Conclusion: Toward an Atmospherology of Digital Games

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The Impossibility of Talking about Atmospheres

In this anthology, we have set out to examine the uncharted regions of atmosphere in digital games. Atmosphere is ever present in non-academic discussions, games are lauded for having it, shunned for lacking it. But what does atmosphere really mean? Browsing the distribution platform Steam and searching for games tagged as "atmospheric," we find role-playing heavyweights like Red Dead Redemption 2 and The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, which are commended for their intriguing world-building.[2, 3] Other entries might be more surprising, like Euro Truck Simulator 2, a simulation game that allows players to deliver cargo and spend hours on motorways around the world.[4]

If we dig deeper into the user reviews on Steam it becomes impossible to ignore that the term atmosphere—whatever it means—is of importance for many players to describe their play experiences. For example, the 2012 title Dishonored, a stealth game that casts the player in a plague-ridden city, is recommended on Steam by the user "Murphy's Lawyer" for "[g]ame atmosphere

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1   This chapter is loosely tied to the author's dissertation "Atmosphärisches Vergangenheitserleben im Digitalen Spiel" (University of Cologne 2022, publication with Büchner forthcoming).

2   Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games 2018, O: Rockstar Studios).

3   The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt 2015, O: CD Projekt Red).

4   Euro Truck Simulator 2 (SCS Software 2012, O: SCS Software).

connoiseurs."[5, 6] They claim that "[t]he atmosphere of the game is really its heart and soul."[7] Another user, "Knal," points out that "[t]he very first thing that will grip you as you play is the unique world and amazing atmosphere,"[8] while user "Beaker" claims that "the atmospheric scenery of the decaying city has burned itself into my memory for eternity."[9]

Or take a look at the Steam reviews for ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE (2015), which is set in London during the Industrial Revolution. The user "GrimReaper" argues that "[t]he soundtracks and atmosphere in the game involuntarily send you to London in the XIX centuries."[10] And even the user "Gollycon" who does not, in fact, recommend the game, has to acknowledge that "[a] lot of the pubs and street corners had a pleasant atmosphere to them."[11]

Granted, this is no more than a fraction of the thousands of comments we can find on Steam, other distribution platforms, or on social channels like Twitter or Reddit. Still, these few comments paint a vivid picture of a term that is used regularly, nonchalantly and—as it seems—without needing any further explanation. This colloquial use of the term and the seeming omnipresence of conversations about atmospheres—think about commentators lamenting the lack of atmosphere in football stadiums emptied by pandemic restrictions—has given atmospheres their reputation of being "mere linguistic phenomena"[12] or "a mere metaphorical way of speaking."[13] But is this actually the case?

As the philosopher and renowned researcher on atmospheres Gernot Böhme has pointed out, a usage of the term atmosphere "in the non-meteorological sense [is] provable at least since the 18th century."[14] And while we may find reasons to

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5   https://steamcommunity.com/id/murphyslawyer87/recommended/205100/ from 15.11. 2015.

6   DISHONORED (Bethesda Softworks 2012, O: Arkane Studios).

7   https://steamcommunity.com/id/murphyslawyer87/recommended/205100/ from 15.11. 2015.

8   https://steamcommunity.com/id/knal/recommended/205100/ from 24.06.2015.

9   Ibid.

10 https://steamcommunity.com/id/GrimReaper0406/recommended/368500/ from 13.01. 2020.

11 https://steamcommunity.com/id/free-man/recommended/368500/ from 03.12.2018.

12 Rauh, Andreas: "Versuche zur aisthetischen Atmosphäre", In: Rainer Goetz and Stefan Graupner (eds.), *Atmosphäre(n): Interdisziplinäre Annährungen an einen unscharfen Begriff*, München: kopaed 2007, pp. 123-41, here p. 124, transl. by author.

13 Böhme, Gernot: *Aisthetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, München: Wilhelm Fink 2001, p. 48, transl. by author.

14 Ibid., p. 51, transl. by author.

discredit the term atmosphere as an "almost dogmatically used revelatory phrase [*Offenbarungswort*],"[15] we would be remiss to discard its significance as a practice established over centuries to describe emotional relationships between subjects and their environment. We should not mistake the way the term *is* used—inconsistently, abundantly, and unreflectively—with the way it *could* be used. No matter how "vague," and "subjective"[16]—as Björn Redecker acknowledges in this anthology—atmospheres may seem, one thing is for certain: they refer to a "*non-neutral* place"[17] and to a "specific mode of perception."[18] Whoever uses the term does so to describe *something* that is difficult to grasp with the tools language affords us. We could see this diffuse omnipresence of atmospheres as a sign of defeat, of the inadequacy of our terms, or even as a "symptom of exhaustion."[19] However, I argue here that the term atmosphere is not the endpoint of an attempt at grasping this ominous *something* that we feel when tucked in at home in the flickering light of a fireplace[20] or when riding through the thick virtual forest of RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2.[21] On the contrary, it is the starting point for much more if its "hermeneutic potential" is embraced fully.[22] The concept of atmosphere carries such potential because it encourages the exploration of existing material from new angles. It draws attention to the conscious design of space as a means to shape

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15 Henckmann, Wolfhart: "Atmosphäre, Stimmung, Gefühl", In: Rainer Goetz and Stefan Graupner (eds.), *Atmosphäre(n): Interdisziplinäre Annährungen an einen unscharfen Begriff*, München: kopaed 2007, pp. 45-84, here p. 55, transl. by author.

16 Björn Redecker in this volume, p. 208.

17 Rauh, Andreas: *Aisthetische Atmosphäre*, p. 124, transl. by author.

18 Ibid.

19 Wellbery, David E.: "Stimmung", In: Karlheinz Barck et al. (eds.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe, Vol. 5*, Stuttgart / Weimar: J.B. Metzler 2010, pp. 703-33, here p. 732, transl. by author.

20 This specific situation could, for example, be described with the Danish expression "hygge". It is by no means accidental that attempts have been made to connect hygge to the concept of atmosphere. In this vain, anthropologist Jeppe Trolle Linnet defines hygge as "the sense of an atmosphere that allows dwelling" (see https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/definition-hygge-jeppe-linnet-phd from 11.04.2018).

21 Zimmermann, Felix: "Ethical Boredom in the Wilderness: Treating Red Dead Redemption 2 as an Ambience Action Game", In: Dietmar Meinel (ed.): *Video Games and Spatiality in Amercian Studies: Playing the Field II*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2022, pp. 51-70.

22 Rauh, Andreas: *Aisthetische Atmosphäre*, p. 124, transl. by author.

the player's emotional state. The question is: Does our understanding of the virtual world change if we take atmospheres into account?

This is to say that we, as researchers of (digital) games, should come to terms with the inescapable vagueness of the common discourse surrounding atmospheres and therefore with the impossibility of (adequately) talking about them. By no means does this acknowledgment predetermine what we can do with atmospheres moving forward. If anything, there is work to be done. The term and its current usage pose a challenge for academic research, especially for game studies. While atmospheres are remarkably present in the production and reception of digital games, the research on these games and their contexts seems hesitant to adopt the topic.[23,24] This is hardly surprising when we consider the statements made above. As it stands, the terminology is fundamentally fraught and therefore atmosphere is not a tool that we can simply apply to better understand digital games. The "hermeneutic potential," consequently, does not lie in the term atmosphere itself. Rather, it challenges us to improve upon it, to develop methodologies to analyze the phenomenon it refers to, and to engage with the countless statements of players and developers alike who try to put into words a special engagement they have with digital games and their worlds.

AVENUES AND COMPLICATIONS

Terms

What we need is an atmospherology of digital games: a scientific theory of how the phenomenon of atmosphere can be described in relation to the specific mediality of digital games. But before a unifying effort can be made to set in stone the pillars of such an atmospherology, steps must be undertaken to adapt the existing

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23 The first German-language anthology on this topic was brought forth by Christian Huberts and Sebastian Standke in 2014: Huberts, Christian and Standke, Sebastian (eds.): *Zwischen|Welten: Atmosphären im Computerspiel*, Glückstadt: Verlag Werner Hülsbusch (vwh), 2014.

24 Recently a few English-language publications have dealt with atmospheres and digital games, for example: Fuchs, Mathias: Phantasmal Spaces, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2019; Zimmermann, Felix and Huberts, Christian: "From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre", In: *Press Start* 5 (2019), pp. 29-50; Whistance-Smith, Gregory: *Expressive Space: Embodying Meaning in Video Game Environments*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2022.

research on atmospheres to what has been established already in game studies discourse.[25] This is not an endeavor for one or even a few researchers but for a multitude of scholars who approach atmospheres each with their own specific research focus.[26] The previous chapters have made apparent the productivity of this strategy, making big steps toward an atmospherology of digital games, answering questions, asking new ones, and leaving ample room for future research in this growing field. They are to be understood as pieces of a greater puzzle, as first expeditions into the unknown that strive to uncover answers and illuminate the whole. See for example the ludomusicological perspectives on atmospheres that **Björn Redecker** and **Vadim Nickel** bring forth. They understand that atmospheres, like music and sound, are immediate. As Redecker points out, "we need to conceive the aural layer of digital games as a whole."[27] It is specifically this holistic approach towards game audio that will be essential to an atmosphereology of digital games moving forward. Beyond that, scholars must not fall into the trap of an ahistorical exceptionalism of atmospheric production and experience in digital games. As Nickel convincingly shows, the way digital games produce atmospheres by means of game audio is very similar to the traditions of ambient and especially generative music. This led Nickel to identify a specific "generative atmospheric experience."[28] It is of great importance to understand that the phenomenon in focus here is not categorically different from the centuries of (talking about) atmospheric experience. On the contrary, the continuation of this tradition in digital games only proves that "[a]esthetics is a basic human need"[29] that can be satisfied by atmospheric experiences brought forth by an "aesthetic economy" – which entails digital games.[30]

However, it is hardly possible to ignore the terminological complication the term 'ambient music' brings with it. As if the inconsistent use of the term *atmosphere* wasn't enough, an atmospherology of digital games will also have to take

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25 For example, it can be asked how atmospheres relate to a prevalent concept like Immersion (see Freitag, Florian et al.: "Immersivity: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Spaces of Immersion", In: *Ambiances – International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space* (2020)).

26 Granted, in my dissertation I'm trying to tie some threads together.

27 Björn Redecker in this volume, p. 221.

28 Vadim Nickel in this volume, p. 203.

29 Böhme, Gernot: *Atmosphäre. Essays zur Neuen Ästhetik*, 7th edition, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2013, p. 41, transl. by author.

30 Böhme, Gernot: *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres, Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces*, London / New York: Routledge 2017, p. 33.

into account the numerous other terms that are used to described atmospheric experience. One of these terms is 'ambient' or 'ambience' which is featured in the introduction to this section by **Sonia Fizek**. She has called for a holistic approach to ambient media and identifies "Slow Play" as a specific ludic practice in relation to ambience.[31]

Without going into too much detail on the terminological quandaries of atmosphere, ambience, *Stimmung*, mood, tone, attunement-to name but a few-it is evident that there is no consensus on the relationship of these terms. Atmosphere and *Stimmung* are prominent in German-language literature on the topic; mood and tone are terms in more colloquial settings, for example when developers or players describe their experiences with games; and ambience or "ambiances,"[32] as they are called by the French sociologist Jean-Paul Thibaud,[33] are more popular in English-language atmosphere research. As the chapters by Nickel and Fizek demonstrate, 'ambience' puts emphasis on specific aspects of atmospheric experience, especially on audio arrangements (ambient music) and-as Fizek makes clear—on the unconscious and subtle, i.e. that which is not reflected upon by the player. Based on this, Fizek has made the convincing claim that "ambience complicates the usual story of an aesthetic video gaming experience, which is usually regarded as a foreground activity."[34] It is still up for debate, however, whether ambience is indeed "much more capacious a term than atmosphere", as Fizek maintains.[35]

I would argue that an atmospherology of digital games will have to integrate related terms like ambience, however, not in a sense of assimilation but of productive coexistence. Atmosphere, then, could constitute an umbrella term under which other terms like ambience, mood, or tone can be subsumed, with each term providing a specific focus and nuanced view of atmospheric experience. Atmospheric experience can very much be a conscious and reflective foreground experience, but at the same time it is possible to talk about atmospheric experience in terms of the background, of the unconscious and pre-reflective. The terminological plurality of atmosphere allows us to be both transparent and precise about our research endeavor. While complex terminology requires the added effort of

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31 Sonia Fizek in this volume, p. 127.

32 The „International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space", one of the most important publications on atmosphere research, is also titled „ambiances", see https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/.

33 See for example Thibaud, Jean-Paul: "Urban Ambiances as Common Ground?", In: *Lebenswelt: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience 4* (2014), pp. 282-95.

34 Sonia Fizek in this volume, p. 140.

35 Sonia Fizek in this volume, p. 129.

striving for clarity and sophistication, the value of such an effort has been demonstrated by the nuanced approaches in this anthology, oscillating between terms like atmosphere and ambience while highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

Themes

An atmospherology of digital games must be understood as an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor, not only in how phenomenology and game studies are joined but also in how the broader historical and cultural context of atmospheric experience is to be considered.[36] The productivity of such an understanding is especially apparent in the chapters by **Anh-Thu Nguyen**, **Magdalena Leichter**, and **Katja Aller**.

One of the core arguments of Gernot Böhme is that atmospheres are a product of "aesthetic work."[37]Atmospheres, in that sense, can be consciously created to fulfill specific functions and satisfy specific (aesthetic) needs. Nguyen shows how productive it can be to rethink well-known cultural dynamics like tourism, which is of increasing importance to digital games, in terms of atmosphere. She has opened up an avenue for future research on atmospheres as part of "national branding strategies"[38] and "as a marketing tool for Cool Japan."[39] With this, she has entered the territory of what Mathias Fuchs has termed "phantasmal spaces," which he describes as "rich with atmospheric content"[40] and as "rhizomes of memories, conventions, cultural techniques and material history in permanent change".[41] An atmospherology of digital games will also have to consider the production and experience of atmospheres in digital games as complex cultural networks and thereby follow in the footsteps of the work presented here.

Similarly, Leichter acknowledges the longstanding tradition of atmospheric experience and its origins as a meteorological term. She underlines the sentiment

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36 For example, to encompass a historical perspective on atmospheres, I propose the concept of "atmospheres of the past" (see Zimmermann, Felix: "Historical Digital Games as Experiences: How Atmospheres of the Past Satisfy Needs of Authenticity", In: Marc Bonner (ed.), *Game | World | Architectonics: Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021, pp. 19-34).

37 Böhme, Gernot: *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, p. 14.

38 Anh-Thu Nguyen in this volume, p. 151.

39 Anh-Thu Nguyen in this volume, p. 153.

40 M. Fuchs, Phantasmal Spaces, p. 127.

41 Ibid., p. 130.

that an atmospherology of digital games should not reduce the complexity of the phenomenon by disregarding its history and cultural embeddedness. On the contrary, the complexity of atmospheres must be addressed by an interdisciplinary project. Drawing on a diverse assemblage of researchers, this anthology demonstrates how a joining of game studies and atmosphere research is to be achieved.[42] Leichter's analysis of wind shows the value of engaging with even the most commonplace phenomena. For Leichter, wind must be regarded as a "multisensory phenomenon, making the gameworld a navigable space with meteorological (air-filled) atmospheres as well as an aesthetic realm".[43]

Finally, Aller's contribution can be seen as a plea to take seriously the implications of genre discourse about and beyond digital games when it comes to forming an adequate atmospherology. Her chapter serves as a stark reminder that generalized statements about what constitutes atmospheric experience in digital games are out of the question. A genre like the Walking Simulator—which is in itself heavily debated[44]—utilizes very specific techniques to produce, as Aller has stated, "uncanny atmospheres" and is therefore to be regarded separately from other genres that employ different gameplay mechanics, player perspectives and such.[45] What is more, with her implementation of seminal theories on the uncanny and fearfulness, Aller underscores one of the central arguments of this chapter, namely that an atmospherology of digital games will and must invite interdisciplinary work to unleash the "hermeneutic potential" of atmospheres.

Methods

How do we describe atmospheric experience—a question that has accompanied us since the beginning of this chapter—and how do we objectify that which is so

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42 And with this, this book follows into the footsteps of the German-language anthology by Christian Huberts and Sebastian Standke which first broke ground in this regard.

43 Magdalena Leichter in this volume, p. 171.

44 Cf. Carbo-Mascarell, Rosa: "Walking Simulators: The Digitisation of an Aesthetic Practice", In: *Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG* (2016); Juul, Jesper: The Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of the Aesthetics of Video Games: Walking Simulators as Response to the Problem of Optimization. Lecture at the *12th International Conference on the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference* (August 2018, Copenhagen); Debus, Michael S.: *Unifying Game Ontology: A Faceted Classification of Game Elements*. Dissertation, Copenhagen 2019; F. Zimmermann & C. Huberts, *From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game*.

45 Katja Aller in this volume, p. 175.

radically subjective? Böhme has engaged with this question and determined atmospheres as "quasi-objective or something existent intersubjectively."[46] By that, he refers to the double nature of atmosphere: On the one hand, atmospheres are subjectively experienced and very much determined by an individual's predisposition. On the other hand, you can argue about and even agree with others on the atmospheres present in specific special arrangement.[47] Atmospheres can be, as I pointed out before, consciously created and the elements used to create these atmospheres can be put under scrutiny.[48] Therefore, their intersubjectivity lies especially in the tried and tested, in some cases even traditionalized elements used in their creation.

Jonathan Jung Johansen reminds us that, although this anthology is mainly concerned with digital games, we cannot ignore the sophisticated techniques of aesthetic work that analog games and game design draw on. As Johansen demonstrates, an atmospherology of digital games could benefit from the research of game mechanics and their influence on atmosphere production and atmospheric experience. Johansen makes a strong argument for researchers of atmospheres in all play contexts to focus on the physical or virtual presence of game objects as "ecstasies," meaning "the way things are radiating into space and thus contributing to the formation of an atmosphere."[49] The unassuming Jenga tower is a striking example of such a game element and is key in the atmospheric play situation Johansen describes. His analysis underlines that we would do well to value game design in its importance for an atmospherology of digital games as a whole. Especially Johansen but also many of the other authors in this volume bring forth deliberations on how a method for approaching atmospheres in digital games can be created that eminently considers the ludic.

CLOSING REMARKS ON ATMOSPHERIC COMPETENCE

The seven contributions of this volume are a testament to the urgent need for an atmospherology of digital games. As we speak, atmospheres are at work in the

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46 Böhme, Gernot: *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, p. 2.

47 Cf. ibid.

48 I argue in another paper that we could call the process of translating atmospheric situations into constellations of elements a "constellation analysis" (cf. F. Zimmermann, *Historical Digital Games as Experiences*, p. 25).

49 G. Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, p. 5.

world around us and in the worlds we enter via play. The full range of their influence, however, still eludes most game research.

Gernot Böhme makes an interesting point when he argues for an "aesthetic education"[50] and the corresponding development of "atmospheric competencies"[51] to allow not only researchers but society as whole to be aware of the power of atmospheres. This power lies in the often-unconscious effects atmospheres have on our emotional state. Böhme, and the Italian philosopher Tonio Griffero deduce that "atmospheric 'competence'" is what helps us to "really learn how not to be grossly manipulated".[52]

These concluding remarks are not meant as an alarmist plea to shun or regulate atmosphere production and atmospheric experience. They are but a reminder that atmospheres are already an integral part of our lives and, specifically, an essential aspect of the gameplay experience. As I said at the beginning of this chapter: games are lauded for having it and shunned for lacking it; and, additionally, developers do their best to satisfy this demand for atmospheric experience and have, over the years, established techniques of aesthetic work currently neglected by academic research. Let us change that, let us learn to understand what players mean, what developers mean, what *we* mean when we talk about atmospheres in games, not to dispel the magic of atmospheric experience but to understand (and perhaps enjoy) it more fully.

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50 Böhme, Gernot: "Atmosphären wahrnehmen, Atmosphären gestalten, mit Atmosphären leben: Ein neues Konzept ästhetischer Bildung", In: Rainer Goetz and Stefan Graupner (eds.), *Atmosphäre(n): Interdisziplinäre Annährungen an einen unscharfen* Begriff, München: kopaed 2007, pp. 31-43, here p. 39, transl. by author.

51 Ibid., p. 40, transl. by author.

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