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The present article focuses on the ways in which games represent certain aspects of the systemic nature of violence. It seeks to shift focus from the "outrageous" representations of violence directed at human individuals that often tend to dominate debates on game violence, to rather study the, much less visible, "everyday" violence directed at animals as it is manifested by the hunting mechanics of open world games. Taking a rhetorical approach to the underlying mechanics of violence, it focuses less on shocking depictions as such than on the implicit ideological functions of procedural gameplay.

The article circles around four main areas of investigation: how games represent the relationship between hunting animals and crafting animal goods; construct distinctions between human and non-human animals; separate species into juridical and ethical categories; and deal with the digital nature of representations of wildlife in games, where animals may always respawn anew, in order to present rhetorical arguments on the connection between hunting and extinction.

Game Studies and Animal Violence

Studies on violence against animals in games are surprisingly scarce (Sawers & Demetrious, 2010). In gaming discourse in general, accounts may be found of individual players' reactions to shocking depictions of animal violence. E.g., critical essays by vegetarian players may focus on the haunting experience of being forced as a player to carry out involuntary acts of slaughter. Cameron Kunzelman (2013) observes how the introduction of a "hunger" mechanics in Mojang's open world sandbox game *Minecraft* (2009; 2011) prompted new incentives for killing in-game animals. Striving to play as a vegetarian character, Kunzelman details how he had to stop playing the game altogether at the very moment it finally forced him to kill a pig in order to survive. In a similar vein, Alec Meer (2011) notes how his attempt at playing an animal-friendly character in Bethesda's open world RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) was immediately interrupted as his punishment of a poacher resulted in him being attacked by, and having to kill, the poacher's dog. While certainly sympathetic, such anecdotal accounts tend to limit themselves to singular and individual player experiences, rather than focusing on the procedural setup of the hunting mechanics as such.

The growing body of empirical research on the psychological and emotional effects of playing violent video games, in turn, tends to focus on games where aggression is directed at human, or at least highly anthropomorphic, individuals (Chittaro & Sioni, 2012). Studying aggression in relation to a game where you kill insects, Luca Chittaro and Riccardo Sioni (2012) stress that representations of violence against animals

rather than humans cause less concern, as it is not only socially accepted but even encouraged in relation to certain species (like cockroaches). Thus, they argue, games of the "Whac-a-Mole" variant allow players to engage in violent acts which are "unlikely to (consciously or unconsciously) evoke taboo or moral stigma" (p. 235). Consequently, they suggest that game violence will come to function in very different ways depending on whether it is directed at human beings, animal species close to us (such as pets), or those we simply regard as pests.

Hereby, we note how game violence is closely connected to ethical and ideological concerns. By focusing on how games encourage or discourage violence against certain species, we may be able to move from the visual representation of violent acts to the underlying systems of classification and gameplay interaction making violence possible or impossible, as well as acceptable or unacceptable, in the first place. To put it briefly, games make visible implicit distinctions in how we evaluate various species ethically and emotionally. As Naarah Catherine Sawers and Kristin Demetrious suggest, games may consequently be seen as ideological constructs that "position the player to assume certain values around the human/non-human relationship" (2010, p. 245). In order to sift out such distinctions and values, we must direct our focus towards the ways in which games regulate what acts are considered possible or impossible, as well as offensive or inoffensive.

An Approach to Game Violence and Non-Human Animals

The present argument starts from three theoretical notions: that violence is an ideological concept; that we live in a "carnist" society encouraging violence against certain species of animals; and that games constitute procedural representations of such often implicit ideological systems.

In Slavoj Žižek's (2008) fundamental distinction between *subjective* and *objective* violence, the former term designates violence that shocks us – sudden, unexpected, evident, singular – whereas the latter rather signifies the often invisible force inherent to the incessant reproduction of an ostensible state of normality. Whereas subjective violence is visible, abnormal, and foregrounded, objective violence is invisible, normal, and backgrounded. In other words, whereas acts of subjective violence come across as dreadful events disrupting a supposedly non-violent state of normality, the very conceptualization of objective violence hints at how this state too—the status quo—presupposes violent force. Thus, Žižek contends, the acts we usually understand as violent may only appear against a backdrop of even more excessive, yet less visible, violence. By focusing solely on shocking and gruesome acts (or representations thereof), we may, in fact, lose sight of the much more extensive forces of violence constituting our everyday life.

An example of this mechanism is found in the outrage caused by recurrent "scandals" in industrial meat production. When butchering goes wrong, we suddenly become aware of the violence inherent to the food industry; and still, such instances are presented as singular accidents rather than as manifestations of the intrinsic violence of killing and eating animals. Melanie Joy designates *carnism* the ideological system of beliefs that makes meat eating seem "normal, natural, and necessary" (2010, pp.96–97). Influenced by cognitive constructivism, Joy highlights the ways we

sort and interpret data according to established schemas or mental classificatory systems which, unconsciously, let us organize animals in various hierarchical classes associated with different attitudes and interactions (e.g., the dividing of species into "prey, predator, pest, pet, or food"; 2010, p.14).

Such cognitivist models, which themselves often are influenced by computer science, are of particular interest for game studies since games inevitably will come to model and reproduce similar patterns of thought in its design of the game world and game play mechanics. To put it briefly, the ways in which games are constructed may be studied as models of certain cognitive (and hence ideological) schemas.

Along similar lines, Ian Bogost (2007) maintains that games make meaning, not by creating a full reproduction of the world, but by selectively modelling certain procedures associated with specific phenomena. According to his "procedural rhetorics", where games are understood as restricted procedural representations of particular material processes, games constitute arguments on "how things work", or, more elaborately, "the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith." (p.3) In this view, games become interesting not because they remodel the world in its entirety but because they direct our attention to how we tend to understand some particular subject. In constructing the game, the designers transform certain intangible schemas into the physics, mechanics, world, gameplay and interface of the game. To put it briefly, games can be said to constitute tangible models of specific areas of ideology.

In what ways does the mere construction of the game world form ideological models? Speaking on games as models of ecology, P. Saxton Brown adds that video games "often say little that is explicit about climate change and environmental crisis, but because they often create environments (processes, spaces, worlds), they constitute an important site where models of environmental consciousness can be created, allegorized, and played" (2014, p.403). More particularly, games will have to categorize certain sets of objects and associate them with specific affordances and patterns of interaction. Thus, in McKenzie Wark's words, the "primary violence" of the game-space "has nothing to do with brightly colored explosions or mounting death counts but with the decision by digital fiat on where everything belongs and how it is ranked" (2007, p.20).

For example, games make distinctions between who and what can and cannot be killed; between classes of people based on differences in gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and other intersecting hierarchies; between species of non-human animals and their social standing as pets or pests, predators or prey; and so on. By categorizing representations of various bodies in distinct classes, and providing them with differing affordances, games provide models of how social and ethical relations between similar bodies are being regulated among the creators and players of games, outside of the so called "magic circle" of gaming.

Hunting, Crafting and Commodification

Consider a specific human-animal interaction. As Brown (2014) notes, during the last decade, hunting has become a major feature of many big-budget ("AAA") open world games, not least because current technology allows for lush realistic three-dimensional models of vast and traversable areas populated by seemingly autonomous flora and fauna. What is the function of such fauna? In open world games, the combination of openness and randomness creates incentive for exploration: unexpectedly stumbling upon a pack of wild animals while running through the forest gives thrill and life to the world, and rhythm to what could otherwise become rather dull treks through a static environment. As Robin Johnson (2014) points out, the artificial intelligence systems of Rockstar's open-world action-adventure Western game *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) allows for a rich wildlife of birds, cougars, snakes, wild horses, bears, and so on, that all respond to hunger, thirst, and external threats. By associating different species with different biotopes, geographical variation is gained. Furthermore, a certain element of randomness also allows for variations in gameplay:

> The wildlife AI leads to some exciting and unexpected gameplay such as the first time a cougar knocks the player off his or her horse in a strike from behind. With so much of the wildlife scampering away when the player is near or hunting, to suddenly be the hunted demonstrates the game AI's different animal reasoning systems. (Johnson, 2014, p.17)

Open world games tend to move hunting mechanics from the "ludic" or competitive and goal-driven realm of hunting games proper, where it is the very raison d'être of playing, to the "paideic" aspect of roaming the land freely, where it is but one of many sporadic and spontaneous diversions on offer. You rarely have to hunt for food, since in most games, you do not have to eat at all. Nevertheless, active pursuit is encouraged through a common use of crafting and trading mechanics where hunting is needed in order to gather the necessary animal resources. As Brown points out regarding the *Far Cry*-series, the implementation of a mandatory crafting mechanic will come to model nature within an anthropocentric framework of violent exploitation: "Here, bear skins and plant life are always waiting to be collected into a certain amount of material for crafting and a certain quotient of XP[.]" (2014, p.397) So, even though hunting is but one of many possible diversions, the fundamental outline of the game world presents a procedural argument on the environment as a bountiful and unlimited source of raw materials for humans to harvest—Indefinitely, at that, since animals killed will always respawn.

If games, accordingly, argue for the necessity of killing animals, how do they argue for the nature of this violent act? When the prey is brought down in Ubisoft's *Far Cry 3* (2012), the player must advance towards it and activate a flaying mechanism, where blood splatters over the TV-screen while the player character cuts open the animal and removes its valuable body parts (the pelt, primarily, which is used to craft rucksacks and ammo pouches and such). During the act, the player character often expresses his disgust by uttering sounds of repulsion. While such explicitness of violence in the hunt for animal resources is what made a player like Kunzelman quit playing *Minecraft*, the mere graphicness gives us little reason to reject the game, since, by expressing the goriness of the act, the game also makes a procedural argument on the fundamental link between animal goods and violence, as a kind of

reminder about what Michael Pollan has called the *messiness* of killing: "how it forced me to look at and smell and touch and even to taste the death, at my hands, of a creature my size that, on the inside at least, had all the same parts and probably looked an awful lot like I did" (2006, p. 358).

Due to their simulational nature, games may use their algorithmic mode of representation to rhetorically emphasize the violent, corporeal origin of animal products. This gives their arguments a political force lacking, for example, in a seemingly "friendlier" game like Maxis' *The Sims 3* (2009), where meat is depicted as growing on bushes, much like fruit and vegetables. Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda points out how, in modern society, the consumption of animal goods must repress "the death, the spilled blood, of the animal" (2013, p.28). Through the reificating function of industrial slaughterhouses and supermarkets, the commodity is "fully rendered, clearly separated not only from the living [animal] but from the systems—ecological, political, and economic—In which the [animal] lived and died" (p.31). In *Far Cry 3*, rather than simply buying your holsters and wallets as already manufactured and "clearly separated" leather goods, the player must partake in the brutality of animal exploitation. The link between killing and crafting if further intensified in games like *Red Dead Redemption* and Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed III* (2012; both set in a Wild West setting), where excessive violence render quarries useless: taking a shotgun to a rabbit may vaporize the body in its entirety, and a pelt shot to pieces will generate a lower price in the market.

By exposing the gory process, and by making palpable the effects of excessive force, these games will not simply stop at arguing for the necessity of exploiting animals, but will further explicate the very brutality of this process, thereby impeding the phantasmagoric idea of the commodity as clearly separated from its material processes of production. As if to stress this effect, while skinning his prey in *Red Dead Redemption*, the player character alters between emphasizing the materiality of the body ("Tough one, ain't ya"), its economic worth in the marketplace ("This will fetch a good price"), and the moral and corporeal messiness of killing ("This is dirty").

Humans and Non-human Animals

The hunting element lets us further analyze the distinctions made between categories like humans and non-human animals; predators and prey; harmless and dangerous species; wild and tamed animals; killable and non-killable animals; edible and inedible animals; common, rare, endangered or unique ("legendary") animals; and so on. In fact, the hunting mechanic as such indicates how the most basic elements of gameplay are organized by a division between humans and non-human animals. The animal is always an object in the environment of the human subject. In biosemiotic terms, we could say that hunting games in general model the animal as a contextual object embellished with a "target" tone in the *Umwelt* of the hunter.

In this sense, hunter games as such constitute anthropocentric—i.e., systemically violent—arguments. Whereas games certainly may invert this logic along the lines of "human hunt"-stories like Richard Connell's short story "The Most Dangerous Game" (1924) or John Woo's movie adaptation *Hard Target* (1993), the trope is often limited to a particular quest (like "Caught in the Hunt" in Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls IV:*

Oblivion, 2006). With the possible exception of Hypnotix' parodic *Deer Avenger*-series (1998-2001), most games, accordingly, restrict it to a temporary carnevalesque reversal which, all in all, leaves the fundamental distinction between human-hunter and animal-prey intact.

A random encounter in Bethesda's post-apocalyptical *Fallout 3* (2008) involves a group of roaming hunters who sell a food stuff called "strange meat". Those familiar with the series recognize this as a euphemism for human flesh, the implication being that the hunters hunt, kill, butcher and sell people to unknowing consumers. Nevertheless, although the game implements "human hunting" as part of its game world, its basic mechanics maintain a fundamental distinction in *why* humans and non-human animals are killed. When you loot a human body, you acquire their possessions: weapon, armor, money, and so on; but when you loot an animal body, you rather acquire its meat. At its most basic structural level, then, the game presents the argument that humans are robbed, whereas animals are hunted, implying how the former is the subject who owns and the latter the object who is being owned.

A similar point can be made in relation to the mechanics of scalping in *Assassin's Creed III*. Although a game like Neversoft's open world western *Gun* (2005) allowed for the player to scalp his enemies, a similar mechanics was planned for, but excluded from, *Assassin's Creed III*. Director Alex Hutchinsons states the reason for this in an interview:

> So we started out with some historical research that said that scalping did exist, people were offering bounties, but the more we dug, the bounties were for men, women and children with different values, and most of the scalping took place on people who were alive and there's all kinds of terrible stories of people surviving being scalped. It just starts to feel a little tasteless. It might seem funny but then we had this vision of people killing twenty guards and then one-by-one scalping each of them. When you really follow it through, it's not a tone that we wanted for the game. (GDC Interview, 2012)

Instead, the game will present a procedural argument on the limits of acceptable violence: by singling out the scalping of humans as tasteless, the flaying of animals becomes tasteful. Animals are thus implicitly represented as fragmentary *bodies* of dismountable parts whereas the human, on the other hand, is an individual, that is, a unified *corpse* even in death. Violence against humans will only come to stand out as grotesque and unsettling against a backdrop where violence against animals is considered normal.

Animals as Juridical and Ethical Categories

Many open world games present more explicit arguments on how various species are evaluated. Often, games distinguish between aggressive animals that will attack you and passive animals that simply will scurry away when you approach them. In Obsidian's post-apocalyptical open world RPG *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), the distinction this is related to a "karma meter" which congregates, in numerical form, the moral consequences of the player's actions on a scale running from -1000 ("Very evil") to 1000 ("Very good"). Whereas killing aggressive, feral or mutant animals won't

affect the meter, killing friendly or domesticated animals will give a negative reading. Consequently, the game presents an argument against the unwarranted killing of some animals while maintaining an ethics of self-defense.

However, since this is a complex roleplaying-game, it is up to the player to choose whether s/he wants to play a character who is good or evil; and a system of optional "perks" makes it possible to further tweak how your player character will relate to non-human animals. For example, the "Hunter" perk makes your attacks on animals more deadly; whereas, on the other hand, the "Animal friend" perk turns aggressive animals into friendly ones that may even fight on your side. Playing in the game's "Hardcore" mode, the character will further have to eat regularly in order to stay alive, why hunting animals becomes a prime source of food. If you then maximize your "Survival" skill, you will become better at utilizing the meat from your quarry, allowing you to cook more advanced recipes that provide more health points. Some leeway is accordingly given, making a procedural argument for the necessity of making a moral choice regarding how you want to interact with your environment.

Somewhat more fixed is the juridical significance sometimes added to the moral distinction between killing dangerous and non-dangerous animals. In *Red Dead Redemption*, all wild animals, like elks and wolves, are fair game whereas domesticated animals, like dogs and cattle, are marked as being owned by a human individual. Whereas killing animals is no crime per se, killing animals that are in someone's possession is considered an offense and will result in a bounty. As a result, you may hunt and kill wild horses but not domesticated ones, lest you become the target of bounty hunters. By considering the different bounties, we note how the game mechanics argue for a hierarchization of species based on their conceived economic worth: shooting an owned dog is worth a three dollar bounty; an owned horse a five dollar bounty; cattle a twenty dollar bounty; and killing an innocent (non-aggressive) human being results in a forty dollar bounty. To quote a famous maxim, some animals are more equal than others.

In *Assassin's Creed III*, you hunt animals for resources in order to expand trade and production. Yet, the game series features a peculiar setup which gives its built-in moral distinction between classes of animals a kind of ontological pseudo-motivation. Although each instalment is based on similar gameplay mechanics, each takes place in a different historical setting, since what you are thought of as playing, according to the story, is a kind of advanced virtual simulation of the genetically passed down memories of the protagonist character's ancestors.

Thus, in *Assassin's Creed III*, the player character Desmond runs a simulation of his Mohawk ancestor Connor's (or Ratonhnhaké:ton's) memories. The game's "computational" aspects are naturalized, consequently, by the fact that we are actually thought of as playing a virtual simulation that runs on a particular game engine using a graphic interface and a specific set of controls, and so on. As a consequence, the open world will come to allow for free paideic exploration whereas the goal-driven or ludic elements of the narrative forces the player to "stay on track" in order to recreate the life of his ancestor. If the player diverges too much from the predestined course of events, the simulation will "desynchronize" and break down.

This dynamic between free-play and control is evident in the way the game handles random killing. Basically, it is allowed to kill enemies and wild animals but forbidden (although possible; later games limit this possibility) to kill innocent people and domesticated animals. Since the ancestor whose memories constitute the "game world" acted on a strict moral code, the player, too, must follow this code in order not to "desynchronize" the simulation.

For example, when Connor the Mohawk fells a prey, he honors the animal's "sacrifice" by kneeling in front of its body, giving it thanks while also cutting off its skin. Hereby, the game will come to express a kind of anthropocentric ethics of hunting in line with José Ortega y Gasset's dubious claim that "the greatest and most moral homage we can pay to certain animals on certain occasions is to kill them with certain means and rituals" (2007, p.101). As Pollan points out, ritual sacrifice has been a way of making the brutality of animal slaughter seem morally acceptable, "to help people feel better about killing, cooking, and eating animals" (2013, p.51). And Jacques Derrida famously coined the word "carnophallogocentrism" in order to underline how humanist ethics rests on animal sacrifice, stating that the "establishment of man's privileged position requires the sacrifice and devouring of animals" (Birnbaum and Olsson 2009). From a critical perspective, then, it is evident how the killing of animals, and the sovereignty of man, is achieved within the game simply by relocating the agency of violence from the violator to the violated in a move reminiscent of the victim blaming common to patriarchal rape culture: the animal is claimed to have "offered" its body to us, wherefore we simply should "accept" and "honor" its act of self-sacrifice. Through the sacrificial economy enveloping the hunting mechanics in the game, the immoral act of killing is suddenly transformed into a moral act of "honoring" the killed. While seemingly seeking to tone down the shocking effect of violence against animals, the game argues for a morality that, in itself, presupposes violence as its foundation.

If a player of *Assassin's Creed III* breaks this code by casually slaying animals without honoring their "gifts" – that is, by simply leaving their carcasses behind without triggering the skinning mechanic – s/he will be disqualified and the simulation will desynchronize. The same thing happens whenever the player starts killing domesticated animals, like chicken or pigs. Thus, the game world categorizes its living beings into classes of fair game or taboo, between that which may be freely exploited and that which is regulated by economic ownership. According to the game's procedural rhetorics, bears, beavers, and military workers are fair game while cows, dogs, and dock workers are inviolable. A clear and unambiguous moral line runs through the basic makeup of the world, separating two distinct moral and metaphysical domains: those that should and those that should not be killed.

By singling out certain species of animals as inviolable, the game will present the killing of other species as something normal, natural and necessary.

Virtual Extinction

Perhaps, the most spectacular procedural argument open world games make regarding the hunting of animal life concerns finitude. Today, death in games is seldom final; when you die, you simply respawn at a save point. This logic is even

more evident in the case of enemies, who may be mowed down in hundreds only to reappear in wave after wave. Since simulated life lacks a material ground outside of the representation of infinite calculations, it is infinite in itself. As a result, open world games featuring a hunting mechanics tend to model natural life in accordance with the ideology of industrial capitalism, i.e. as an infinite source for endless exploitation. As Brown notes regarding the representation of marine life in Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013):

> Humpbacks and orcas, kelp and coral exist in the game as infinitely bountiful objects, which are capable of a varying degree of interaction with the user and with one another, but whose numbers are essentially inexhaustible and immune to changes in the ostensible ecosystem in which they live. (Brown 2014, p.383)

In *Red Dead Redemption*, the game world is constructed so that a new set of specimens will always be generated at random intervals within the different zones constituting the delimited habitats of specific species. The animal population of any area may, in other words, never be "exhausted", no matter how many individual specimen the player kills. Having had a successful boar hunt in a particular part of the forest, the player may always come back at a later time to find new prey. Thus, the game world argues that animal life is ontologically infinite.

This basic feature guarantees that there is always a way to earn money in the game; whenever you are in dire straits, you may head out into the woods to hunt for pelts and meat, feathers, horns and teeth to trade. The random generation of animals also saves the spontaneous exploration of the environment from becoming boring since you will always run into potential prey or even be surprised by an attacking predator. Goal-driven activities, too, rely on the infinite spawning of creatures. In the "Sharpshooter Challenges" and "Master Hunter Challenges", you must kill a number of targets under specific conditions (for instance, kill five birds from a moving train; kill a bear using your knife); and by killing at least one specimen of all 26 wild animal species in the game, you earn the "Unnatural Selection" achievement. The game mechanics make sure that there are always enough animals to be killed in order for the plyer to fulfill such conditions.

Nevertheless, there exist games where limitations are introduced. In Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), one of many side activities involves cleansing the urban environment of diseased pigeons. Unlike in *Red Dead Redemption*, there is a fixed number of 200 pigeons, each placed at a specific hard-to-find location, and the game lets the player keep track of how many have been killed and how many remain. When the final pigeon is eliminated, the game greets the player with a message highlighting the very finality of the event: "All diseased pigeons killed. LC is a cleaner place." (cf. Furze 2014, p. 143)

Rather than a hunting mechanic per se, this is a take on the common trope of finding collectibles in open world games. In hunting games, on the other hand, finitude is often limited to the particular case of "legendary" animals; that is, unique individuals who can be killed only once and will not respawn (except after starting a new game). In order to complete *Red Dead Redemption*'s "Master Hunter Challenges", for example, the player must kill two legendary animals whose unique standing is enhanced by the fact that they, unlike the regular "random" fauna, have been given individual names: Khan the Jaguar and Lobo the Wolf. In stark contrast to any

environmental ethics of preservation, the ludic logic of hunting as blood sport will consider the singularity of any creature as a prime incentive to kill it: the rarer the animal, the more desirable it becomes for the hunter.

The hunt for pigeons or legendary animals uses finitude on the level of populations and specimen, rather than species. Nevertheless, even in games like *Red Dead Redemption*, which relies on the law of infinite algorithmic respawning, we find an attempt at diverting this very logic in order to model processes of extinction. Rather than a game modelling extinction as its prime didactical purpose (such as a newsgame, or "serious" game created for the sole purpose of making a rhetorical point), *Red Dead Redemption* rather uses extinction to break with its own previously established logic in a move reminiscent of the (aesthetical and political) techniques of "defamiliarization".

Whereas killing the last pigeon in *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a satisfying and greatly anticipated experience, a similar moment in *Red Dead Redemption* may catch the player off guard. Since the hunting mechanics of the game conditions the player to kill pretty much any wildlife s/he happens to come across, when, later in the game, the player gains access to the Great Plains area, and there stumbles upon a herd of American Buffalo—a novel species hitherto not encountered—s/he will most certainly start hunting it. Yet, unlike the other animals of the game, the buffalo will not respawn: the twenty individuals grazing the plains are all there are. Since the herd scatters as soon as you start shooting, you may not notice that it is rapidly thinning, but once you have killed the last buffalo, a hidden achievement is unlocked, titled "Manifest Destiny".

The killing of buffalos is not a quest or a challenge presented in advance; when you play the game for the first time, you are not aware of the fact that you are working your way towards this achievement. The player is simply engaged in killing off buffalos due to his or her having become accustomed to game's imperative to kill. Thus, the sudden appearance of the hidden achievement functions as a kind *Verfremdungseffekt,* drawing attention to it as a break with the very mechanics of the game (the hunting imperative and the law of infinite respawning).

Rockstar, as a studio, are notorious not only for their penchant for controversy but also for infusing their "AAA"-spectacles of crude entertainment with clever elements of social critique. "Manifest Destiny" is, of course, the established term for the ideology of westward colonization and violent exploitation in the name of progress in 19th Century America. It was based on the conviction of the virtue of the American people and the belief in a God-given mission to civilize the savage continent. In the process, the American buffalo was cleared out to pave way for the expanding railroad and to weaken the Native American population who were relying on it. Towards the end of the century, the buffalo population had dwindled from 60 million to only a thousand animals, making the species almost extinct (cf. Marchand et al., 2014, p. 50).

As stressed by Mark Hayse, through "careful design, even the most suspect elements within video game play can foster ethical reflection and mediate moral meaning" (2014 p.472). By suddenly diverging from its own logic of infinite respawning, *Red Dead Redemption* will come to defamiliarize the very mechanics

that, up until this point, has conditioned the player for mindless violence against all wild animals. Ecologist Steve Stanley underlines the rhetorical effect by stating how the hunting of this particular animal would leave "a lasting impact on the player's game, and for many it was a shock when they finally realized their bison were never going to respawn" (2014). This "shock" is of an entirely different kind than that caused by extreme and gruesome depictions of violence, not least as it directs the attention of the player from the depiction as such towards hunting and extinction as a real-life process. If the Western genre is often accused for exploiting and glamourizing colonial and anthropocentric violence, here, it is rather disrupted by pointing the player towards the real violence of the actual historical area – something which bears further significance for any player living in the age of "the sixth extinction".

Conclusion

The article set out to shift focus from simple depictions of shocking violence towards the underlying mechanics making possible and acceptable different acts of violence against different classes of bodies in the first place. Taking the hunting mechanics of open world games as its main point of discussion, it has looked not at the experience of the individual player, but at how game design manifests procedural arguments on the ethical and political aspects of violence against animals.

Whereas there often are instances of explicit violence against animals in hunting games, it has been argued that the very explicitness of such depictions in fact may serve the rhetorical function of drawing attention to the corporeal messiness of producing animal goods, thus impeding a vision of meat as mere commodity, clearly separated from its bodily origins. By considering how games distinguish humans from non-human animals, it also looked at what violent acts are considered tasteless and unacceptable, or tasteful and acceptable, in the first place. By looking at how games handle random acts of killing, it noted distinctions between what kinds of bodies are considered as being protected by, or exempt from, moral concerns as well as legal rights: for example, wildlife is fair game while domesticated cattle is prohibited; and humans are unified subjects while animals as fragmented objects.

Finally, the article considered how the algorithmic nature of spawning tends to make digital animals immune to extinction. Interestingly enough, it further noticed how a game intentionally diverged from this logic in order to surprise the player by defamiliarizing its own established logic.

Hopefully, the discussion has shown how the rhetorical analysis of games may help to make visible the inherent violence of certain implicit norms governing our, often brutal, attitudes towards non-human animals outside. For, as Stanley points out in discussing how open world games represent hunting animals and extinction:

> These interactions with our environments not only lead to more immersive games, they lead to a more meaningful game play experience. […] When we can finally play video games that not only allow us to interact with their environments, but also create lasting impacts through our actions, both positive and negative, then we'll be achieving the potential that an interactive medium offers. (2014)

Such a potential demands attentiveness towards the ways in which games form ideological arguments. The rhetorical approach towards games may help in affirming the full complexities of ways games make meaning.

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