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> "The horrors of hell can be experienced in a single day; that's plenty of time."
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 26

The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth (Nicalis 2014) foregrounds the chronotope of the abject—the timespace encounter with the unclean and repulsive that we revel in to purge—that is an important threshold experience of play in video games. Through its appropriation of the Judeo-Christian Binding narrative, the game illustrates the everyday problems of responsibility living an individual, bare life existence under sovereign state power, one replete with the abject organized into a spatiotemporal state of emergency. *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* portrays this threshold experience of life and death through what I refer to as *the chronotope of the abject*, which exposes the 'survival' between life/death that is ritualized through game mechanics, narratives, and images. By commandeering the Judeo-Christian narrative, the game offers a telling allegory of the paradoxical and ambivalent experience of living, and gaming, as biopolitical subjects in modern democracies, where the line between city and home disappears altogether.[1] Attempting to escape his knife-wielding mother who has been commanded by God (the absolute singular Other) to kill her son as a sacrifice, the infantilized Isaac—with ubiquitous flowing tears—descends into the basement to escape. He flees only to find himself (further) trapped and forced to defeat abject creatures, destroy piles of excrement for loot, and use items, pills, cards, and bombs to survive. Isaac, cursed by trauma and hallowed, uses his violently-charged tears to respond to the abject. The game's narrative, iconography, and mechanics work to call attention to how a player, as a modern *homo sacer*, confronts the abject under sovereign state power: in tears but also through laughter.

In combining Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of abjection with Giorgio Agamben's political philosophy of the *homo sacer*, I argue that the chronotopic arrangement of a permanent state of emergency that drives Isaac from room to room, clearing abject creatures, spiders, flies, and excrement, helps scholars better understand how video games package abjection to players. Furthermore, this relation between sovereign state power and abjection is mediated by self-legitimizing and self-propagating narratives of life, death, suicide, responsibility, and ethics, which are addressed in the context of the game throughout this essay. Thinking about abjection as a threshold experience—the antinomical contact of enjoying and purifying the abject (Kristeva 1982, p. 17)—allows one further to understand the video game medium as it relates to players' psychosocial drives as manipulated by sovereign power, all in accordance with the political paradigm of the camp (Agamben 1998, p. 185). This is important because Agamben's work—discussed in more detail later in this essay—allows one to see how the abject cannot be divorced from the political

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conditions of its cultural production. The essay also offers a more local opportunity to reconsider this particular game's relation to a Christian cosmology, against which the game attempts to struggle, though ultimately in some ways further deploys. *The Binding of Isaac*, at bottom, serves as a capable allegory of live lived under sovereign state power, all mediated by the abject. In other words, the gameworld here serves as a microcosm of players' out-of-game lived realities as biopolitical subjects, which necessarily involves a critical consideration of precisely how we represent and respond to the abject.

Borrowing "chronotope" from Einstein's theory of relativity and applying it as a governing metaphor, Mikhail Bakhtin articulates how—in a frequently quoted passage—"[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history" (1981, p. 84). In particular, Bakhtin ends his 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel' with the chronotope of the threshold. Bakhtin describes the chronotope of the threshold as being related to *moments* of "*crisis* and *break* in a life" (1981, p. 248). In doorways, staircases, corridors, and the like, "time is essentially instantaneous" and decisions are made: "the falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, [and] decisions that determine the whole life of a man" (1981, p. 248). I adapt and deploy Bakhtin's threshold chronotope here because simulated spatiotemporal thresholds—doorways, portals, encounters, entrances, loading screens—map onto metaphorical threshold experiences of play as well, as in psychosocial experiences like abjection.[2] Since this chronotope is "always metaphorical and symbolic" (1981, p. 248), it is precisely this chronotope's metaphoric potential that serves so well to analyze the mutability and socio-cultural affordances of the video game medium. Chronotopicity, therefore, becomes a means of realizing how time and space can never be disconnected from history since all of the abstract philosophical, cultural, and social ideas in the game manifest through the chronotope (1981, p. 250). As such, threshold chronotopes are particularly useful in locating such reinscribed prejudices within video games, including but also beyond the typical attention paid to the overdetermined categories of game rules and game narratives. The *instant* of players' experience of timespace demands an attention to players who play in the threshold space between in-game and out-of-game worlds. The chronotope of the abject is important to understanding abjection as a spatiotemporal and metaphorical threshold experience beyond reductive dichotomies like individual/society, life/death, time/space, clean/unclean, and responsibility/ethics.

Binding—a remake of the original *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen 2011)—frames its narrative around the Judeo-Christian story of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering (*holocaust*) as a mark of absolute faith. This appropriation engages the religious narrative via evangelical Christianity specifically more so than Judaism or Islam, as Isaac's mother is seen listening to the ostensible voice of God against the backdrop of daytime "Christian broadcasts on the television". Within this simulated Protestant-Christian cosmos, God speaks as the absolute Other to Isaac's unnamed mother: one day—in a reversal of the Biblical narrative's filicide, which excludes mother and woman (Derrida 2008, p. 76)—she hears a voice from on high stating that her son has been "corrupted by sin" and "needs to be saved". Saving Isaac assumes three, ritualistic forms: first, all of Isaac's belongings and toys are removed from his room according to a principle of asceticism. When the voice of God declares that "Isaac's soul is still corrupt", Isaac's

unnamed mother cuts him off from everything by locking him in his room. After these two expressions of her faith, God still requires one more thing to prove her faith. He commands her to prove her love and devotion by sacrificing Isaac: “Go into his room and end his life as an offering to me to prove that you love me above all else” to which she responds, “Yes, Lord”, her shortest response to the voice of the Other. In a scene that extends and perverts the moment of the Biblical climax—the instant when Isaac sees his father’s knife bearing down on him—the in-game Isaac, “trembling in fear” as the narrator describes, sees his mother grab the butcher knife. The in-game Isaac’s “trembling in fear” inverts the trembling in fear that his mother—the evangelical surrogate for Abraham—should be experiencing as any “knight of faith” would, full of anxiety, restlessness, and torment (Kierkegaard 2006). He finds a means to escape—descending into the basement through a trap door—just as she bursts through the bedroom door. Isaac, now excluded and entrapped, begins his adventure. Not unlike the player, inclusion within the home—as in the gameworld—is itself a form of exclusion. In this reading, Isaac becomes an allegory for the included-excluded player—a *homo sacer* in their own right—who games under conditions of unfreedom and injustice specific to sovereign state power.

Abjection in *The Binding of Isaac*

Isaac’s survival brings him and the player face to face with the abject and with death. The randomly generated basement rooms populate with grotesque monsters, perverse animals, hyperbolic birth disorders, dead people and animals, loot-filled piles of excrement, occult symbols, blood, and guts with which Isaac—or one of the other Biblically-inflected characters one chooses to play—comes into close contact. The game’s inclusion of the chronotope of the abject engenders a psychosocial response within the player toward the abject, which “fascinates desire” by means of occupying that very border of our condition as living beings, of straddling the edge of life and death as neither subject nor object (Kristeva 1982, p. 1). The abject becomes *object*ified in that which is cast out, especially in the experience of a corpse or shit (1982, p. 3), the simulation of which figures prominently in the game. The abject is not merely that which is unclean, but “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982, p. 4). This disruption from the border, from the threshold of life and death, proceeds in the game via a chronotopic play from that same threshold of the abject experienced by the player. Indeed, much critical attention has been paid to abjection in video games, particularly in how games abjectify women (Stang 2021; Stang and Trammell 2019, p. 3) and mothers (Vanderhoef and Payne 2018, p. 52) in gendered and misogynistic ways, along with how video games stage the abject to produce a desirable uncertainty for players (Spittle 2011, p. 315). As Diane Carr (2014) has argued, video games also problematically stage abjection through representation of disabled bodies, affording an implicit privilege to able bodies in games (§21-23). The chronotope of the abject is inclusive of these careful, thought-provoking readings.

Locating abjection, however, in the timespace configuration of a permanent state of emergency—the primary structure of sovereign power’s control of bare life (Agamben 1998, pp. 159, 176)—takes the analysis of the abject beyond representations of the “monstrous feminine”, borrowing that phrase as many of the aforementioned authors

do from Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). The chronotope of the abject that occurs in *Binding* as a permanent state of emergency that masquerades as daily life within the home allegorizes players' precarious positions as biopolitical subjects who are determined, controlled, and trapped by sovereign state power in every way (including through video games). By locating abjection in the instant of a particular timespace configuration, player-readers can discern their own threshold experience of abjection as mapping onto in-game depictions of abjection, a threshold that disturbs players and, therefore, presents a possibility of provoking a destabilizing cognitive dissonance in a particular chronotopic moment of play. The abject, then, becomes a site for transgressive, queer readings of video games through moments of philosophical reflection while playing. While the player pushes Isaac through basement room after room, the game pushes the player to confront not only the abjection of the game but also the abject conditions of daily life under sovereign power. The form of the game's spatiotemporal movements related to abjection is the game's very content. Such out-of-game conditions are doubled within the gameworld insofar as the gameworld serves as an "allegorithm" of out-of-game realities, inequalities, and abjection (Wark 2007, §31). *Binding* not only functions as an allegorithm in Wark's sense; it serves as a useful allegory of the allegorithm when read alongside Kristeva and Agamben. The overt critique of a religious sovereign power in the game is supplemented by a religio-secular power that reduces all life to bare life and that further deploys the abjection of being a controlled subject under the auspices of being an "escape" into virtuality.

Upon character death, an impossible, prosopopoeic diary letter appears in the game: "Dear diary, Today I died." This writing from beyond the grave, in the threshold instant of in-game life and death, works to solidify the abject through its literature. An impossible threshold in the Real opens up a possible threshold in the Imaginary, demarcated by the contradiction of the present moment of writing—"Dear Diary"—and the evocation of the past event, "Today I died." The uneasiness of this impossible diary entry is replete with elements to spark laughter for the player. This impossible letter also anticipates the commonly 'impossible' anticipation of starting the game over, coming back from the dead, in a sense. Neither essentially subject nor object, the abject exists on the very edge of existential experience. The ironic letter—recalling the haunting irony of Abraham's response to Isaac regarding the animal God would provide for the sacrifice—emerges as a kind of absurd laughter: the abject monster that killed your character is featured with marginalia that says "ugly" and an arrow pointing to the creature. The letter laughs at and enjoys death, even as its creator enacts a specific work of mourning, one not unrelated to the melancholy bound up in abjection, play, and gaming (Ouellette 2021, p. 186). This is also perhaps to speak of the "literariness" that some games call attention to and employ—and from which a chronotopic engagement can be helpful—in life-affirming, childlike, imaginative, and paradoxically impersonal ways (Piero 2014, pp. 81, 94-5). Similar to how the game itself extends the spatiotemporal moment of the knife bearing down on Isaac, the inner framing work of *écriture* that points back to the outer frame draws out the death moment to inspect, prod, and play with death. The game's visual-narrative frame invaginates gameplay by opening up a larger space for reading and thinking about the politics of relation foregrounded by the game's cosmology.

The preoccupation with property in the letter signals an expected deviation from the Biblical narrative, as seen in the sentence, “I leave all that I own to my cat Guppy.” In this moment, the irony is doubled, since all he owns—back to the outer narrative frame—has already been confiscated by his mother. It also refers though to the fact that players lose their items and money upon dying. Ultimately, the narrative of Guppy invokes both a playfulness of nonhuman animal companionship, on the one hand, and the work of mourning on the other, as the game’s titular Guppy (whose name appears throughout the game in ‘Guppy items’) memorializes game creator Edmund McMillen’s much-beloved and recently passed feline companion, Guppy (Matulef 2014). Within the quest for survival in these basements and caves, the player encounters several incarnations of survival as the threshold experience of life and death, which often appears in video games. These appearances are important to the study of gaming if gaming is, can be, or pretends to be a variant practicing for death, a philosophizing of sorts. This letter ultimately features a hybrid construction of dialogized heteroglossia that takes on the parodic stylization, in tragicomical ways, of a suicide note (Bakhtin 1981, pp. 348, 364). Isaac’s suffering at the hands of an abusive parent anticipates this suicide note. This crucial observation reminds one of the complex construction of all discourse, though some discourses—including the Western discourse on suicide—seem largely to have been already decided and closed.

Suicide as Religious-Secular Discourse and Survival through Property

This ‘voice’ of suicide in the letter is doubled in the game via the gruesome and silent-yet-still-always-speaking image of (an)other Isaac who has hanged himself from the ceiling, a figure seen in one of the “safe rooms” where one can purchase items and exchange currency. He lies there, slightly wavering in the drafty basement, still as death and yet visually shouting to be heard, to be recognized, to be gazed upon and made less lonely. Since Socrates—both writing in the *Phaedo* about philosophizing as a practicing for death and in his own choosing to die under juridical rule—the images, narratives, and ideologies surrounding suicide have fluctuated based on the prevailing theologico-political order. Suicide is never simply a matter of an individual, but an individual living under the conditions of state- and institutionally-sanctioned narratives that operate to control bare life.[3] Unlike in the works of Socrates, Plato, Hume, Foucault, Critchley, and others, current Western popular discourse on the topic has generally decreed this act to be absolutely immoral, illegal, and incomprehensible. Such a dogmatic commitment to misunderstanding and psycho-culturally prohibiting (*and thereby unintentionally fetishizing*) suicide potentially contributes to rather than assuages those impossible burdens that, for most at some point in life, feel too heavy to bear.

Without making an argument *for* suicide, and without disgracing the memory of those lives lost to suicide, I would suggest that the construction of suicide as an absolute taboo positions the act (and even thinking about the act) within the realm of absolute responsibility to law, “to life”, and to the State. In other words, the current neoliberal discourse on suicide positions one as a subject reduced to bare life under Agamben’s (1998) principle of the *homo sacer*, a figure both sacred and damned, to

be addressed in more depth later in this essay (p. 78). Following the logic of the incommensurability of absolute responsibility and ethics, such prohibitions—even under the well-intentioned though commercially and legalistically-imbued auspices of suicide prevention, big data (e.g. *DSM-V*), and best practices as the only authorized means to respond to human suffering—forecloses discourse on suicide in dangerous ways. In some Western states and countries, assisted suicide is now permitted, but the choice is mediated by the control of medical professionals, law, and institutions that must authorize the legally sanctioned suicide. David Hume argues with regard to the ethics of suicide and about which Critchley (2015) writes in his *Notes on Suicide*, it is "the fallacious Christian arguments against suicide", which Hume thoroughly unpacks some 240 years ago in *Of Suicide*, that in large part produces the misery, blame, and suffering experienced by having no other legal or moral option. Critchley (bravely) states:

> The legitimacy of the recourse to suicide, namely the foreknowledge that I do not have to experience endless pain with either legal blame or moral shame, is the key to any chance of happiness (2015, p. 25).

This is especially the case considering the impact these internalized narratives have on the terminally ill, who suffer with no legal or moral choice but to continue suffering in most countries and states. In its ostensible replacement of religion, the Western democratic nation-state has decided to keep some of religion's most damaging ideologies in its control of biopolitical life, a life reduced to mere survival, even a survival through entertainment forms of play like video games.

No space, no place, is outside the reach of sovereign power—no one is left alone, though power abides and mediates life, particularly in gendered and patriarchal ways. In an important reversal, the Biblical Abraham's task by God is replaced in the game by Isaac's mother, which at once reifies a common, patriarchal construction of femininity as being related to domestic spaces and abjectifies the mother from the very beginning of the game. This reification is reinforced by various in-game items that operate similarly. Isaac's mother would appear to be fond of pills and medication, as seen in items like "Mom's Bottle of Pills" and "Mom's Coin Purse". In a home filled with pills, then, it comes as no surprise that pills figure as a primary mechanic in the game, a mechanic not unrelated to the now decades-old upsurge of pill addiction and abuse in the out-of-game world resulting in part from the pharmaceutical industry's influence among healthcare physicians, psychiatrists, and various medical professional organizations (Reznek 2016, p. 21). The presence of pills and medicine in games would require a separate space to analyze in depth, but from power pills in *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980) to Med-X (originally morphine) in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), video games reinscribe drug use prevalent in dominant culture (Reuben 2018). Isaac's mother's body is not only gendered in troubling ways—items like "Mom's Eyeshadow", "Mom's Heels", "Mom's Lipstick", and "Mom's Contacts" all offer hyperludic benefits (Conway 2010, p. 136)—her body is also medicalized to show the imbrication of illusory religious and medical discourses. The analysis of abjection in video games, therefore, benefits from addressing the misogynistic and gendered representations of the abject *within* larger systems of control, sovereign power, and dominant culture.

Binding is entirely wrapped up in controlling bodies—Isaac's mother seeks to kill her son; Isaac uses dead bodies of animals, shopkeepers, and other people to survive; and Isaac's own body is forced to transform and change through items and pills in order to survive. A microcosm of player's out-of-game subject positions under bare life existence, the game demonstrates a preoccupation with property ownership in the narrative and in-game written artifacts. Beyond that, the very mechanics of consuming and adapting to randomly generated chronotopic encounters show how abjection in gaming, as in life, is known through timespace. The gendered nature of Isaac's plight can also be seen in items like "Eve's Mascara", which while doubling Isaac's damage also halves his tears stats and greatly reduces his shot speed. In the game, therefore, Eve is demonized in properly Judeo-Christian fashion by means of her punitive effects, which are tied rhetorically to her vanity and willingness to be seduced by appearances, whether by Serpent or by mascara. The presence of these items become a subtle, patriarchal, and religiously-inflected insistence to players that Eve—and by metonymic extension all women—are to blame for human suffering (Gen. 3:12-3, 15-9, 22-4).

Andrea Dworkin (1987) explores this misogynistic—and ultimately abusive—history in *Intercourse*, where she argues that the act of sexual intercourse (and its language) celebrates male domination over women. She describes how the female body is itself abjectified:

> Her genitals are dirty in the literal meaning: stink and blood and urine and mucous and slime. Her genitals are also dirty in the metaphorical sense: obscene. She is reviled as filthy, obscene, in religion, pornography, philosophy, and in most literature and art and psychology. (1987, p. 170)

The chronotope of the abject calls attention to how abject female bodies are simulated in video games in ways beyond narrative and images: through in-game items, in this case, and the semiotic relation of those items as they appear before players in a particular chronotopic instant of play. Each pill, each transformation, and each player decision is a deployment of the threshold chronotope of the abject: crisis, break, and decision in confronting the abject. When playing as Eve, the in-game item "Whore of Babylon" activates sooner. Between the representations of Isaac's mother and Eve, women figure in the game as both the initiation and consummation of suffering and abjection, a misogynistic "mystery" alluded to but never explicitly stated (Rev. 17:5). This categorization and particular invocation of Eve recalls the social dominance of the category of sex that "impregnates all discourses" under the guise of its ostensible naturalization (Wittig 2000, p. 126). The Biblical instantiation of (misogynistic) patriarchy as divinely sanctioned appears quite early in the narrative of how women came to experience—and deserve, so the narrative goes—pain in childbirth and subjugation to men (Gen. 3:16). In contrast to the game's inversion of Biblical parental hierarchy, the only mention of fathers (besides the "heavenly Father" in the game's narrative) is the in-game item, "Dad's Key"—to the father goes the right of the skeleton key to open all the doors. The categorization of in-game items offers insight into the ideological constructions in the game by virtue of their naming and effects. They also show the attention that the game pays to bodies wherein the body as abject becomes an ontological threshold for the player.

Lest I over-emphasize Isaac's bodily survival in the home though, all of the gameplay—from the moment of Isaac's descent into the basement—could be a dream, or a deeper and deeper descent into a 'madness' brought on by trauma. Indeed, this is consistent with Northrop Frye's (1976) analysis of descent narratives, in which often "the normal road of descent is through dream or something strongly suggestive of a dream atmosphere" (p. 99). Loading screens regularly depict Isaac sleeping and dreaming in carnivalesque fashion of the abject: monsters fart, excrement is exchanged in comical fashion, and young Isaac even dreams fondly of giving his mother shit—carefully wrapped and presented as "the gift of shit" that reacts against her impending "gift of death"—to name just a few instances of puerile levity. Loading screens are crucially important supplements (in the Derridean sense) to gameplay proper, particularly in how the gameplay is narratively framed and thus structures the player's total experience of the game. It would be easy to dismiss loading screen images and video as mere ornamentation, or a necessary technical requirement, but the frame also labors as a *parergon* whose supplementarity is always crucial to that which surrounds it (Derrida 1987, pp. 61, 75). Part of the appeal is directed to the player's desire to revel in ambiguity and ambivalence seldom tolerated in many out-of-game worlds that demand "productive" action over slow, careful thinking and imaginative interpretation. Ambiguity, to its credit, is the ethical mode of artistic and imaginative practice. The game's spatial arrangement is itself ultimately a return to the mother, a 'descent' or regression to the womb (even the inner 'womb' of a house) that issues in an inevitable ascent back to the surface of the house, but only after defeating often demonically-inflected spawn of abjectified wombs.

The ascent and descent within Isaac's house describe the experience of gaming, which vacillates between advancements and setbacks, challenge and boredom, and living and dying. To Adam Crowley's (2017) attention, with Northrop Frye in mind, some games unfold an ascension or descension into various symbolic worlds of experience, both through temporal and spatial elements of the game (pp. 42-44). For Frye (1976) writing about literature, there are only four main narrative movements: descent from a higher world, descent to a lower world, ascent from a lower world, and ascent to a higher world (p. 97). In *Binding*'s cosmology, the game's framed narrative involves a descent to a lower world, in the opening moment, and—at the end of the game—an ascent from a lower world. The higher world is invoked by the mother's belief in a pre-eminent God who speaks to her direct from on high, as it were. Since descent narratives call more attention to alienation and loneliness (1976, p. 115), it is fitting to consider how the descent into Isaac's basement—where he is mostly alone until one summons abject creatures to fight by his side—maps onto the player's own experience of alienation, or not, when playing this game. *Binding*'s chronotopic cosmology involves what Frye calls "demonic parody" whereby the abject seen at the 'bottom' (i.e. in the basements) parodies the chronotopic abjection that confronts players who play in an ostensibly 'higher' position 'above" or outside the game (1976, p. 52). Whether a labyrinth of basements (*Binding*) or one of a city/houses (as in many other games), the demonic parody presents "the world that desire totally rejects"—a parody of the gameworld made over as a hell on earth (1976, p. 147). Indeed, gameworlds reward their players through their demonic parody of out-of-game hellscapes rife with misogyny, racism, and economic inequality instantiated and maintained systemically by sovereign state power—especially in the Trump era. As such, *Binding* is an exemplary gameworld it that it

simulates the political power and systemic violence that invades the home, all represented in the gameworld through the chronotope of the abject.

Surviving: The Player as a Modern *Homo Sacer*

Like the Roman *homo sacer*, and like those today living under sovereign rule, Isaac is forced to flee, though such fleeing is really itself a capturing (he never leaves the house). In a similar sense, the ostensible 'escape' into video games and from 'reality' is actually little more than a capturing of the player, an enclosure within a virtual world fashioned according to the rules, norms, and ideologies of the out-of-game world. This life stripped down to 'bare life', in which one's life is not really one's own, figures throughout *Binding* in the Isaac character who lives as a *homo sacer* figure. Giorgio Agamben (1998) argues in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* that the bare life (ζωὴ) of the *homo sacer* has always been included in the political realm, though according to a principle of exclusion. It is precisely this age-old concealed inclusive exclusion—even Foucault missed it, locating biopolitics only in modernity—that forms the heart of sovereign state power (1998, pp. 4-6). As *Binding* begins with Isaac's descent into the basement through a trap door, players find themselves, in a sense, similarly trapped. Isaac finds himself temporarily "free" from his murderous mother, who operates according to a rule of singular responsibility to the absolute Other, God, which precludes her from operating in the human-to-human ethical realm (Derrida 2008, pp. 61-62). Sovereign power, like God as the absolute Other, forces us into a vertical responsibility whereby we each become irresponsibly "responsible" in our duty to the absolute Other by means of silence and secrets. We sacrifice our Isaacs—other humanimal and nonhumanimal subjects of sovereign power—daily in accordance with dominant cultures, laws, taboos, rules, and demands. While game studies has addressed biopower in the context of late capitalism, more attention is needed to address biopolitics as the originary structure of the *polis*. It allows us to see the player not only as a biopolitical subject—as a *homo sacer*—but also the spatiotemporal and metaphorical arrangement of discourses that bolster this subjugation in games, including through the radical deployment of abjection. In the *Binding* gameworld, the exception of a state of emergency has become the rule—thematic rule, spatiotemporal rule, and algorithmic rule.

More directly, gaming becomes an activity enmeshed in what Agamben names *the paradigm of the camp*, "the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living […] when the state of exception begins to become the rule" (Agamben 1998, pp. 166, 168-169). *Binding* organizes space in a way that allegorizes out-of-game conditions, including being pushed from 'room' to 'room' by economies, deterministic culture, and political positions. Located in Isaac's home, the game illustrates how the (political) city and the (private) house "become indistinguishable" (1998, p. 188). Isaac's in-home state of exception becomes the juridical rule of his mother's hallucinations, a *Schutzhaft*, or protective custody, "placed outside the rules of penal and prison law" (1998, p. 169). The rules of the game enable and restrict play, though there can be no restriction of the play of language (*langue*), a play that can involve language games so heinous as to make it

possible to forcibly crowd people into gas chambers in executionary camps and then burn their bodies on pyres.

Since video games are “games of empire” as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) convincingly argue, then games also operate according to a paradigm of the camp that controls bare life under a constant state of emergency, which is extended beyond the historical camps into every private and public sphere of existence (Agamben 1998, p. 174). The experience of this existence, and this state of gaming, calls attention to the player’s own precarious position living, and gaming, under modern democratic life. For some, as for Arthur Chu (2015, §8) and myself, this takes the shape of a fundamentalist, evangelical upbringing. One can think of many modern political examples—from televangelist and Trump White House aide Paula White’s prayer for “all Satanic pregnancies to miscarry” (Law 2020, §1) to the years of support for border walls and camps that divide children from parents by force of law (among other corporeal violations)—though our everyday interactions and discourse with one another in homes, workplaces, and recreational places should not be overlooked. The modern democratic state has infected homes, social media, discourse, and culture to the point that we must be vigilant against—as my readings attempt to do—reproducing ontologies that violently split self/other across the political spectrum. The biopolitical organization of subjects—for all of us, though to a greater degree for some, to be sure—is now a chronotope of the camp as a metaphorical threshold of survival between life and death. The syntagmatic psychoanalytic confrontation of the abject intersects with the paradigmatic relations that Agamben associates with the Camp, all from within a socio-political set of relations. This is important because the chronotope of the abject—which can take into account spatiotemporal movements, narratives, mechanics, and images, as shown—can open up a space for a more precise reading that preserves the important psychoanalytic dimensions present while also addressing its gaps and limitations, all toward more just ways of relating.

Survival in the game, and the *jouissance* of the abject when gaming, merely prepares the player to revel in and purge the abject as a mode of survival outside the game. Survival then becomes an attempt to *return* internally and in various material “rebirths” externally, often channeled into consumption. As an object of desire, the abject figures in a double temporality as both “a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (Kristeva 1982, p. 9). The time of abjection and gaming is *jouissance*, that painfully pleasurable confrontation with the abject that attempts, paradoxically, to cleanse oneself from the abject by coming close to and reveling in it. This is the ‘rebirth’ that the chronotope of the abject recovers and which *Binding* stages as a corrective to the ideology of a post-lapsarian, Christian ‘rebirth’, that ‘salvation’ through being ‘born again’ by pure water toward new epistemological and affective commitments.

If, as Espen Aarseth (2004) states, “the gameworld is its own reward” (p. 51), the experience of abjection in gaming furnishes a world, even a home, that demands absolute responsibility, which potentially poses ethical dilemmas that require decisions. Perhaps players should hearken to Adorno’s (1974) cautionary words, “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (p. 39). The home itself has become contaminated, once providing at least some safety and privacy from Western sovereign power, though it has seldom been a space safe from violent, misogynistic,

racist, heteronormative, and patriarchal ideologies. Even more crucially, and to Adorno's point, the domestic space is not only invaded by outside power. Its dwellers are faced with the problem of living ethically in the home, of the immorality of comfortability and safety of one's own home, when genocide, torture, and organized suffering abounds outside its walls. Such ethical problems exist in the ever-increasing U.S. border camps—the U.S. leads the world with 52,000 detained immigrants in the Trump era (Kassie 2019)—or even the farcical 2019 'Storm Area 51' wherein a sublimated desire to help 'aliens' at the border manifests in saving the extraterrestrial aliens allegedly held captive in Area 51. Too many contemporary examples to list. In short, we face the danger—even as a *homo sacer*, as players stripped bare and paradoxically privileged—of reproducing evil through a passivity that is lulled by a sense of truth. One's experience of truth, after all, has everything to do with pleasure (*plaisir*) and nothing to do with the Real (Lacan 2016, p. 63). Neither given to the hegemony of sovereign state power nor engaging in an absurd, Trumpian 'post-fact' exercise attuned to some dubious notion of American 'freedom', this reading demands in its resistance the affirmation of life through just, chronotopic decisions.

As Derrida reminds his reader, the "sacrifice of Isaac illustrates the most common and everyday experience of responsibility" (2008, p. 68). In one's relation to the other—spouses, children, guildies, lovers, friends, neighbors, colleagues, family, and so on—one's responsibility to them each as an Other obliges a duty to them and, therefore, a neglect of some "other other" (2008, pp. 68-70). *Tout autre est tout autre*. Every other is completely other. One's only response to such responsibility, not unlike Abraham, is to sacrifice the ethics that require me to respond to the other other. In keeping the secret, we each come to resemble these exaggerated figures of Abraham and the in-game mother in a sense, a mortifying thought. Whereas the Biblical binding of Isaac narrative is told according to the principle of responsibility, *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* ultimately reverses this order by locating the mother's unthinkable actions in the ethical domain of human relations to other humanimals and nonhuman animals, like Guppy, whose virtual body (among other bodies of the dead) are discovered, used, and therefore perhaps remembered. The responsibility to the gameworld discussed earlier is mitigated—almost in a religious fashion, much like late medieval household mirrors framed in religious imagery as a resistance to the object's supposed vanity—by the game's frame that calls attention to ethical relation.

Concluding Thoughts

In making an ostensibly 'anti-Christian' game, the developers ultimately relocate the binding of Isaac away from the realm of responsibility to the realm of ethics, which makes the violent act all the more objectionable (since the secret is not entirely kept). The main *deus ex machina* ending reveals, however, some cracks in the game's challenge to the religious order. The larger problem, unresolved in *The Binding of Isaac*, is the isolation of the individual who must act. In trying to flesh out characteristics by which an outside observer might be able to distinguish between a knight of faith and a tragic hero, a faithful servant of God and a murderer, Abraham and Cain, Kierkegaard confirms that "[t]he true knight of faith is always absolute

isolation; the counterfeit knight is sectarian" (2006, p. 69). Insofar as the "true knight of faith" is incapable of "[making] himself intelligible to others", Kierkegaard writes, "he feels no vain desire to instruct others" (2006, p. 70).[4] The mother in *The Binding of Isaac* represents this isolation, which is perhaps the most terrifying aspect: a lone individual, which Kierkegaard judges as a prerequisite for faith, acting in isolation. The idea that not proselytizing or forming sectarian groups alone is enough to prevent "false" fanaticism hardly seems to suffice. This is especially true to 21st century eyes exposed to mass shooters who invoke rhetorics of evangelical Christianity (like the 2015 Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood clinic massacre), insurrection at the hands of hate groups like the Proud Boys (like the 2021 U.S. Capitol Insurrection), and a whole host of religiously-inflected violence carried out by individuals working on behalf of God's purported command to them. Indeed, as Wittgenstein reminds us, "the horrors of hell can be experienced in a single day; that's plenty of time" (1980, p. 26). In this way, *The Binding of Isaac* adroitly depicts (religious) fanaticism as a response to the abject, as an ostensible means to purify and purge the abject via a suspension of the ethical that is no longer a sacrifice. It is infinite *catastrophe*.

The experience of the chronotope of the abject when gaming under sovereign power becomes the threshold experience of the encounter with the other and, therefore, a moment of decision. This method of slow, queer reading—reading threshold chronotopes as culture—pursues the even more unstable, discursive, and ambiguous experience than popular discourse usually accounts for, including a fair amount of academic discourse.[5] The writing of abjection even as it appears in game design functions as the consummation of religious catharsis: the game seduces with its 'literary' ambiguity. Ironically, given *Binding*'s central anti-Christian narrative goal, "the artistic experience", Kristeva (1982) writes, "which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, *appears as the essential component of religiosity*" (p. 17 [emphasis mine]). The game attempts to resist but at the same time redeploys the structures of a theologically-rooted politics—such as the responsibility/ethics paradigm—that foreclose the possibility of any other way. The chronotope of the abject, as a matter of reading, calls for a more genuine hospitality of mind to envision new timespaces that are open to emancipatory possibilities yet to be realized as legitimate options at every level of social interaction. The achievement of *Binding* lies, for this player-reader, in its bare depiction of 'bare life' at the heart of biopolitical power. Indeed, this game locates the *homo sacer* no longer in the city but in the home, a home made over as a camp by sovereign power through technologies of control, surveillance, culture industry, and marketing. Somewhat like seeking out the secret rooms in *Binding*, looking for the trace of the invisible and undecidable in video games proffers new experiences, possibilities, and language games—even player subjectivities beyond a bare life existence—toward a more just way of living beyond compulsory survival inside and outside the game. To be attuned to such traces will require game studies to be more steadfast in its commitment both to philosophical engagement as well as to mutable methodologies that respond to the undecideability, changefulness, and contingency of the video game medium.

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Notes

[1] Agamben (1998) writes: “There is no return from the camps to classical politics. In the camps, city and house become indistinguishable, and the possibility of differentiating between our biological body and our political body [...] was taken from us forever” (p. 188). This dynamic is also explored by Piero and Ouellette (2021) with regard to the chronotope of the family-idyllic in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), where city and home are structured according to the same patriarchal economy (*oikonomia*).

[2] At bottom, play cannot merely be, as Ian Bogost argues, “a property of things” and “the work of a working system” (2016, pp. 95, 114). Instead, play involves a close contact with alterity within a mutable system. Play involves the creation of a world that is not separate from Being. In other words, a gameworld cannot be external to existence, even if housed in external materials like circuit boards, algorithms, screens, and devices. This contact between player-reader and game is the instant of being, and this being-with is always the sharing of a timespace in which meaning circulates among all things dead, living, human, nonhuman, and material, past and future (Nancy 2000, pp. 4, 33, 35). The chronotope connects and mediates the relation between player and machine, and this happens instant by instant.

[3] See Antonin Artaud’s provocative 1947 essay, ‘Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society’.

[4] There is much more to be said here regarding *Binding*’s intersection with Kierkegaard, but due to spatial constraints, that must wait for a larger forum.

[5] For a more extended treatment of the chronotope of the abject, threshold chronotopes, and changeful methodologies, see Piero’s book forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan, tentatively titled *Video Game Chronotopes and Social Justice: Playing on the Threshold*.