

Summary: *Games and Transgressive Aesthetics* research project

Funding source: Research Council of Norway

Project manager and PI: Kristine Jørgensen

Project duration: Jan 1, 2015-Jun 30, 2019 (first 6 months were dedicated to planning/hiring)

Research question and hypotheses:

What happens when transgressive game content is framed by a playful mindset, and what happens to the playful mindset when encountering transgressive game content?

Hypotheses:

- The transgressive is trivialized because “it is only play”; or that playfulness collapses because the transgressive is experienced as speculative, shocking, tasteless, or too invasive.
- Playfulness is what makes it possible for the player to endure the transgression.

The project aims to explore whether there are certain contexts that allow seriousness and playfulness to be balanced in a way that maintains both the gravity of the illustrated situations, as well as the player’s motivation to explore the situations from a playful or safe position.

Goal:

By formulating an empirically and experientially oriented theory that explains the relationship between transgressive content and playfulness in digital games, the project will represent an alternative to effect studies and its reductive focus on meaning-making in games as a simple relationship between cause and effect. The project will also contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the artistic and expressive potential of digital games.

Qualitative description of results:

Results are still being processed. A comprehensive theory of games and transgressive aesthetics will be published in Mortensen and Jørgensen (in review), and a monograph about the theory of ludic monsters will be published in Švelch (for consideration).

The research project has illuminated the hypotheses and provided a more detailed understanding of how transgressions are understood in a playful context. With point of departure in the idea that transgression means to overstep boundaries and break norms, central to our theory are the following ideas:

The distinction between **profound transgression** and **transgressive aesthetics**: While profound transgressions imply situations that are so offensive or repulsive to us that we are not willing to endure them, transgressive aesthetic implies that we are willing to endure the transgression because it is part of an aesthetic practice. We connect to the idea of transgressive aesthetics to Kant’s idea of the sublime, and further also in Vella’s idea of the **ludic sublime**. However, this experience of ludic sublime tends to be temporary. Our explorations of monstrosity in games, for example, suggest that monstrous entities and enemies in video games tend to be demystified as they are made into objects of player agency, and translated into a rational language of statistics. This conforms to Caillois’ proposition that play expends mystery.

The fallacy of play: While the ludic context and the sense of playfulness may trivialize transgressive actions as well as media content, we call the idea that play and games by definition is non-serious and fun the fallacy of play. We say that it is a fallacy because in reality play can indeed concern serious and uncomfortable topics.

However, this is not to say that playfulness is immune to transgressions: There are indeed situations where the sense of playfulness disappears. When players feel that their sensibilities are being challenged, they may either quit playing, or they may find techniques that help them endure the sense of transgression. In our data we identified four main situations in which players experience that the sense of transgression is mitigated:

- When they enter a telic metamotivational state: What Anders Frank calls “gamer mode”
- When transgressive content is being presented repeatedly, and the player is desensitized
- In the context of humour, absurdity, exaggeration
- When the context provide a sense of meaningful discomfort
- When the player can distract themselves from the discomfort of transgressions

The sense of transgression is based on social norms, conventions, as well as subjective preferences and sensibilities. We also find that it is important to separate between whether players can be considered **transgressors** or **transgressees**: in other words, whether they are the ones transgressing, or whether they are the victim of transgressions either by the game or by other players.

What did we promise?

In the original proposal, we promised 10 articles on specific topics. After expanding the project to another postdoc and decreasing the PI's position to 50% from Aug 2016, the number of articles were increased to 13. We also promised to deliver 1 monograph, 1 anthology, 1 PhD thesis, and 3 master theses.

As of now, we have only 5 articles, but we also have 2 full conference papers accepted. We have however increased the number of monographs to 2. We have delivered the anthology, which will be published Dec 2018. We also expect to submit 3 additional articles before the end of the project. Two master theses have been defended; one is still in development. The PhD thesis will be submitted in June 2019. See below for a complete list:

With the exception of two (in grey), we have covered all topics that were indicated in the proposal:

WP1-1) An article presenting a typology of transgressive games

- monograph chapter
- anthology chapters (Pötzsch, Mortensen/Navarro-Remesal)
- Jørgensen 2016a

WP1-2) A comparative article on the transgressive in games and other media

WP2-1) An article that presents results from the ethnographic forum studies

- Bjørkelo (in review): “Elves are Jews with pointy ears and gay magic”
- Bjørkelo: (in development)

WP2-2 and 2-3) Two articles that present results from collected data

- Jørgensen 2016b
- Anthology chapter (Jørgensen)
- Švelch (in development)

WP2-4) A statement article about how to understand transgressive games

- monograph chapter

WP3-1) An article on the impact of the results on understanding games as an environment for learning through experience

WP3-2 and 3-3) Two articles on the relationship between the playful and the transgressive

- monograph chapter
- anthology chapter (Stenros)

- Švelch 2018c

WP3-4) An article on the boundary between the thought-provoking and speculative in transgressive game content

- monograph chapter
- anthology chapter (Jørgensen)
- Švelch 2018c

WP3-5) An article on the impact of the results on understanding games as a medium and as art (PhD student)

- monograph chapter

WP3-6) An article on the societal impact of the results

- monograph chapter

WP3-7) An article that discusses what it is that makes players continue playing when encountering transgressive content

- monograph chapter
- anthology chapter (Jørgensen, Bjørkelo)

3 master theses

- Hanssen: *Ethics in The Walking Dead. A qualitative study of user experiences of the videogame The Walking Dead*
- Buer: *The Impact of Interface and Gameworld Design on Player Experience. The case of Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain*
- Lipicnik: in progress

1 PhD thesis

- Bjørkelo has a delay in his progression and will deliver his thesis in June 2019. Original date was Jan 7, 2019.

Monographs:

1. Mortensen, T.E., Jørgensen, K. (in review). *The Paradox of Transgression in Games*. In review for MIT Press.
2. Švelch, J. (under consideration): *Player versus monster: From horror to fodder and back*. Proposal with sample chapters requested by editors of the *Playful Thinking* series (MIT Press), and will be delivered by Jun 2019

Anthology:

1. Jørgensen, K. & Karlsen, F. (in press). *Transgression in Games and Play*. MIT Press.
Contributors: Jaakko Stenros, Torill Elvira Mortensen and Victor Navarro-Remesal, Holger Pötzsch, John R. Sageng, Mia Consalvo, Hanna Wirman and Rhys Jones, Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros, Kristian A. Bjørkelo, Tomasz Z. Majkowski, Ragnhild Tronstad, Alan Meades, Kelly Boudreau, Faltin Karlsen, Kristine Jørgensen.

Journal articles and chapters in research collections:

1. Bjørkelo, K.A. (in review): "Elves are Jews with pointy ears and gay magic".
2. Švelch, J. (forthcoming): "Always Already Monsters: Bioshock's "Splicers" as Computational Others". In Bockwoldt, J., Hammar, E., Pötzsch, H., Beyer, C. (eds.). *Manufacturing Monsters*. Special issue of the *Nordlit* journal.
3. Jørgensen, K. (forthcoming). "Understanding War Game Experiences: Applying Multiple Player Perspectives to Game Analysis», in Hammond, P., Pötzsch, H. (eds.). *War Games: Memory, Militarism, and the Subject of Play*. Bloomsbury.

4. Jørgensen, K. (in press). "Dead Rising and the Gameworld Zombie", in Webley, S.J., Zackariasson, P. (eds.): *The Playful Undead and Video Games. Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*. Routledge.
5. Jørgensen, K. (2016b): "The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line." *Game Studies* vol 16, issue 2.

Conference full papers:

1. Bjørkelo, K.A., Jørgensen, K. (2018). "The Asylum Seekers Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism". Full paper accepted for *DiGRA Nordic 2018*, Bergen.
2. Švelch, J. (2018c). "Encoding monsters: 'Ontology of the enemy' and containment of the unknown in role-playing games". Paper presented at *Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2018*, Copenhagen.

In development:

1. Bjørkelo, K.A. (Journal article that sums up forum findings)
2. Švelch, J. *Is the Alien cheating?: Reception of monstrous AI in Alien: Isolation*. Article in progress, based on a previous conference paper.
3. Švelch, J. *Living up to the lore: On the reception of video game monsters*. Article in progress, based on discussion forum and focus group material, preliminary version presented at DiGRA Nordic 2018.

Conferences:

We estimated to attend a minimum of three conferences a year for the duration of the project where we could either present papers or organize panels/workshops. We have as of now presented 16 papers. We have also organized five workshops/panels at different conferences. Following the plan for organizing a conference in late 2018, we are organizing DiGRA Nordic in Bergen in November 2018.

Conference papers:

1. Bjørkelo, K.A., Jørgensen, K. (2018). "The Asylum Seekers Larp: The Positive Discomfort of Transgressive Realism". Full paper accepted for *DiGRA Nordic 2018*, Bergen.
2. Mortensen, T., Jørgensen, K. (2018). "Transgressive Game Content and Emotional Response. Excerpt from The Paradox of Transgression in Games". *Norsk medieforskerkonferanse 2018*, Bodø.
3. Bjørkelo, K.A. (2018b). "Approaching unsolicited, articulated emotional responses in online forums". *Norsk medieforskerkonferanse 2018*, Bodø.
4. Bjørkelo, K.A. (2018a). "Master and Slave - Play and Game". Paper presented at *BDSM Workshop, DiGRA 2018*.
5. Švelch, J., Švelch, Jan (2018). "Who Creates Monsters. The Work of Enemy Design in Video Games." *Central and Eastern European Game Studies conference 2018, Prague*
6. Švelch, J. (2018e). "Spawn, Fight, Die, and Turn to Loot. A Reflection on Life Cycles of Video Game Monsters." *Central and Eastern European Game Studies conference 2018, Prague*
7. Švelch, J. (2018d). "Living up to the lore: On the reception of video game monsters". Full paper accepted for *DiGRA Nordic 2018*, Bergen.
8. Švelch, J. (2018c). "Encoding monsters: 'Ontology of the enemy' and containment of the unknown in role-playing games". Paper presented at *Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2018*, Copenhagen.
9. Švelch, J. (2018b). "The unremarkable death of a ludic monster: Exploring the life cycles of video game enemies". Paper presented at *Death and Macabre Aesthetics in Games: The Third Annual Moscow Game Center Conference*, Moscow.
10. Švelch, J. (2018a). "Reading bestiaries and monster manuals: Sublime monstrosity and containment in (c)RPGs. *Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference 2018*, Toronto.

11. Švelch, J. (2017b). "Is the Alien cheating?: Vernacular epistemologies of AI in Alien: Isolation". Paper presented at *AI and Games Workshop*, University of Cambridge, 2017.
12. Švelch, J. (2017a). "Paradoxes of video game monstrosity: The case of Bayonetta's transnational monsters". Paper presented at *Transnational Monsters Conference*, York.
13. Jørgensen, K. (2016a). "A Framework for Understanding Player Experiences with Controversial Game Content". Paper presented at *DiGRA/FDG 2016: The First Joint International Conference*, Dundee.
14. Bjørkelo, K.A. (2016). "A Safe Space for Race and Nation". Paper presented at *CEEGS 2016*, Lublin.
15. Bjørkelo, K.A. (2015). "Sympathy for the Gamer". Paper presented at *CEEGS 2015*, Krakow.
16. Jørgensen, K. (2015). "Playful Transgressions: On controversial content in digital games". Paper presented at the *Nordmedia Conference 2015*, Copenhagen.

Workshops and panels:

1. *Upcoming panel: Monstrous Representations: The Politics of Monsters in Video Games*
SCMS 2019, Seattle, USA
Chairs: Jaroslav Švelch, Sarah Stang
Speakers: Sarah Stang, Darshana Jayemanne, Stephanie Jennings, Jaroslav Švelch
2. *Panel: Demystifying Video Game Monsters*
SCMS 2018, Toronto, Canada
Chair: Jaroslav Švelch
Speakers: Daniel Vella, Sarah Christina Ganzon, Carly Kocurek, Jaroslav Švelch
3. *Games and Monstrosity Workshop*
CEEGS 2017, Trnava, Slovakia
Organizers: Jaroslav Švelch, Daniel Vella
Speakers: Ivan Davidov, Francesca Borg Taylor, Marta Kania, Diana Melnic and Vlad Melnic, Magdalena Cielecka
4. *Workshop: Transgressive Game Content: A Central and Eastern European Perspective*
CEEGS 2015, Kraków, Poland
Organizers: Kristine Jørgensen, Torill Elvira Mortensen
Speakers: Holger Pötzsch, Bartek Schweiger, Tomasz Z. Majkowski, Kristian A. Bjørkelo, Joanna Plaszewska, Piotr Sterczewski, Vit Sisler.
5. *Games and Transgressive Aesthetics Workshop*
DiGRA 2015, Lüneburg, Germany
Organizers: Kristine Jørgensen, Rune Klevjer, Torill Elvira Mortensen
Speakers: Bartek Schweiger, Carl Therrien, Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris, Brian Schrank, Mark Johnson, Holger Pötzsch.

Seminars:

The proposal stated that we would organize annual research seminars for all partners. We have organized a total of four seminars as well as this last evaluation meeting. According to the plan, we have also established a local research group, which has met 2-3 times every term.

1. *Seminar: Existence and Emotion in Play*
Media City Bergen, May 25, 2018
Organizer: Kristine Jørgensen
Speakers: Doris C. Rusch, Torill Elvira Mortensen, Kristian A. Bjørkelo, Jaroslav Švelch, Faltin Karlsen, Erik Aarebrot
2. *3rd GTA Research Seminar: Researching the Transgressive Aspects of Gaming and Play Seminar*
Dipartimenti Arti, University of Bologna, May 22, 2017

Organizers: Kristine Jørgensen, Torill Elvira Mortensen

Speakers: Ilaria Mariani and Davide Spallazzo, Kristian A. Bjørkelo, Tomasz Z. Majkowski, Olli T. Leino, Jaroslav Švelch, Riccardo Fassone (co-author William Huber), Jaakko Stenros (co-author Tanja Sihvonen), Jon Back (co-authors Elena Marquez Segura and Annika Waern), Torill Elvira Mortensen

3. 2nd GTA Research Seminar: Transgressions in Games and Play Anthology Workshop

Westerdals Oslo ACT, Aug 22-23, 2016

Organizers: Faltin Karlsen, Kristine Jørgensen, Malgorzata A. Pacholczyk

Workshop contributors: Jaakko Stenros, Torill Elvira Mortensen, Holger Pötzsch, John R. Sageng, Mia Consalvo, Rhys Jones, Tanja Sihvonen, Kristian A. Bjørkelo, Tomasz Z. Majkowski, Ragnhild Tronstad, Alan Meades, Kelly Boudreau, Sebastian Deterding.

4. 1st Games and Transgressive Aesthetics Research Seminar

Dept of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen, Aug 17-18, 2015

Organizers: Kristine Jørgensen

Invited speakers: Asbjørn Grønstad, Staffan Björk, Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jaakko Stenros, Rune Mentzoni.

Workshop contributors: Frans Mäyrä, Jill Walker Rettberg, Anita Leirfall, Rune Klevjer, John R. Sageng, Holger Pötzsch, Ragnhild Tronstad, Vibeke Sjøvoll, Tore Gulden, Faltin Karlsen

UiB network for games research

- This cross-disciplinary group with members from spanning fields such as media studies, psychosocial science, philosophy, digital culture and religion studies.
- The group has met 2-3 times each term since 2015.
- Meetings have been a mixture between invited speakers, discussion of work-in-progress, and presentations by master students.