I Believe in Videogames

A Medium's Potential for Spiritual Experiences

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Introduction

Technology and spirituality can be argued to stand in a paradigmatic correspondence. Remarking on the sprawling advent of new technologies in the mid and late 19th century, Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan noted that spirituality established itself as "a technology in its own right" (2016: 902): It enabled practitioners to connect amongst each other as well as with what they believed to exist beyond a concrete reality via "diverse techniques, codes, electrics, song and dance, political address, scientific experimentation, parlor games" (ibid.) and other strategies. In the 21st century, the digital age expands this plethora with ephemeral cyberspaces that may serve as "[vehicles] to inform, enlighten and support knowledge and truth seekers" (Di Maio 2019: 427) who intend to engage with their spiritual side, or may stumble upon their spiritual sentiment without even noticing so before. The extraordinary appeal of these realms is that they are much more than a cultural archive (in the sense of Assmann 1988: 13) of readily accessible slices of knowledge. Instead, they offer dynamic and interactive means of affective engagement, encouraging users to creatively connect with the spiritual (ibid: 428) or to find themselves in a mode of engagement with the medium that unexpectedly inspires an awareness of their inmost for the mysteries of the unfathomable which we typically connect to the spiritual realm (cf. Welte 1965: 33).

To understand why videogames are an essential part of this digital offer that allows to engage one's spirituality, one must be willing to rethink technology at the crossroads of public understanding (achievement, progress, etc.) and personal meaning (cf. Parcey 2001: 1–13). They connect interactive engagement with the phenomena of immersion and embodiment through their unique remedial composition (cf. Bolter/Grusin 2000: 5) and do so at an unprecedented scale of accessibility. As generally available entertainment products, videogames are the perchance most commonly available provider of fictitious

virtual spaces that allows its users to explore them without prior expertise. These users are typically referred to as players because these virtual spaces invite playful interaction in a half-reality of fictional, narrative content that is guided by hard-coded rules and mechanics (following Juul 2005). Such virtual videogame worlds not only incite curiosity but can be based spiritual imagery or reflect upon it (cf. Bosman 2016). They are the tools that enable players to enter virtual spaces shaped by cultural knowledge to seek and make spiritual experiences, and this potential is due to their interactivity; tightly connected to each player's subjective disposition.

Personally, I have struggled to allocate my research on videogames, and the spiritual experiences that they may provide, appropriately within a scientific framework. Even though videogames can be described as a sum of objectively definable components, of algorithms, rulesets, and audio-visuals, for which countless taxonomic models exist, the actual player experience happens outside of exactly definable norms due to the ergodic state of the game, and the hermetic and esoteric quality of human nature. Even models specifically aiming to explain the dimensions in which players are affected by videogames (such as the MDA-model by Hunicke/LeBlanc/Zubek 2001–2004) may explain how games intend to affect the human being but cannot answer for every subjective, intimate, and thus private sentiment. At large, this is of course an issue that goes well beyond game studies. The creed of scientific objectivity by default cordons off an engagement with issues that must be explored within and negotiated from a personal perspective. "We are persons whose bodies can be studied according to the impersonal laws of physics", argues B. Allan Wallace, "but who's minds are subjectively experienced in ways science has not yet been able to fathom" (2000: 8). The act of spirituality equals the act of creating a technological framework to assess issues of immense personal importance. Videogames as a technical framework may overlap with this act and provide a virtual environment to explore spirituality on one's own terms. 'Personally,' therefore, is precisely where and how this research effort must take place – and this acknowledgement of the spiritual is an implicit work order to the scientific reappraisal of experience-oriented game studies.

In the following, I aim to create awareness for the untapped, yet existent dimensions of the experiential spectra videogames may provide by elaborating on two co-dependent theses: Firstly, that videogames may provide players with spiritual experiences and, secondly, that it is necessary to consolidate academic-scientific and personal-poetic modes of writing to examine these spiritual experiences. This train of thought begins with a theoretical mediation on spirituality and play, specifically focusing on how they may overlap. Building upon the observations of Johan Huizinga ([1949] 2016) allows me to find a common core in one of the foundational metaphors of contemporary game studies: that of the **magic circle**, the mental image of a boundary which separates the wilful ritual from an ordinary everyday life experience. To subsequently describe why videogames are extremely capable of providing us with subjective experiences, what a methodology to describe these experiences may look like, and to illustrate its capabilities with an example, I henceforth and regularly paraphrase concepts introduced in my monograph *Genre und Videospiel: Einführung in eine unmögliche Taxonomie* (2021) and my yet unpublished dissertation *What is a Video Game Experience?* (2021). In both works, I have argued for the videogame as a digital ***objet ambigu***, an understanding that allows me to imagine them as a medium of potential for subjective interests, needs, and desires. From this theoreti-

cal framework that foregrounds the importance of the self and the private to understand the role of videogames as facilitators of spiritual experiences, I seek a way to express such experiences without abandoning the scientific norm of accessibility and transparency. I provide an overview of different academic methodologies that consciously deal with the use of I-voice to discuss intimate experiences for scientific purposes and correlate them to the work of game studies pioneers who also intended to highlight the experience of self in their research. Following and evaluating these trends, I propose the self-designed method of **close performing** to negotiate between personal sentiments and academic purpose to explore experiences, especially such elusive ones as spiritual experiences in gaming. A brief excursion into the videogame *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room 2015) follows this in order to demonstrate the capabilities of the method to mediate between theoretical frameworks and personal, in part introspective, observations, before concluding with a summary of insights and an appeal for a re-evaluation of style and voice in academic writing on videogames.

The Spiritual Experience

Spirituality is a concept of mystical grandeur commonly connected to the belief in, belonging to, and understanding of higher concepts and their importance to one's ordinary life (Steinpatz 2020: 161).[1] Quite literally touching upon the infinite and unimaginable, the term is of such a semantic magnitude that its use for analytical purposes must ultimately be doubted (cf. Motak 2009: 133). At its broadest, spirituality is a gateway to transcendence, the engagement with everything that may exist beyond a perceivable reality, "discovered in moments in which the individual questions the meaning of personal existence and attempts to place the self within a broader ontological context" (Gorsuch/Shafranske 1984: 231). Thinking of spirituality through such questions actually is a helpful strategy to break its complexity down into meaningful pieces. We often get in touch with our spiritual side – when we are confronted with existential queries and marvel – perchance without even realising their spiritual tint. Such questions, as they may occur to us in everyday life, occur in the following dimensions:

- **Contemplating time**: How and when did existence begin? When will it end (if it ever ends)?
- **Contemplating space**: Where am I (cosmically speaking)? Are there other beings in this universe?
- **Contemplating existence**: What am I? What Is my purpose in life?
- **Contemplating relations**: What is my relation to others? To me and the entirety of everything else?

Such queries protrude in every relation of the self and its transcendental embeddedness: that with other humans or living beings, that with a God or any given deity, and even the

1 In reference to von Balthasar's understanding of spirituality as a *durchstimmtheit*, a permeation of such grand-scale concepts with every act and decision of the self (1967: 247).

relation of self to itself (Dahlgrün 2018: 68). What they also share and convey is a longing to understand an infinite field of unanswerable wonders and worries which are explored by science, yet far too big to answer them satisfactorily in their current state. An individual's inability to find meaning, hope, peace, love, comfort, strength, and connection in life nevertheless depends on an individual's ability to handle these contemplations and their personal beliefs. Failing to encounter them may lead to spiritual distress: a clinical condition that is linked to states of distress, anxiety, scorn, and crestfallenness (O'Brien 2011: 148; Schmucker 1996; Young/Koopsen 2005: 212). Upholding an individual sense for the spiritual thus can be regarded as a mental health pillar. Seybold and Hill, for instance, argue that the positive effect of spirituality has been greatly explored regarding its connected emotions "(e.g., forgiveness, hope, contentment, love)" (2001: 23) that "might benefit the individual through their impact on neural pathways that connect to the endocrine and immune system" (ibid.). The human mind yearns to understand and to experience comfort in the knowledge of fitting in, of having a 'rightful' place in existence. We **want** our lives to matter and to understand our purpose in the grander scheme of things, so to speak.

Spirituality, expressed in the longing for cosmic meaning, belonging, understanding and embeddedness, reveals at least two critical qualities of the elusive term. Firstly, spiritual longing is universal. The questions raised above do not belong to a specific dogma or gnostic tradition. In fact, such questions may even be raised without a deity or belief in mind at all, suggesting that such a longing may as well be experienced by those who consider themselves to be agnostic or atheistic. Secondly, these questions reveal an underlying quality of the spiritual: that of an active want or desire. Spirituality is not only a longing for something beyond-rational but an active, open-minded seeking (Dürckheim 1984: 151) to counter one's existential dread of the void – and thus, a subjective practice.

The spiritual experience, as it connects the personal to the universal state of being, is an "apprehension of the infinite through feeling" (Roy 2001: 4) – an experience of extreme magnitude. It bridges the singular self with an assumed, cosmic entirety, and is expressed as a large-scale dichotomy in the works of many philosophers, scholars, and theologists. Blaise Pascal, for instance, famously negotiated such a sentiment in his *Pensées*: "I see nothing but infinites on all sides, which surround me as an atom, and as a shadow which endures only for an instant and returns no more." (Pascal [1670] 1910: 80). In *Das Heilige*, Rudolf Otto famously approaches the raw sensation of the sacred beyond religious and rational constraints (cf. [1917] 2014). He describes that its massive effect on us arises as counterplay of extremes: the ***mysterium tremendum*** – the frightful reverence in the face of the transcendental (ibid: 13–14) – and the ***mysterium fascinans***, the fact that transcendence is yet an awe-inspiring mystery (ibid: 42). It is a harmonious contrast (ibid.), a fulfilling fascination with a higher power but, simultaneously, a realisation of oneself being at the bottom of this cosmic power dynamic. Considering art history, it becomes evident that many creative trends intended to express spiritual sentiments in a similar fashion of approximating that beyond reality, which cannot be expressed, by harmonising strongly contrasting elements in their works. Spirituality in art emerges from the interplay between the solitary and the universe, the highest highs and the lowest lows, typically in a sensory or emotionally overwhelming fashion. In Romantic art, for instance, spirituality emerges in the shape of the sublime. The motif juxtaposes na-

ture's magical beauty and the imposing danger, relying on core themes like storms or vast mountain ranges to create what Edmund Burke calls a "delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror" ([1765] 2015: 109). Spiritual music follows similar patterns. Carl Gombrich, for instance, elaborated on church music as an approach to **Apophaticism** and **Cataphaticism**; the joy of all sound and no sound in church music as following similar principles to celebrate the transcendental infinite (2010: 564). Videogames, meanwhile, invite their players to actively seek out how and where they may appeal to their spiritual senses. In an interview with Adam Biessener, Dave Pinchbeck, the lead designer of this paper's case study *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, described his personal play experience of the wild west action-adventure *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010). He details how he explores the world of the game to gently trot up to a mountain and gain utter joy from gazing at the virtual environment beneath him (in Biessener 2011: n.p.). The anecdote shows that videogames grant a unique medial and artistic approach to the spiritual, where, instead of being confronted with overwhelming magnitude, players may seek it out themselves or even stumble upon it by mere accident. Pinchbeck may have experienced his sensations during that sunrise precisely as it counterpoints the fast-paced gameplay of *Red Dead Redemption*, or because the solitude of the moment inspired him to contemplate the relationship of himself with the grandeur of nature itself. Their capability for interactive exploration speaks to the private and subjective notion of the spiritual experiences, which is ultimately nurtured by the very composition of the medium and the concept of play itself.

Even though the artistic motifs connected to spirituality intend to evoke strong emotions, the exact nature of such an experience to the thinker, spectator, listener, or player is difficult to assess scientifically. Spiritual experiences are inner experiences. They emerge from purely subjective sentiments and are, consequently, neither objectively negotiable nor communicable to others (cf. Hammel 1997: 40). Robert Sharf summarises the reasons for this inaccessibility of the spiritual experience in four defining qualities (in Bush 2012: 201):

> It is absolutely **private**: it happens in isolation from the experience of all other (human) beings. This also means that the ones making the experience are unable to communicate them transparently.
> it is **subjective**, which modifies the idea of its privacy by a non-normative evaluation. The one making the experience is the only being entitled to evaluate its intensity, quality, meaning.
> It is **indubitably divine**. It can be a hunch, an intuition, or a conviction of the one making an experience that it is indubitably and veritably connected to a transcendental contemplation.
> It is an **immediate** sensation. The one making the experience cannot prepare for its instant occurrence.

Subsequently, one would have to ask how (and if) spiritual experiences can actually be explored. They happen under the explicit exclusion of others, as per Sharf's definition, and their divine quality manifests 'ad hoc' in a subjective sensation. Consequently, spiritual experiences are often reflected upon through the periphery, their signifiers being the

centre of attention rather than their respective, uniquely personal signifieds. On the one hand, this means that researchers are bound to approach spiritual experiences through their environment – the conditions under which they happen or the means by which the ones having spiritual experiences are capable of sharing them, even if what they describe may not be an entirely accurate description of their internal processes. On the other hand, it suggests that a worthwhile strategy to unriddle the spiritual experience may be to look at the studies of phenomena which likewise describe dedicated states of mental elevation beyond ordinary life. The following section, therefore, sheds a light on the shared affective and cognitive mechanisms of spiritual and ludic rites.

Spirituality, Play, and Videogames

All play is rooted in spirituality – and likewise, all spirituality is equally rooted in play. This chiasmic argument, while seemingly exaggerated in its simplicity, does indeed overlap when we regard the sacred and the ludic as dedicated frames of mind. Both terms represent, in Turner's sense, liminal, "independent domain[s] of creative activity" (1974: 65). They encourage us to enter a state of mind that surpasses an ordinary, concrete reality, and follows its own modes of meaning making. Brian Edgar points out that "[worship], like play, is 'fictitious' in that it copies life in the 'real world' with symbolic eating and drinking and washing, with dress-ups and special actions and movements and songs, and yet it is not exactly the same; it has its own unique form and meaning" (2017: 27). He bases his observations on Romano Guardini's *Spirit of the Liturgy* (in ibid.), which also refers to Christian rites as joyous play that shall arise from a sphere beyond the grave severity of reality – arguing that the sacred may only arise from beyond the constraints of worldly purpose. In a similar fashion, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, often regarded as the foundational work of Western game studies, encapsulates how the ***différance*** of spirituality and play confluences in the idea of the sacred-earnest act:

> The child plays in complete–we can well say, in sacred–earnest. But it plays and knows that it plays. The sportsman, too, plays with all the fervour of a man enraptured, but he still knows that he is playing. The actor on the stage is wholly absorbed in his playing, but is all the time conscious of "the play". The same holds good of the violinist, though he may soar to realms beyond this world. The play-character, therefore, may attach to the sublimest forms of action. (Huizinga [1949] 2016: 18)

Huizinga portrays the sacred-earnest as act which one fully understands as playing, acting, or make-believe, yet commits to and executes with a distinct sincerity. The person playing *Quake III: Arena* (ID Software 1999) knows that they are not killing another being when shooting it but uses this real-world vocabulary in full earnest (and most likely quite a bit of frustration) during the act of playing the game. The person losing the trusted ward-companion Yorda in *ICO* (Team ICO 2001) may experience as devastating loss due to its dramatic narrative impact and change in gameplay, which is subsequently deprived in terms of meaningful interaction (Harrer 2018: 98). It is the wilful act of entering a liminal state which Huizinga expresses in his metaphor of the **magic circle**, the artificial

border one crosses to enter the state of play. Drawing from the Indian *Mahābhārata*, in which prince Yudhisthira entered a gambler's den and, by crossing into it, accepting it as a sphere governed by its own rules which are superimposed upon the rules of ordinary life. Huizinga's usage of the magic circle as a metaphor is an interesting one. While the *Mahābhārata* does not mention a particular form, the circular form is a commonplace symbol of Western esoteric practices (Chatley 1911: 137) in which a round line of banishment or protection drawn on the floor creates a "limit [to] the magical environment" of the spellcaster (ibid.). In both cases, however, the sacred-earnest tone of the otherworldly environment – may it be that of the gambler, that of the spell-caster (or that of the sportsman, or player, were we to continue in Huizinga's example) – provides a distinct order to the events happening in its elevated state, authorised by voluntarily accepted rules. Gordon Calleja thus notes how the magic circle thus "inscribes the boundary … between the idealized ritual of play and the mess of ordinary life" (2015: 213).

Videogames are a specific category of game that relies on digital technology to invite its players into the magic circle, where they may have gameplay experiences that are accessed via technical means. In the ongoing acts of digitization – "the conditioning of social structures and practices through the process of being digitized" (Grieve Helland Singh 2018: 140–41) – they provide new spaces in which sacral play can be enacted. They offer "the possibility for players to manipulate the content and form of a videogame and/or the possibility of a continuous information exchange between the user and the game system" (Weber et al. 2014: 83) and are, in that sense, an omnipotent systemic magic circle. Videogames provide hard-coded boundaries which are mediated direct and immanently, and in which soft, human interactions occur.

Understood as a digital, virtual home for the sacred-earnest, the videogame is an aesthetic and narrative setup for the players – a stage only present in the circuitry of computers and home consoles, audio-visually manifested by loudspeakers and monitors, and filled with environmental properties for players to explore. Janet Murray famously introduced the idea of the videogame as stage of (self) fulfilment in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), where she presents the eponymous machine of the sci-fi universe *Star Trek* as means to rethink the capability of videogames to immerse players onto a virtual stage; a fictional framework provided by the technical capabilities of the medium. The Holodeck serves as a digital cave of wonders in *Star Trek*, in which a supercomputer can recreate a virtual depiction of any desired place, time, scenario, or character ensemble. The protagonists of *Star Trek* make use of these capabilities by imagining themselves as heroes in their own scenarios (such as in Scanlan 1988) by acknowledging them as metaphoric means and taking their own actions within a virtual setting as an example to rethink their behaviour or actions outside of it (cf. Chalmers 1998), or by using its fictional worlds to find inspiration for their research (cf. Singer 1993). At times, the protagonists even experience **bleed** (in the sense of Montola 2010 and Bowman 2013) and find themselves unable to separate between their 'real' emotions and those facilitated by the play-like experience of the Holodeck's virtuality, such as when protagonist Geordi La Forge falls in love with a hologram (cf. Beaumont 1989). While technically not on par with such a *Wunderwerk* quite yet, videogames strive for a similar sort of engagement. All key ingredients are there: the virtual stages (ordered in videogame geographies as maps or level structures), the props (or items) giving players meaningful tools to interact, other actors (may they be human

players or artificial non-player characters), but also general stage directions (in the shape of a narrative and basic mechanics). Play, as Lévy puts it, only unfolds via player action:

> The virtual begins to flourish with the appearance of human subjectivity in the loop, once the indeterminateness of meaning and the propensity of the text to signify come into play, a tension that actualization or interpretation, will resolve during the act of reading. (1998: 53)

The fact that videogames are interactive media by heart also means that they can only grant experiences if one interacts with them. Their virtual worlds provide a bare excess of potential meaning making instances – though their order and ultimate effect on the player experience are built on "hybridized processes … [of] mediated performance and life improvisation" (Davis 2006: 101).

Within the digital magic circle of videogames, spirituality and religion can be handled in different nuances. Rachel Wagner argues that we can analyse the interplay of these two habitual practices and the cultural artefacts arising from them through four lenses as necessary to describe the intersections of the religious and games (cf. 2015: 3–6):

> **Religion in gaming**, meaning the representation of actual religious practices and traditions in videogame environments.
> **Religion as gaming**, meaning existing practices that would allow interpreting religious (inter) action as play or playful.
> **Gaming as religion**, meaning any way in which gaming-related activities, such as the communal behaviour of gaming communities and fandoms, could be described akin to religious communes.
> **Gaming in religion**, meaning the application of games at the centre of religious practices or games that can be argued to have a religious-educational function.

For the sake of analysing videogames as providers of spiritual experiences, it is apt to combine the first two lenses precisely because private and intimate experiences, just as the very personal experience of play, take place in a specific frame of mind. Even though there are games with a more differentiated approach to the topic, many of them are purposefully designed to be educational on religion. In other instances, "A great many video games that feature or represent religion in some way tend to have a kind of mechanical theology that sees gods as technologies to be manipulated for power" (Schut 2014: 260). Many games deal with a display of religion that is not intended to have us directly reflect on belief initially. It plays, for example, a distinct role in setting up conflict-oriented games like *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios 1997), a real-time strategy game in which players guide the development of ancient civilisations with a focus on generating soldiers and sending them towards an enemy and often in the guise of cultural and religious clashes. Here, ideological markers embedded in a historical setting are applied to distinguish parties involved in a conflict. Belief is embedded as a tangible element in tech trees, unit upgrades, and specialised troops with distinct functions. While this may provide a historically laden perspective of ideology (cf. Praschak/Ancuta 2019), we could argue that they teach religion through a historian's lens rather than encourage players to engage with their spiritual sides and that religious imagery may or may not be re-

sponsible for a spiritual experience in a videogame. Evident audio-visual, narrative or mechanic cues alone are not the only criterium by which we question. Rather, I want to ask how gameplay can provide the individual with actual spiritual sentiments, even if their content may not be evidently linked to religious practices as such. Spirituality can arise for personal reasons alone from all sorts of games, meaning that to explore the issue thoroughly, one must frame any approach that focuses on what is present in the game and how it may affect players with that subjectivity in mind.

In prior works, I have established my position that the videogame is, first and foremost, a medium of potential (Schniz 2021a: 23). Potential typically expresses itself as a human factor: it arises from present capacities and develops based on how human beings make use of these capacities. The videogame's appeal as a medium granting immense interaction to players, bears a striking resemblance to the ***objet ambigu***, as originally imagined by the French philosopher Paul Valéry (cf. [1923] 1991). Based on his writings of a young Socrates, who is puzzled by a small rock that cannot be defined in origin, the ***objet ambigu*** – the object that is open to interpretation or of several meanings. Key trait of the ***objet ambigu*** is its indefinite ***gestalt***: It denies each and any structural securement, as it defines different and perchance incompatible origins, functions, or structures in its texture. Due to that, the ***objet ambigu*** is an artwork that reverses the principle of interpretation. Instead of being endowed with meaning by the interpretation of its beholder, it cannot hold meaning which is ultimately allowing one to conclude its beholders. In Valéry's fable, it took an ***objet ambigu*** for Socrates to realise that he wants to be a philosopher. The puzzle posed to him by the small pebble did not leave his thoughts, encouraging him to seek wisdom rather than become a shipwright ([1964] Blumenberg 2017: 97).

The videogame can be seen as a digital successor of the ***objet ambigu***. Where Valéry had to invent a mysterious shape that mainly provides its winding, partly contradicting facets through an inventive reader's imagination, videogames are the ever-altering composition per definition. Its contents require players to actively engage with their content. Therefore, agency – "the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player's intention" (Mateas 2004: 21) – has become a key term in contemporary game studies. The way their contents unfold, or the potential that they may unfold, is dependent on a given player's intent and performance. Brendan Keogh rightfully argues "the player and game must be considered as a singular, inseparable whole" (2014: n.p.), an inseparable amalgamation of potential for development within the virtual magic circle and even for long-lasting player developments. Daniel Martin Feige describes this as the act "*des sich selbst durchspielens*" – the art of playing through yourself (2015: 173). Playing a videogame in this understanding is a profound tool of introspection. Players reflecting on how they play a videogame – what they want their avatar to resemble, how they embed their agency into the virtual environment and derive meaning from it, and such – are bound to learn as much about what makes themselves themselves as what makes the game the game. It is a setup bound to inspire an understanding of personal matters, such as one's own spiritual needs.

A decisive factor in the perception of a videogame's spirituality is its fictional, virtual world which players explore and within which they, according to Feige, may also find reflective engagement with their selves. Stef Aupers fittingly characterises the world of a videogame as possessing a mythopoeic spirituality (2015: 77). By enabling players to ex-

plore a videogame's cyberspace freely, they likewise enable their players to immerse into a world different from their own, guided by its own functional and narrative rules. Even though players acknowledge these virtual worlds and their lore that potentially involves rites of magic, acts of prayer, or other facets of spiritual engagement as products of imagination, Aupers argues that these interactions "have real spiritual value" (2015: 77). Aupers's idea is very much in line with Bartle's considerations on immersion and influence: just as one interacts with a virtual world based on real-life expectations, the virtual world may, in return, also facilitate expectations about our reality (Bartle 2004: 701). Considering the spiritual potential of videogames, one can argue that they may immerse players into virtual worlds that aesthetically function on principles of spirituality in a fantastic fashion and ultimately encourage them to play through themselves within this framework. By way of illustration, the action game *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware 2019) allows players to roam a Sengoku-era Japan in the avatar of the eponymous ninja warrior **Sekiro**. The game's interpretation of the era merges historical dates with Japan's rich mythology. Players encounter fabled beings such as mischievous **Yokai** or vengeful spirits and encounter even more abstract concepts of the transcendental – such as a boss fight that has players enter the realm of four monkeys (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, do no evil) (ibid.) – which can be read as taking place entirely within a metaphor. The game thus encourages players who actively explore its world, influenced by spiritual phenomena, to reflect on themselves based on their play experience. Do they believe in spirits? What does the believe in mythical beings, deities, reincarnation, and other principles introduced by the game have to do with their own identity? What do they think of the (supposedly) character-shaping influence of the spiritual metaphor? The inhibition threshold to reflect upon one's spiritual side appears significantly lower when immersed in a fantasy world which is orchestrated towards the sublime or a general ambience that evokes a sensation of unison and longing between players and game worlds. Aupers concludes that "spiritual play provides a feasible strategy for all those modern people in a disenchanted world who 'want to believe,' but consider themselves too secular to do so." (2015, 90)

The Need for an I-Voice in Game Studies

The videogame is the medium of self-made experiences, of personal potential lived out in a digital, virtual, and agency-granting environment which may incite spiritual contemplation. If we play a videogame, the choices we make in it reflect on our state of mind and our personality, allowing us to come to a deep understanding of ourselves and our spiritual longings. The self is the nexus of an experience-focused videogame analysis – and likewise the neuralgic point when science ought to break with what Wallace called the *Taboo of Subjectivity* (cf. 2000) and express personal and spiritual sentiments.

If I wish to share an intimate videogame experience in an academic fashion, I must at first examine what repertoire allows one to explore the self, i.e. what role an I-voice plays (or is allowed to play) in 'hard' sciences. Writing in I-voice and scientific writing traditions stand in a problematic relation that juxtaposes the aim for objective writing with the need for subjective expression. For the longest time, writing in I-form has been

shunned in academic writing (Thomson 2023: 104). With very few exceptions – such as 'allowing' authors to refer to themselves in an introduction to lay bare their contribution to the readers – style guidelines mention it as unprofessional and as not allowing the argument of the paper to speak for itself. Objectivity has been steadily questioned though (cf. Hardin 1993 in Thomson) because, ultimately (and hermeneutically speaking), no human account can provide a definitive objectivity. The conducting researcher always plays a role in their work, which is why an attestation for this personal nexus in science and, thus, the I-voice has re-emerged. Thomson argues that one cannot separate a researcher from their research (Thomson 2023: 104). For this reason, there is a recent trend in academic writing magnifying that "craving to find out what's inside of you, what makes you more than how you've been shaped by the academy to talk and write" (Nash 2019: 27). Interestingly though, Thomson connects this train of thought with the idea that a researcher's I-voice should, in an academic text, be correlated to a strong verb implying their research activity, providing the example that a researcher should not "write 'I feel'" (Thomson 2023: 105). While Thomson's statement coherently fits into her argument of coherent and transparent scientific communication, the idea of avoiding such expressions must be challenged when science ought to discuss the very personal. What would then be done with research questions and fields specifically handling questions that lie beyond the positivist scope such as the human experience – or more specifically, a human experience which has been identified as extraordinarily subjective and private?

Commonly, the I-voice finds a justified function not only in recent authoritative voices of academic writers but also in qualitative methodologies aiming to shed light upon inner processes of research subjects. Sciences that deal with the human self, such as psychology, first and foremost fit this description. One typical method here is the so-called Experience Sampling Method. Experience sampling was introduced by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and Reed Larson (1987). In this method, participants are asked to write down their impressions like a diary entry, record themselves as they speak about an event, or be invited to interview with a researcher accompanying the study. In these cases, the researchers serve as a gatekeeping instance of scientific integrity. To guarantee the collection of genuine, personal data points, researchers must ideally, draw deductions about their participants, which ought to provide a personal account in I-voice.

Methods such as the autoethnographic approach, as practised in social sciences, enable researchers to speak from their own perspectives. The method intends to allow researchers to personally report on events they experienced themselves in "…an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis/Bochner 2000: 739), allowing field experts to connect a self-reflected observation, both internally and externally, with a theoretical framework. Finally, there are traditions strongly related to artistic disciplines in which I-narration is purposefully chosen to give its authors a more expressive means to connect abstract thoughts and impressions. Such is the case for the Dérive (cf. Debord [1958] 1981). This peripatetic method, which the Situationist-collective established in 1950s Paris, enables a researcher to drift through an environment, allowing them to focus on their surroundings, capture the essential ambience they provide, and encourages them to put them into words. The written report of a **dérive** is as poetic or prosaic as it is scientific, as its in-

tent should enable the researcher-flaneur to express whatever personal state they were in during their stroll.

Using the I-voice in qualitative research also attracts a distinct scepticism that is rooted in the need for trustworthy communication between author and audience. The reasons why readers may think of an author as unreliable in their I-centred presentation of research results are manifold: Scholars operating in discourses that are outspokenly ideological, for instance, cannot avoid embedding their I-voice in a socio-political climate, which may make readers doubt if they engaged with an observation or a self-propelled agenda. A personal narration also is, as Arthur Bochner put it, much more focused on an individual's attempt to make sense of a situation, imbuing it (and its description) with poetic qualities (2000: 270). A story told from a personal perspective may be anchored in real-life events via citations of and references to events, dates, or happenings for which proof exists, but an author's individual experience of the event and its subsequent translation from personal experience and text are a matter of individual rhetoric. These examples make clear that readers must be able to consider a scientific author using the I-voice as trustworthy and, on a larger scope, that these scientific authors must also be able to worker under high, self-imposed when composing and editing their personal report. Ultimately, these (self-set) demands are the reason why the discussion of topics that evade objective truth by default is the hardest challenge of integrity in academic writing. Spirituality, like the other pillars of the great Hegelian tripartition of Good, True, and Beautiful matters, can only be discussed from an intimate and individual position as they deny all but the subjective perspective (Kurz 2015: 42). Mansfield sees the I-voice as "a meeting-point between the most formal and highly abstract concepts and the most immediate and intense emotions" (Mansfield: 1), thus encapsulating why an I-voice is a necessity for the documentation of personal sentiments just as much as why such narrative strategies always bear the risk of causing an argument to fall victim to inaccessibility by a lack intersubjective common ground or trust.

In game studies, there is a distinct necessity for the analysis of such subjective experiences and thus, the foregrounding of the self. As has been established along the musings of Feige and others, videogames are as much about the self as they are about the medium. As a medium of the self which grants a never seen before amount of personal autonomy within a fictional system, it needs to grant a voice to that self and its respective experience. From a design perspective, experience has been identified as the centre of the videogame (cf. Schell 2008: 10; Sylvester 2013: 7). Jesse Schell even goes as far as admitting that designers may aim to provide their player audience with a specific experience through mechanics or a narrative framework (2008: 10).

> Video games have the capacity to form a number of subject positions, whether through their hardware, representations, narratives, gameplay mechanisms, so on. Of course, this is not a capability unique to video games as a medium. Still, it is important to recognize and interrogate the ways that video games and their specific qualities construct particular subjectivities. (ibid.)

The need for the self to shine through in written texts on videogames becomes evident in journalistic pieces, for instance. Authors reviewing videogames, most notably those that

left a strong emotional impression on them, already tend to recount their gameplay experience as narrators of their own stories. One such example is the review "Journey and the art of emotional game design" by Nick Harper, found in the online edition of the Guardian (2012). The world of *Journey* (thatgamecompany 2012) is opulent, and the players need to explore it, even though it is never clearly spelt out, heartfelt. Its vast landscape brims with massive and overwhelming landmarks in which the player avatar is significantly smaller than the rest, resembling an immersive sublime. The avatar is held at the loser's point of the screen (cf. Wiegand 2019: 23), a tiny speck of player identification drowning in massive mountain ranges or spectacularly large-scale weather phenomena expose the frailty and minuscule tone of one human life in comparison to the world us such and the scale at which it takes place. Thus, the sublime can be understood as evoking the spiritual key notion of the infinite vs the finite by juxtaposing the tiny player avatar with the massive and menacing world surrounding them to an effect reminiscent of the sublime. Even though players can neither die nor be hurt in *Journey* – in the worst case, players may fall a passage of jumping across platforms or an environmental puzzle – these surroundings evoke mystery and a sense of fear.

In *Journey*, this distinct sense of the sublime is also invoked by the fact that the avatar is, central to the game's tone, often a plaything to its happenstances. This can be seen in one element central to every player's pilgrimage, namely the scarf. The scarf is, in a sense, the only possession players have as they play *Journey*. It serves a decorative purpose as much as it supports players in their journey. As it reacts to wind, it can always guide players in the direction they must go without breaking the intradiegetic, HUD-less tone of the game. In his own self-made play experience, Harper describes the key time of the game as an enduring metaphorical tool, connecting players to the landscape and its deeper emotional meaning:

> At first there is immobilisation. The team uses the scarf mechanic to manipulate the player's emotions, first freezing it and then shrinking it as the player struggles up the mountain. This removal of abilities is a design strategy to make the player feel less empowered, to raise their anxiety. In Journey it works brilliantly – the first time I struggled up the mountain I stopped and questioned whether I should continue, as I watched my scarf slowly float away in the breeze. For a moment I was immobile. (2012: n.p.)

Harper regularly relies on I-voice throughout the report to recount events from the game. This emphasises the connection between him, his avatar, the game world, and the experience that the connection between these elements that *Journey* provides him with. His mind revolving thoroughly around the challenge that the game provides serves us readers as an example of the phenomenon of immersion and how it inspires him, in turn, to reflect upon his role and function within the game and its greater meaning. Moreover, Harper's narrative mode is interlaced with references to dramaturgic structures and the experience of tension and excitement in videogame narration, which he at first compares to the excitement felt when an underdog wins at a tennis match, then later raises to a meta-level by discussing the psychological effects of human beings going through change (ibid.). Following his descriptions in which he correlates the personal and the

scientific, and even though his sources are, due to the standards of journalistic writing, not indexed in an academic fashion, Harper is able to provide objective gravity to the descriptions of the intimate effect of the game and the personal meaning that he derives from it.

Harper begins to correlate the game to an experience of grief and acceptance, such as in his descriptions of a central item of the game: the avatar's scarf. The scarf serves as one of the few helpful tools available to the players in *Journey*. Beyond being a symbol of warmth and comfort in a harsh and overwhelmingly vast and empty environment, the scarf serves as a compass of sorts, the direction in which the wind drags it, telling players where they should head. Hence, the experience of losing the scarf unexpectedly later in the game is a sad surprise to players, fitting in well with the underlying motif that Harper reads from the game. To him, "[t]he scarf is the representation of … equaling an experience of death and rebirth" (ibid.). As he shares his strong emotional response to the game's interplay of visual storytelling (the player losing an inanimate but nevertheless trusted companion) and gameplay effect (the player losing their guiding tool, which creates a momentum of loss and hopelessness), the readers are taken along a personal experience going from loss to sadness, to a hope that these events took place as intended in a grander scheme of things. Auper's idea of a mythopoesis shines strong in such personal reflections because Harper, while acknowledging the videogame as an artefact of interactive fiction, apparently made an experience within the confines of its virtual world that fits the criteria of spiritual momentum.

In academic writings on videogames, using an I-voice – and moreover, specifying why using it –helps to untangle the relation of avatar, game, and player. Doris Rusch's shared play experience of *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent 2001) wonderfully exemplifies this.

> For now, let me clarify that James is the character in the game's story, I'm the player of the game and thus our goals and intention don't always match. It therefore makes sense to view James and me as two separate entities and I will acknowledge this distinction by talking about "us" when James and my actions, goals and intentions overlap. I will refer to James as his own character, when I'm dealing with the prescripted, story related parts of the game. Whenever James' perspective is irrelevant and my experience or actions as a player are in the foreground, I will say "I". (Rusch 2009: 2)

Rusch clearly distinguishes between her avatar James, who is intradiegetically driven by his own emotions, agendas, and narrative setup, and her own player actions. At times they may overlap, at others not so much. As we are represented by an avatar in the virtual world, which we may be in full control of but who may also act against our wishes in scripted events or cut scenes, it is important to clearly state when and how an I-voice is used.

Another similar acknowledgement of purposeful I-narration, this time to highlight subjective sentiments, can be found, for instance, in the work of Rosa Carbo-Mascarell. In her analysis of walking simulators, she opens by establishing the ***dérive***, in its embedding in situationist practices, as a fitting mean to reflect on the personal experience of a videogame. This connection appears evident due to her selection of game genre, as walking simulators are, as the name implies, defined by the act of contemplative wander-

ing (cf. Muscat 2016). Carbo-Mascarells selection of methodology is a thorough acknowledgement of the I and its importance in the act of playing a videogame and, likewise, of the I-narration to adequately capture such an experience: "I as a researcher must be situated in the game and let myself be immersed in it, reading the provocations caused by the design of the game's landscape. My approach will be that of a literary explorer." (Carbo-Mascarell 2016: 2). Carbo-Mascarell exercises these practices by keeping a game log as she plays and intermingling it with secondary sources (ibid.). Throughout, her I-voice shines through, as in the following:

> each revelation I encounter through virtual movement draws me further into the game. There is no passivity to the way I uncover Sam and Lonnie's relationship. I find an intimate diary page in which Sam describes her sexual experiences with Lonnie which Katie promptly puts down. I realise I am, like the urban explorers, adding my own experiences to the story in the way my embodied character or I explore and react to it. To Garrett (2013) this is the way to add heritage to place, rather than the encasing of story in glass and marketplace value. (Carbo-Mascarell 2016: 10)

This way of writing allows Carbo-Mascarell to connect personal encounters of the play with their emotional impact and, in turn, to connect that impact to a higher level of abstraction. It effectively turns the I into a mediator of the inner and higher meaning.

Building on Carbo-Mascarell, I developed the idea of **close performing** and aimed to turn it into a follow-up methodology. I acknowledge Carbo-Mascarell's situationist approach to videogames, which, by allowing players to explore a virtual world as an avatar, encourages them to "explore the ambience" of a place and to focus on their very subjective observations and thus, allows them to recount their own experiences while academically embedding them and combine the means of the dérive with the literary method known as closed reading. Close reading is a strategy encouraging a scholar to focus on the finesse of detail and focus exclusively on the artwork itself (Nünning 2013: 105). Uniting these methods combines Mascarell's profound understanding of these virtual worlds with an acknowledgement of their artificiality. Videogame worlds thrive in environmental storytelling. They are highly symbolic spaces in which every aspect can possess narrative qualities (cf. Jenkins 2004). When humans enter a fictional space, explains Werner Delanoy, the constraints and binding logic of everyday life lose their grip on them, and they are encouraged to see things in a different light (2002: 3). While Mascarell's text effectively and elegantly brings forward the critical notion of the I, their approaches are also characterised by certain oversights when engaging with videogames. The ambiguity and arbitrary of the dérive, for example, are actually built on a duality of wanderer and world. While built on ergodic principles, the videogame provides more clearly designed pillars that ought to shape its gameplay experience.

Close reading, meanwhile, is built on a strong reliance on fixed sequence in a text. Games, however, demand a more procedural literacy (Bogost 2005: 32). Thus, a dérive is the natural counter-concept. It is fluid, ambiguous, and open to new combinations not coming from the eye of the beholder but from that which is freely and openly explored. One close reads a videogame, so to speak, as one performs within its virtual world. Close performing follows the notions of Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011: S. 304–5), who en-

courage scholars to clearly frame the lenses by which one is analysing a videogame in order to lay bare why certain facets are paid specific attention to, whereas others may be neglected. This laying bare of distinct targets is an important differentiation in the still novel and ever-evolving methodological toolbox of game studies. As Rudolf Inderst elaborates in what he refers to **close playing** a videogame (2023: n.p.), portraying one's gaming capital – such as the motivation to play a certain game, one's experience and familiarity with its genre conventions, etc. (ibid.) – and research interest has a major impact on how the detailed observation of one's gaming experience plays. The statement of close performing a videogame thus bears a reliance on Inderst's observation and is, in that sense, a clarification on the lenses used. It marks a scientific text as focusing on hard-to-capture phenomena, sensitizes its readers for the effective, non-avoidable presence of subjective and maybe even poetically tinted text passages and necessary inclusion of the I-voice[2] in relation to a crucial and close examination of their build-up and effect on player experience.

What I do is to structure my observations along a guideline of four steps:

- **Immediate observations**: The initial experience of a videogame is built on a Heideggerian sense of *geworfenheit* (cf. Moralde 2014: 3). Players are catapulted into a virtual world that they assume is based on real-life principles and yet, its ontology is defined by systemic factors beyond player knowledge. This is explicitly decisive in how players are introduced to their *alter ego* and a*lter veritas*. One must learn to walk and move in this fictitious environment and understand how hardware input translates into one's avatars agency. Initial clues, such as the background knowledge provided by a cutscene or the extra-diegetic tutorial input of command options, help players to understand their temporary domain.
  Thus, I open a report of my personal play experience aim to describe the direct sensations that I notice in a videogame and how they impact me. What are the defining scene-setters, what are the mechanical cues, how are my first opportunities to interact with this world designed, and what expectations do they set for the upcoming gameplay?
- **Short-term actions**: Following the examination a videogame world-introduction is an analysis of performative options that the game directly provides me with. I take inventory of the ways in which I may meaningfully interact with my environment and in how far they are contextualised within the virtual world. In a game like *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe. 2011), for instance, most short-term actions are derived from the complacent narrator-voice and the complicity or (futile) confrontation that I may seek within the Kafkaesque virtual world, consisting of endless corridors and hallways that change according to the narrator's whim. Finding a way out of the game's proverbial bureaucratic maze –or eliciting in how far I may resist the narrator are regular occurring short-term actions.
  The aim is to understand precisely how I can exert agency with an avatar, how these actions fulfil a role and purpose within a narrative framework, and what this means for my play experience.

2 A factor acknowledged, though not pivotal to all close plays, as Inderst's work suggests.

- **Long-term insights**: Long-term insights do, in a sense, refer to what Kirkpatrick describes as the temporal rhythm of a game (2011: 73–79). The structure and procedural composition of a videogame can be described as a progression of meaningful patterns – which, under the lens of close performance, refers to a game's short-term actions. Long-term insights therefore arise from an extended examination of how short-term action occur in a game. Which actions are regularly repeated? Do they change, adapt, or counteract one another?
  Where does my repertoire inspire me to go, how would I describe the flow of this process, and where are the breaks at which I have to make decisions? How does the variety of short-term actions that I am presented with influence my play-experience on a long-term basis?
- **Cascadic notes**: Every playthrough of a videogame is different. These differences may be an integral part of a game's systemic setup. Games featuring procedurally generated content may provide players with newly arranged geographies or item locations every time their criteria for a reset are fulfilled, and games featuring a 'new game plus' mode explicitly motivate players to engage with them again by offering new rules (e.g. a higher difficulty) or narrative content to explore. Moreover though, a new playthrough also offers a different content experience due to player behaviour. Players may, for example, decide to play a role-playing game with a different character class or to follow different paths in moments where a game demands to select one of several mutually exclusive choices. Even in games that only offer minimum optionality, no player will perform and feel exactly in the same way as during their first playthrough. Thus, a game must be played several times to fathom its experiential potential.
  I refer to this step as cascadic because it is not only concerned with additional play cycles but also a reminder that these further cycles demand another iteration of the first three steps of a close analytical performance: Does the game allow or inspire new immediate observations, short-term actions, or long-term insights?

The intent is to play a game several times with these layers in mind to take notes. The dimensions ought to create a balance between acknowledging very personal direct impact and their abstract embedding. The procedural expansion of the four steps in terms of observed time stretches helps to grasp the meaning of a game's infrastructure and allows one to trace patterns and core motifs of the game. Ultimately, repetition is a necessary part due to the procedural nature of games. Depending on how many randomised elements they contain, some can change drastically from play to play.

My Play Experience of Everybody's Gone to the Rapture

In the following, I provide a personal account of my gameplay experience of *Everybody's gone to the Rapture*, which is the third in a series of walking simulators by the Brighton-based development studio, The Chinese Room. As is typical for the genre, walking simulators focus on slow-paced exploration, are void of any time pressure or exercises that demand quick reflexes, lack combat gameplay and authorial narrative railroading. Walk-

ing simulators ideally invite players to explore them in their own pace and on their own terms regarding the interpretation of their environmental narrative clues. Without any challenging demand in its mechanical and narrative dimensions that would occupy a player's attention, then, the genre appears to be ideal for the exploration of the self and one's inner experiential sentiments as inspired by their virtual world. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* uses these mechanics to embed the players in a scenario that follows the tropes of a cosy catastrophe (cf. Aldiss 1973: 293–95), a dramatic event that is nevertheless presented as calming and hopeful. Embodying an anonymous shell avatar (Schallegger 2017: 45) that does not reveal its identity by any clue, players explore the small village Yaughton after it has been struck by an apocalyptic event. The excerpt begins in the next paragraph and is paraphrased from my dissertation, in which I compared and analysed different inner experiences across several games (cf. Schniz 2021b). It has been edited to foreground the usability of the close performing method and to allocate and describe an intimate play experience:

My **immediate observations** are concerned with how *Everbody's Gone to the Rapture* immerses me into its virtual world by establishing a motif of strong magnitude in aesthetic and emotional contrasts: After starting a new game, players are exposed to a black screen and a voiceover that appears to be a radio message. Subtitles identify the speaker as one Kate, who claims that it is "all over now" and that she is "the only one left" (The Chinese Room 2015). The game does not grant me much time to comprehend this message, however, as the screen quickly fades to the pencil drawn image of a landscape first before said image turns into a 3D animated landscape. All of this is accompanied by a monumental soundtrack reminiscent of opera music. With this sudden and massive shift from quiet voice to loud orchestra, accompanied by the fad from black to still image to lush, vivid landscape, overwhelms and immerses me – so much, in fact, that I do not realise that I can move around for a long while. There is no extradiegetic message informing me that I can take over and move around now. The game fully adapts to my tempo and curiosity.

These early minutes of my play-experience already set the spiritual experience in its shape of extreme dichotomy as a leitmotif of the game. I stare into a black screen during the voice-over, a setup which emphasises the forlornness of Kate, who is reduced to distress call passing the void. Then comes a hand-drawn image of a countryside scenery which slowly fades into the colourful 3D environment of the game, accompanied by the game's orchestral soundtrack. It is an immense transition, ranging from total lack of colour and sound to an enchanting landscape brought to live by details such as flowerheads gently tipping back and forth in the wind, or the morning fog that can be seen in the distance. I interpret the lush environment as a pastoral, the artistic motif of the innocent, humble, and nature-connected human (Baldick 2001: 186). It is overwhelming me to a point where I momentarily forget that this is a game to play, a notion seemingly supported by the introductory sequence as well: the game does not provide any extradiegetic HUD input once the cinematic part of the introduction ends, and I can actually begin to play the game. I lose myself in the landscape depiction before realising that I am now able to move around and may explore the idyl. Moreover so, however, the transition encourages me to juxtapose the very beginning of Kate and her message of a doomed world with the serene environment ahead of me. I remind myself that the pastoral may also serve as

a motif of the elegiac: in art history, pastoral paintings were also made in the name of mourners, depicting how they went along a journey with a loved one who passed away and where the surrounding harmony serves as a tranquilising backdrop and escort to make the journey into the realm of the dead (ibid.). This immediate band of associations, provoked by the central motif of the end of the world and its embeddedness in two vastly different depictions, is setting the scene for my playthrough.

In my **short-term actions** in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, I find myself mainly concerned with the game's central environmental attraction – an entity referred to by the game as 'Pattern' at later points that is scattered across the landscape in shape of small, glowing orbs. After exploring my environment for a bit, I notice a flicker of light atop a staircase, near a fenced-off generator and, by approaching it encounter my first of these orbs. As I move closer to it, a controller icon appears in the bottom centre of the screen. Such encounters, I am about to learn, are the only moments in which I am extradiegetically engaged by *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, which marks the player-orb interaction as a remarkable instance in a game that is otherwise entirely built on walking, listening, and gazing. The short gameplay sequence initiated now – I am asked to move the controller in a gentle sway – is a tender sensation. As if carefully handling a fragile object, I active the orb. With another flicker of the orb, the in-game time switches to night, and tendrils spread out from the orb and form three humanlike silhouettes. They enact a short, dramatic scene in front of me, an argument between scientific staff of the observatory and a facility manager.

This encounter establishes how my further short-term experiences of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* are bound to occur. Even though the game's environmental storytelling, also includes radio calls, visual clues hidden around the village, it mostly occurs via the orbs of the pattern, the cosmic presence which seemingly is responsible for the disappearance of all human beings. There are two types of orbs in the game: some are stationary and almost invisible until they are interacted with, others glowing brightly and patrolling back and forth on set paths. Through my first encounter with them I already learn that they serve as records of sort: they allow to "tap into memories" (Corriea 2015: n.p.). They are "echoes of the past" (Hamilton 2016: n.p.), play short scenes upon interaction which show inhabitants of the valley going on about their every-day business. While these excerpts cannot be dated precisely, they come from different time intervals ranging back from potentially weeks in the past up until shortly before life in the village has come to an end.[3] Through their occurrences, I begin to engage with the past of Shropshire and different inhabitants of the village. I learn about Jeremy and Wendy. I learn about their lives and worries. I accompany them unto their death. Their representation as glowing lights makes this all less tragic. Scattered across *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*'s pastoral are glowing light orbs.

3 As later sequences from the orbs reveal, Yaughton was bombed with nerve gas in order to stop the Pattern from spreading beyond the village. Since no bodies can be found throughout the environment, however, it can be assumed that the Pattern made people disappear before they faced a (presumably more gruesome) death by gas. Players never leave the area and never communicate with human beings from outside the valley, suggesting that the Pattern did spread after all.

Moving from short-term to short-term experience for me combines the sensations of a **Dérive** with those of a curious detective. I aimlessly wander the environment, often spending hours in single areas, trying to puzzle together what world-ending event has happened in the village from environmental details, but do stop or change direction as I notice a glowing orb around. One orb I find in front of a bus station, for example where I am reintroduced to the characters Stephen and Kate. The little snippet of every-day life this time talks about Stephen's work as a researcher. Each and every of these vignettes condenses a slice of life to its affective essence. The time of the day always turns to night as they begin to play, the darkness blending out all surroundings and setting the glowing silhouettes into my personal centre stage. Their body movements are minimal and only hinted at by their ghostly apparitions, their facial expressions non-existent entirely. I have to focus on their voices – and thus open myself automatically to their intonation and emotion. In total, I find orbs belonging to six characters: Kate and Stephen, as introduced already, Wendy (Stephen's mother), Stephen's uncle Frank, Pastor Jeremy, and Lizzie (Stephen's ex-fiancée). Every orb provides me with another scene that I can follow, interpret, and contextualise as a part of my journey. I learn that Wendy has an issue with Kate, most likely due to her ethnicity, or that Jeremy finds himself alone in his church towards the end of the journey, where his interaction with the pattern resembles an angry call upon God by a crestfallen pastor. Exploring this universe of homely affairs after the impending end of the world inspires "private moments of connection between people, or something as intimate and extraordinary as someone's death, were played off against this huge sweeping cosmos" (ibid.).

Regarding a **long-term insights**, I can say that the more time I spend in the game, the more I begin to notice and to appreciate the places seeming detachedness from linear time. The ambience of the virtual landscape is not affected by a linear progression of day and night. Rather, the times of the day change as I reach certain spots in the game and time also reverses when I return to places that I have visited priorly. Since I have begun to grow accustomed to the gameplay, I can now take more other phenomena into consideration. No extradiegetic music is heard at all over long stretches of walking. In houses, the atmosphere is intense and scary due to the lack of both, an extra- or intradiegetic soundtrack and I constantly worry about something to startle me all of a sudden. The absence of music makes the sound of the orbs even more alienating. Upon interaction, the scenery gets overlaid by a massive wall of orchestral music. The game's soundtrack is decidedly non-dynamic, meaning it does not react to player action, but that music is activated in reaction to reaching specific areas in the virtual environment. I more and more realise how *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* is built on the rhizomatic to unfold a logic of duality. "This diegetic player experience delivers both narrative impacts, as players empathise with stories of the characters in their moments before death and agency as they assemble the larger narrative" (Wood 2017: 30). Seen as secluded shards, most of the individual story bits throughout the game share a slice of misery that an inhabitant of Yaughton experienced. As the wanderer of the cosy post-apocalypse, however, I am able to draw connections that these people could not draw, see, or know about in their lifetime. I develop the feeling of being not an authorial author but an authorial curator of sorts, one who possesses the secret knowledge of a spectators who approaches a situation from distance, observes, and draws conclusions from this engagement in the afterlife. I ex-

perience a sentiment of responsibility for these ethereal memory items scattered across the landscape and begin to understand that, as a player, I am able to connect them and to create a whole that is more harmonious than what any of the inhabitants may have sensed. As Hamilton summarises it:

> Kate says that we each have an "other;" a person or entity that makes us whole. She talks about how the Pattern shows everyone happy: Jeremy has found God, Wendy has been reunited with Eddie, Frank is with Mary, and Lizzie and Stephen are together. Kate's other [we may assume] is the Pattern itself. (2016: n.p.)

As avatar in this virtual world, I am blessed with the agency to find these orbs connected to the lifetimes of these humans and retrace their last steps before their world ended. Through the gameplay of the walking simulator, which allows me to navigate through the environment but otherwise forces me to rely on my perception and contemplation rather than in-game functionalities to make sense of what is happening, I find myself spiritual pilgrimage in the sense of an "experience profoundly dependent on material environments, and sensory stimuli, expressed through human interaction with those environments" (Dyas 2021: 3). I am experiencing the world as a mediator between micro-local shards of memories and information: a facilitator of tiny apocalypses, rather than the apocalypse (Pinchbeck in Kuhar 2015: n.p.). This is where the spiritual, to me, unfolds at its most evident in *Everybody's gone to the Rapture*. Individually, the orbs that I take give me samples of worries from the inhabitants of the village. Most of them revolve around interpersonal conflicts that, when following each story through its completion, could not have been resolved by an individual in their lifetime. As a wanderer of the cosy post-apocalypse, however, I am able to draw a greater picture from their sum, to approximate a whole. My role in this virtual world is that of the meaning maker and curator, collecting all these individual stories and learning to see these mortal flickers as a whole that is infinitely encapsulated in a state of existence beyond human time. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* thus keeps me in a back-and-forth through which I am able to engage my spirituality via the game's tacit handling of these extreme positions; Its juxtaposition of player-life in a still, cosy post-apocalypse, the lone avatar in chase of an intangible cosmic pattern, quiet-and darkness and audio-visual opulence. Feeling a sense of connection and embeddedness could not have happened without the ending happening first.

Replaying the game several times to experience its **cascadic** dimension emphasises the motif of a uniting, warmly embracing transcendence as achieved through player interaction. While the game's contents do not change – which I assumed but did not expect fully, since the first walking simulator game by The Chinese Room, *Dear Esther* (2012) plays effectively with randomised content with each playthrough – I begin to notice meaningful elements in the scenery that I have not noticed in my first playthrough and exploring the surroundings off the trodden path. I begin to see the ever-changing pattern as a symbol of infinity which, after making these mental connections, connects everybody happily in the afterlife. My engagement with the pattern over several playthrough equals a metaphor for the spiritual experience itself. Depictions of the end of the world offer a cathartic experience and in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, just as in many other British representations, this catharsis is counterbalanced through a

harmonious depiction on a peaceful countryside (Hoffstadt/Schrey 2011: 31). A spiritual experience is, after all, the interpretation of patterns that we can only undertake subjectively and according to our own preconditions, our cultural upbringing, and the hopeful intends of our spiritual imagination (Antes 2002: 341). Moreover, and coming from a lifelong admiration for videogames – personal at first and scholarly later on – this understanding of how spiritual experience harmonises with my understanding of how videogames affect us as a medium. A videogame is a world system that we players explore, rarely knowing the whole from the start but puzzling it together step by step – just as we only understand that a pattern actually is a pattern by retracing individual geometric proportions until we see a repetition of units building up. Having a glowing pattern being as the divine apparition of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, to me, is a meta-expression of the spiritual capabilities of videogames: The transcendent and meaning-providing whole is right in front of me. All I need to be is daring enough to follow my intuition and the clues it provides until I can make sense of it.

The game always ends where it began: At the observatory which overlooks Shropshire County. It is a fitting metaphor for my experience: an observatory connects the skies to the Earth. It is the place where the patterns of celestial bodies are closely inspected and interpreted as it fulfils the function of a vantage point, far enough away from a matter so that it can be observed from a perspicacious distance. The observatory in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* is a vantage point for the above just as much as it is one for the effects of a cosmic phenomenon 'below'. It is a place residing above and outside of the village, where the pattern's glowing orbs are. I am reminded of this privilege because it serves as the games starting and ending point. I internalise it as my personal alpha and omega to the events of the game. For the ending part, my avatar spawns behind the locked gates of the facility. After exploring the perimeter and entering the building, I find one last audio tape in which Kate states that "Everything is light now. Everything has come to rest" (The Chinese Room 2015). *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* thus concludes on a revelation of dualities. It offered me an experience in-between understanding an event of greater importance and retracing individual aspects of the game. It made me encounter personal tragedies, served as little slices of a timeline, portrayed them as grains of a timeless, all-encompassing network. This pattern, in which their individual meaning remains intact connects them to a harmonious, peaceful state beyond time. By following an esoteric pattern, present yet evading any meaning but the one I imbue to it, I connect the narrative elements of its systemic framework as a self-driven agent in a pastoral environment. I achieved what I understand as a connection between the singular and the whole. One player, one avatar, entangled in the glowing presence of an eternal state. I experienced a revelation in transcendence.

Conclusion

Reading this paper to its very end has, as subjective matters tend to do, most likely elicited an opinion from you. Maybe you agree with Nick Harper's reading of loss as the spiritual leitmotif in *Journey*. Or perhaps the overwhelming feeling of transcendence that I experienced in my close performance of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* resonated with you.

Imagining you huffing 'nonsense!' now and looking for another academic read is, while disheartening on a personal level, also quite possible. Maybe none of the examples discussed in this chapter strike you as particularly spiritual at all, or maybe there is that one, other game that inspired you to ponder about the meaning of believe in your everyday life, and you dearly missed it in the prior contemplation. All these reactions are valid if they are coming from your firm understanding of your subjective desires. They shape a kaleidoscope of personal accesses to matters of spirituality – and the fact that all these reactions are possible when reading this paper emphasise the importance to discuss them even more. Spirituality is an intimate topic, and the fact that it eludes our assumed interest in intersubjective debate and assessment should not be taken as a criterium of exclusion from our scope of discourse but, quite contrarily, be seen as an incentive to foster ideas that allow us to engage this ***mysterium tremendum fascinans et digitalis*** – the transcendental potential of videogames.

This text aimed to provide insight into how videogames may enable their players to make spiritual experiences, as well as the stylistic and methodological challenges of discussing them from a research perspective. Spirituality can be defined as a transcendental need for universal belonging and making sense of one's existence. This may occur in experiences of a strong duality of infinite and finite or of finding purpose. The pervasive magic circle demarcating the (mental) space in which games take place, denoting them as different from the rulings and ordinary state of the everyday, provides an experimental space to find such purpose if one wilfully succumbs to its rules. Understanding videogames, then, not as a finite facilitator but as an infinite provider of potential for realising spiritual experiences guides our analytical attention towards a spatial understanding of the medium – its virtual architecture of belief, if you wish, and its proselytes – and its importance to enable spiritual agency. Videogames offer a dual kind of immersion: They allow players to sink into virtual worlds where they have simultaneously encouraged them to metaphorically sink into themselves, to explore their own needs and to engage with their spiritual side. The spiritual experiences possible in this virtual (self)engagement setup are manifold, as this text's selection of examples has portrayed. It explores videogames as a playground of intended spiritual actions, and, ultimately, a pocket prayerbook of the cyber-citizen, who is educated in self-educational truth via agency exerted in virtuality.

Following the theoretical complex of the spiritual experiences that videogames may provide, the latter part of the text brought forth the problematic relation of scientific writing and the usage of an I-voice in texts. While a strong I-voice in academic writing is contemporarily taken as a descriptor for the actions and thought processes undergone by a researcher, the I-voice in relation to research related to personal experiences is taken with scepticism and generally regarded to potential fallacies of bias and an unnecessarily prosaic tone. The issue at hand is that topics such as the expression of spiritual experiences, a topic of utmost personal nature, needs to be expressed with an equally personal voice. Game studies especially face a precarious issue here, as the content of any given videogame is fully dependent on player interaction and the subjective experiences that players may have within their virtual worlds are, accordingly, difficult to access via objective means. The fact that the usage of I-voice and the evident need of players to share their personal videogame experiences has been expressed in reference to journalist Nick Harper, games scholar Doris Rusch, and expressed in my close performing method, as

exemplified by sharing my own spiritual experience of playing *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* in an attempt to structure personal impressions that is, nevertheless, self-aware of its personal mode of recounting.

The text thereby highlighted the manifold invocations of spiritual experiences as present in videogames and, thus, provides grounds for further research that may enable us to frame a private phenomenon scientifically. While it is easy to speak one's mind and personal opinion about a videogame, up to the point of expressing personal, emotional contemplations, the actual challenge of game analysis lies in connecting these sentiments to objectively discernible attributes of the medium (cf. Jennings 2015: n.p.). What videogames lack, however (or rather what game studies lack), are the means to analyse this phenomenon. Many questions, especially concerning the formalisation of videogame analyses, are still open (Inderst 2023: n.p.). This paper and the insights I have hopefully provided thus far can be read as an incentive for examining means and methodologies in game studies. Foundational theoretical insights of play and belief, overlapping in the act of the sacred and ritual, have long coquetted with one another. The individual must be more acknowledged in the methodology surrounding the videogame, as every play-act is a subjective affair. Only then can extraordinary experiences, such as the experiences of spirituality that may arise from a videogame, be brought forth for critical examination and, thus, benefit designers and our cultural understanding of videogames as artefacts of spiritual potential.

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