect when the time runs out without a decision
   having been made.

25 Cf. Isbister (2016: 22), who also observes and discusses the attachment of players to
   their companions in the games.

stresses). Later on, PewDiePie even admits that he feels ashamed because of his decision ("It's embarrassing – I feel so embarrassed, I don't know why") (ibid., at 26:45). Again, this raises the question to what extent players begin to perceive themselves as puppets within the game as a decision machine[26] – and yet, these intense, emotional moments most certainly are what makes these almost exclusively decision-based games so attractive.

MORAL DECISIONS

> Gaming does not liberate us from constraints (since we accept the far stricter constraint of the rules), but it delivers us from freedom. We lose freedom if we live it merely as reality.
>
> *(Baudrillard 2001: 66)*

In our analog reality, decisions in most cases are already complex and difficult. They are characterized by moral, social and economic considerations. They can make us feel uncertain, as we are not always sure how the rules of the system work and what kind of a decision we are actually making. What other options are there? Is there a solution, and what is really important for it? What are the expected consequences? And is the decision morally justifiable? Games, on the other hand, usually do everything to eliminate such uncertainties, and they make decisions easier – as decision machines, they provide a designed logic of consequences and are therefore simpler in their make-up. In the majority of cases players are even relieved of these moral considerations. It is the only way to allow players to act fast, and it also enables a structured and easy integration of the

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26 This is especially the case when players have the possibility to play through all the different endings, which is exactly what PewDiePie (2014b) did in response to many comments from his community in his *Let's Play* entitled *The Walking Dead: Season 2 – All Endings – ALL OUT OF TEARS* …: "I really don't want to shoot Ken again, after all of this. I feel awful!" (at 15:12). After having tried out all possible endings, he still insists that his decision was the one that made the most sense (at 27:33). At the very end of the video he does, however, admit: "I probably keep going with the end where we keep going with Ken, just for the for the [sic] sake of it" (at 27:50). "[T]he player seems to expect that there will be one single, perfect solution" (Juul 2011: 112) – what Juul observes for the puzzle genre seems to be especially vital for these kind of multiple ending games.

game system into game design. For this purpose, and to bypass the problem of moral decisions, game design offers a range of tactics on different levels: for instance, the choice of abstract themes (e.g. *Tetris*. [Alexei Paschitnow 1984]: jigsaw pieces; *Diablo 3* [Blizzard Entertainment 2012-2014]: green blood), human opponents being replaced by aliens (e.g. *Doom* [Id Software, 1993]), or a deformation beyond the point of recognition (e.g. *The Last of Us*).[27] The story can also be laid out specifically to put players on the spot in an often seemingly primitive, black-and-white situation in which they are allowed to lose all their inhibitions, and hence are freed from any moral concerns for the sake of enjoying the game (e.g. *Battlefield* series [Digital Illusions CE, 2002-2015], cf. Kocher/Bauer/Suter 2009).

Despite these precautions, there have usually been attempts to introduce reality in the form of moral aspects by means of settings or sets of rules.[28] There are many reasons for this, ranging from an increase of attention that comes with the transgression of boundaries, to the possibility of raising the value of the decisions. (cf. Costikyan 2013) The introduction of questions of morality is also a way of expanding the game design, both in terms of the setting (which themes may be addressed?) and in terms of rules (what is permissible in a game?). By creating a connection with reality, the basic repository of concrete decisions can be extended as well. For the players this means that they are once more confronted with a moment of uncertainty,[29] but this time, it is amplified by the question in which sphere the respective system of moral values is actually valid: does the decision apply to the game, or reality? In other words: is a game really just a simulation of the real world, and its catalyst for moral reflections? Introducing questions of morality automatically means that decisions are magnified. They do not necessarily become more meaningful as a result, but they certainly have more of a real-life quality. This suggests a possible case of reversal, in the sense that not only is reality introduced into the game, but the game also enters reality. Yet it remains unclear who rates the decisions, by which criteria, and for which

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27 The visibly human aspect in these cases adds to the tragic element (e.g. Clementine's parents in *The Walking Dead Season 1*).

28 Cf. also Sicart (2009), who discusses games such as *Deus Ex*, *GTA* or *Battlefield 1942*.

29 This "realistic" uncertainty can be increased by leaving open what the consequences might be further along in the game, such as in *This War of Mine* (2014).

of the worlds. These moral decisions are, however, clearly connected to reality by their design – and we therefore experience a loss of freedom.[30]

In the *GTA* game series, numerous moral boundaries are crossed, but the infamous torture scene in *GTA V* does not involve any ethical decisions, as the game clearly makes torture a necessity here.[31] The players themselves decide individually to what extent they want to adjust their endogame decisions to their exogame system of values. In one player's case, there is maximum if belated adjustment, when, in a notorious scene in *GTA IV* (Rockstar North, 2008), he runs over the prostitute whose services he has just used, and utters the words: "I'm a hired killer and I pay for sex. My mother would be ashamed". (CriJulian0094 2008, at 02:08) This appears even more dubious because, in contrast to the torture scene in *GTA V* (Rockstar North, 2013), the immoral decision here has not been forced on the player by the game so the story can continue – the adoption of a gangster-style attitude is solely the player's choice. The question remains whether it is acceptable to justify this decision as a lived consequence of the setting which is predefined by the game design. When players fail to recognize that criminals inhabit social (in this case mafia-like) structures (*The Wire*, 2002-2008, *Gomorra*, 2008, etc.), much like everyone else, it is evident that such decisions, or their consequences, must be factored in by the game and must be playable.

Often it is not obvious whether these immoral decisions are recognized as such, and accepted as part of the game by a player. It would mean that the player would expect a reward from the game, which seems to be at odds with the notion of immoral decisions. PewDiePie's *Let's Play* of *Gretel & Hansel* (Armor Games, 2010), a point-and-click short game, supports this assumption. (cf.

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30 Looking at texts or films for comparison, the impossibility of making decisions in these media is mainly regarded as a disadvantage. Yet in certain cases it can be seen as an advantage: readers/viewers can not advance or prevent anything; they experience the rules of these fictional worlds at close range, but at the same time they are not subject to any (moral) responsibility.

31 Interestingly, once again the pressure exerted by the game is mentioned, for example by VintageBeef (2013c, at 19:11): "That was horrible. The torture and stuff. C'mon game?!" A scene from *God of War 3* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010) is similarly provocative and unavoidable: the quick time sequence requires an input via L1 and R1 which results in the victim's eyes being gouged out, from the victim's perspective. This action leaves Let's Players speechless. (e.g. TheWolverous 2013, at 07:38) Despite being listed as number one in the "most brutal kills" video for this game, this L1/R1 sequence is actually not shown. (Assassamasta 2010, at 03:58).

PewDiePie 2013a) The player, whose avatar is Gretel, is given a sling as one of his first props. This leads PewDiePie to stage a kind of role play (cf. transcript below):[32] he likes the way Hansel moves (L03, L13), which is why he repeatedly uses Gretel to fire at Hansel, in order to make him "dance" ("make the dance", L04-Z08). Just like in a puppet show, he switches between a falsetto voice (Hansel) and a loud, commandeering voice (Gretel). The first shot leaves Hansel with a black eye, and PewDiePie notices this ("oh shit", L02), but still keeps going. Hansel is increasingly injured ("holy shit, we can really fuck him up, huh?", L09 and L10) and eventually drops dead (L19). PewDiePie's reaction is one of shocked surprise and amusement in equal measure (L20).

```
01  PDP:   <<ff> fuck !YOU!;>
02         that_s the LAme <<len> o: SHIT.>
03         NIce dude make the DANce;
04         <<falsetto> no pits> <<ff> make the !DAN!ce;>
05         MAke it;
06         <<falsetto> here we go YEAH.>
07         do you <<falsetto> see the> <<ff> shut !UP!
           make the !DAN!ce;>
08         <<falsetto> ele heats pits> <<ff> make the !DAN!ce.>
09         <<len> HOly shit.>
10         we can REALly fuck him up HUH?
11         ((laughs))
((…))
12         ((laughs))
13         HANS is fucking Awesome.=
14         =look at him he is like <<denasal> do you see this
           MOves;
15         do you see this MOves>;
16         <<ff> !NO! i don_t see> them <<falsetto> sorry pits;>
17         Idiot-
18         (0.5)
           \___/
              \
            Hansel sways
19         what (.) what HAPpened;
                   \___/
                      \
                Hansel drops dead
20         <<ff> i !KIL!led him-> ((laughs))
21         <<croaking and high-voiced> i_m !SOR!RY->
22         (2.5)
23         <<disguised voice> i didn_t MEAN to do> ok i actually
           meant to do it.
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Initially, PewDiePie launches into a justification – his voice still in disguise, playing another role – but because of his prior knowledge (L09 and L10) he

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32 Ibid. The transcript starts at 04:14.

quickly concedes that he had been expecting Hansel's death (L23). It escapes him that this fits exactly into the concept of the game, and that, in fact, it triggered a reward, but he will have noticed by that stage that this sweet fairy-tale world has his own surprising (im-)morality. *Gretel & Hansel* reveals itself as a highly sophisticated game, which, starting with the title, employs postmodern tactics of reversal to take the game-over situation to the point of absurdity (cf also Williams 2010): the more deaths occur, the more medals are collected – with the ultimate goal of being awarded the title "Grimm Master". The means of death, stoning one's brother to death – the respective medal is suitably labelled "Cain" – has been accidentally triggered by PewDiePie when he made the immoral decision to fire at Hansel who anxiously tries to duck each shot; a decision which probably sprang from favorable circumstances and perhaps a naïve notion (of a sling as a child's weapon), but is mostly "owed" to an overwhelming enjoyment of the game that went a little out of hand and turned into a slightly grotesque spectacle (making Hansel dance) – which entirely befits the game.[33]

To make immoral decisions in a playful manner, simulations seem a particularly suitable strategy. However, there are games which lend themselves to being played in an ethically correct way, as our last example will show. It is a *Let's Play* of the game *Little Computer People* (Activision, 1985) in which the YouTuber SpiderMwa presents the version *House-on-a-Disk*: "This is a very very very weird game at least as some people say it, but it's actually a simulation game". (SpiderMwa 2012, at 00:12) Based on the concept that every computer has a "resident" – a *Little Computer Person* (LCP) – a house is shown into which that person can move. To ensure they live a happy life, they need to be given food, something to do and the opportunity to interact with the outside world. This means that the player needs to type orders, which must be phrased correctly: "You always have to type please before giving him orders, just to be nice"[34]. SpiderMwa's style of play is markedly friendly, and he always takes care that the activities of his LCP named Russell are varied and interesting. He could make immoral decisions if he wanted to: for instance, no longer waking the LCP, letting him go hungry or refusing any kind of interaction with him. (cf. "Little

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33 An animated potato, which is supposed to signify that there is not enough food, is the origin of the game's recurring theme of dancing. "The potato will dance", as PewDiePie comments. (PewDiePie 2013b, at 01:20) He returns to the theme several times later on, for instance, at 09:37, when he makes Gretel dance to the banjo music of the old man and beatboxes along to it.

34 Ibid. at 05:57. LCPs consent to these orders by nodding, but they can also ignore them.

Computer Manual") The game of course provides for these eventualities and in-cludes the option to show the LCP turning green in bed – an option which per-haps would have been even more obvious in the original version carrying the subtitle *Research Project*. Yet SpiderMwa, who refers to himself as "your friendly neighborhood let's player" (SpiderMwa 2012, at 27:23), not only treats Russell fairly throughout the game, but he also completely ignores the possibility of acting immorally, which is reflected by his statement at the end: "that's pretty much it that there is to this game, I have pretty much shown everything" (Ibid. at 26:22).

SpiderMwa's style of play vividly shows that not everything that is prepro-grammed in a game, particularly regarding immoral decisions, must be accepted and followed through. Games as a system lay down the rules in the form of chal-lenges, options, a choice of actions and valuated consequences, and they invite players to create, as a concrete actualization of these rules, a decision tree – which is nothing less than the prefabricated result of numerous, long game de-sign decisions. As ludic decision machines, games are geared towards perfecting the moment of decision by an intrinsically motivational design (guiding princi-ples), and as such they leave it to the players whether they want to make their decisions based on criteria from the endo- or exogame worlds. This opens up all manner of possibilities – including the well-intended assimilation to the game world (as in the case of the naïve killer in *GTA IV*), the staging of a *Let's Play* role (VintageBeef, SpiderMwa), the introduction of preferences and notions of morality (PewDiePie), and the deliberate dramatization of the moment of deci-sion or the clarification of a player's own point of view (DannyJesden). This rich palette of moments of decision, factored in and offered by the game and accept-ed by the players, can become visible and observable as a tangible experience by means of *Let's Plays*.

KEY TO GAT2 TRANSCRIPTIONS

(the list below only contains the conventions relevant to this article)

[ ]	overlaps and speaking simultaneously
[ ]	
°h	breathing in
(.)	micropause, estimate, up to approx. 0.2 seconds
(-)	brief pause, estimate, approx. 0.2 to 0.5 seconds
(--)	medium-length pause, estimate, approx. 0.5 to 0.8 seconds
(1.0)	timed pauses

`robert_s`	words joined together within units
`((coughs))`	para- and extralinguistic actions and events
`<<whispers>>`	para- and extralinguistic actions, events accompanying speech
`((...))`	gap in transcript
`=`	fast, immediate follow-on contribution by speaker
`:`	extending, lengthening by approx. 0.2 to 0.5 seconds
`acCENT`	focal stress, accentuation
`accEnt`	secondary stress
`ac!CENT!`	pronounced stress

Fluctuations in pitch at the end of intonational phrases:

`?`	steep rise
`,`	medium rise
`–`	even level
`;`	medium drop
`.`	steep drop

Intralinear notation of fluctuations in stress and pitch

`^SO`	rising-falling

Changes in volume and pace of speech:

`<<ff> >`	fortissimo, very loud
`<<p> >`	piano, quiet
`<<acc> >`	accelerando, becoming faster
`<<len> >`	lento, slow

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