Editorial

Futures

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> History knows many periods of dark times in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than that it show due consideration for their vital interest and personal liberty.
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> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 1968/1995, p. 11

We started our editorial of the 2022 issue of *Eludamos* with the statement that "the past years have given us little to be hopeful about" and continued to ask whether, or not, issues such as "exploding global inequalities, ecological and economic crises, austerity politics, de-democratization, pandemics, and wars" still allowed us to play (Pötzsch & Jørgensen, 2022, p. 1). Who would have thought that, one year later, the world would look even worse with most of our Western democracies blindly following their imperial hegemon now not only remaining speechless about, but even actively supporting the merciless bombardment and starvation of more than 2 million civilians who have lived under a tight siege for more than a decade and are now deliberately deprived of fuel, electricity, food, medicine, and even water. No act of terror, however cruel, can justify the collective punishment and murder of civilians. Every democratic politician worthy of that name should know this. And yet, here we are, again forced to ask this same question: *Given our current dark times, is there still a future for games and play?*

In the previous editorial, we turned to Johan Huizinga (1938/1955) for advice who asserted a civilizational quality of play. According to him, play enables us to voluntarily submit to rules that limit our own conduct and invite critical self-reflection and introspection. This, we believe, constitutes a necessary alternative to a self-righteous glance from an allegedly unassailable moral high ground pretending to stand for universal values. This year, despite the bleakness around us, we will look to the future—or rather *futures*—as the title of this editorial suggests.

Formulated in 1939, on the eve of the slaughter of the second world war and its industry-style extermination of human beings and the unprecedented cruelty of the Holocaust, Bertolt Brecht famously wrote in his poem *To Posteriority*:

> What times are these, in which
> A conversation about trees is almost a crime
> For it implies silence about so much wrongdoing![1]

Given the condition of the current world, can we still have a conversation about games? Can we still play without at the same time remaining silent about surging imperial wars, oppression, and the abuses and exploitation of both humans and the natural world for the sake of further increasing the wealth of the already hyper-rich? Can we still picture a future that is better than the past—for all?

We believe that we can, and indeed *must*, do this and that continuing to play might be one component in this struggle. These acts of play, however, have to question ourselves and our current condition. We need to critically reflect on the games we play, their content and context, as well as their ramifications. This, we believe, can constitute one of the possible futures of games, play, game development, and game studies—and an important one.

Not least scholars such as Max Horkheimer (1937), Stuart Hall (1977), and Mieke Bal (1999) have repeatedly shown that politics, the economy, and culture are narrowly intertwined. In the cultural sphere values are negotiated and truth-regimes are established and reproduced. Through cultural expressions, we negotiate who we are and who we want to be. Here we create widely shared images of common pasts that predispose the very acts creating our possible futures. This is why we need to take cultural production seriously, including its economic and ecological repercussions—and games particularly so as they are the foremost cultural form of our 'ludic century' (Zimmermann, 2013).

We believe that our current dark moment of history is characterized by an overreliance on dystopic narratives. Given the bleakness emerging around us, we seem more prone to imagine and play the end of the world than to engage in attempts to picture viable, if difficult, ways towards brighter futures. According to Jürgen Habermas, this dominance of dystopia, and the virtual absence of utopia, has debilitating effects on our capacity to imagine the world otherwise. Already in 1985, he wrote: "When the oases of utopia dry up, only a desert of banalities and cluelessness remains" (1985/2019, p. 161). However, the capacity to imagine and (en)act otherwise is key to progressive politics able to mobilize democratic masses for necessary change.

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[1] Bertolt Brecht: *An die Nachgeborenen* (1939). Translation from German by Pötzsch. The poem is accessible in both German and an English translation here: https://harpers.org/2008/01/brecht-to-those-who-follow-in-our-wake/.

While dystopic narratives doubtlessly can serve a (self-)critical purpose, maybe a first important step might be to turn away from currently dominating imaginaries of precluded futures that relentlessly emanate from most of popular culture—including the games industry. One of the editors has diagnosed at a different occasion that this dominance serves a "petrification of politics" that blurs our political vision depriving us of will, courage and collective agency, and locking us into a state of unpolitical hopelessness and despair (Pötzsch, 2023, pp. 19–20). However, we need more than virtual escapist fantasies. We need games that present realistic alternatives to the allegedly unquestionable claims of a "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009) that things simply are the way they have to be and that there is nothing we can do. We need to move on and get beyond this impasse—in both thinking and acting.

If we want to get beyond the current post-political situation (Crouch, 2004), we need narratives bringing forth progressive alternatives that inspire action and therefore matter for the real world—and urgently so. We need concrete livable utopias that can unite people in collective struggles for better worlds not only for humans, but for all living creatures on this planet—both present and future. We need such engaging utopian visions of different-worlds-possible that are more than escapist fantasies. And, maybe, games and game studies can help with this—by not only critiquing the present and critically reflecting the ultimate contingency of our own values and norm systems, but also by devising the tools required for a mobilization of our imaginative and organizational potentials in the name of reinvigorating our comatose democracies. Maybe games and play can indeed facilitate a mobilization for better futures?

With the frames adopted above, we place our editorial within the domain of Critical Future Studies (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 109)—a field that aims at contributing to the creation of a "futural public sphere" that can help us "challenge a prevalent contemporary cynicism about our capacity to imagine alternative futures while trapped in a parlous present". Thereby our aim becomes more than identifying new technological and industry trends or summarizing current advances in the discipline. As Nick Taylor points out in his contribution to this issue, we cannot "hold out much hope for the field of game studies if it is fixated, however critically, on whatever new objects the games industry decides are its future". Neither do we intend to reiterate neoliberal fantasies of games as technological quick-fixes capable of making people healthier, more prosocial, or better at collaborating, and thus fitter for relentless competition on the ubiquitous arenas of boundless capitalism. Instead, we share the conviction of Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Hammar (2018) who state that the discipline urgently needs to "reflect on and question the ways that games are embedded in the (historical) global power structure" (p. 10). Games are an integral component of the world. They both reflect and reproduce. Therefore, they can incite both collective action and self-consuming egotism. They are inherently political.

This issue of *Eludamos* is inspired by among others Ruth Levitas (2013) who conceptualizes utopia as a critical method aimed at reflecting upon the given and at actively

shaping better worlds. The papers collected here contribute to Critical Future Studies' "programme of engaged and open-ended social critique" (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 109), not only trying to achieve improved understanding (negative critical mode) but also attempting to actively engage with and change the real world for the better (positive reconstructive mode) (Goode & Godhe, p. 125). For this purpose, we have gathered seven scholarly articles, one book review, and one commentary that all address potential futures of games, play, game development, and game studies from critical and (re)constructive vantage points.

Nick Taylor's article 'Reimagining a Future for Game Studies, From the Ground Up' challenges the discipline to ground itself—both metaphorically and literally—if it is to remain relevant given the severe challenges our social, political, and natural systems currently are confronted with. Drawing upon critical and materialist media studies as well as post- and anti-colonial scholarship, the author employs the example of the mobile game *Temple Run* and its contexts of production and play to trace the multiple ways through which games and their players are imbricated in material surroundings. In doing so, he conducts an exemplary study of how a critical and reflective games scholarship that takes its grounds seriously can proceed.

In their contribution 'Time to Stop Playing: No Game Studies on a Dead Planet', Emil Hammar, Carolyn Jong, and Joachim Despland-Lichtert offer a sweeping critique of how games, the games industry, players, and game scholars are intertwined with the various crises currently riddling both planetary ecosystems and populations, and argue that game scholars need to take these developments seriously. Seeing games and game studies through five distinct thematic areas, they offer a heuristic ordering of the field and its relation to contemporary systems of oppression, exploitation, and destruction that future game studies need to address. Moving from the imperialist structure of the games industry, via white supremacy, militarism, and media manipulation to fascism, patriarchy, and repression, and ending with the imminent climate catastrophe, the authors invite us to a veritable whirlwind tour through the dark underbelly of a global capitalist system hurtling us towards fascism and climate apocalypse. They show that both the games industry and game studies are deeply ingrained in, and reproduce, these dangerous and deadly undercurrents and urgently need to reflect on their role, and then act accordingly. Ending on a constructive note, the authors argue for the necessity to organize and mobilize for change both in the fields of game studies and development as well as beyond.

The following two articles, Alesha Serada's 'Fancies Explained: Converting Symbolic Capital into NFTs' and Hans-Joachim Backe's 'A Future Already Past? The Promises and Pitfalls of Cryptogames, Blockchain, and Speculative Play' take a look at recent technologically afforded trends in game play and development—blockchain and cryptogames. Serada employs Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital to explain value circulations between player communities and the industry. Based on an analysis of the blockchain-based game *CryptoKitties*, the article points to tensions

between top-down financial and bottom-up symbolic forms of capital and warns against tendencies towards exploitation of the creative labor of players. Backe's contribution takes recourse to the theories of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois to offer new theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of cryptogames. He shows that the technologies open for a commodified form of play and playful (re)creation and draws upon concepts such as gamification, playbor, gamblification, and speculative play to cast a critical light on practices of exploitation and monetization associated with blockchain- and cryptogaming. Backe concludes that cryptogames can be seen as "nested activities that can be approached as play, gambling, or financial speculation, with the latter approach being significantly privileged in existing games".

Agata Waszkiewicz's article 'Narrative Selfies and Player–Character Intimacy in Interface Games' looks at a particular type of games with potential for future game-based storytelling. In their contribution, Waszkiewicz interrogates the role of selfies in narrative driven interface games, i.e., games that allow players to witness and intervene in conversations between characters carried out via fictionalized smart phones or computers. The article argues that the use of fictional selfies allows for a negotiation of intimacy and emotional engagement between players and characters. At the same time, this form of engagement can veer towards voyeurism, something that can be problematic since these games often circle around the lives and experiences of marginalized identities. The article analyzes three games to identify three different functions of selfies in game play: dramaturgic, sociosemiotic, and dialectical.

In their article 'Playing on Life's Terms: Behavioral Strategies to Changing Situations', Elisa Wiik and Kati Alha investigate a niche area of game studies—former hardcore players forced to change their play practices due to families and other commitments. As digital games 'grow up' as a medium, so too do their players. Considering the futures of games and game studies means also considering how people change in how they relate to games over time. The contribution analyzes interview data to shed light on possible futures of play for many dedicated game enthusiasts adapting to 'life's terms'. The authors conclude that an often-assumed dichotomy between hardcore and leisure players appears exaggerated and should rather be conceived of as a dynamic scale open for constant change and adaptation.

Lastly, Maria Ruotsalainen's and Mikko Meriläinen's contribution 'Young Video Game Players' Self-Identified Toxic Gaming Behavior: An Interview Study' takes up an issue with significance for possible futures of play and game cultures – toxicity. The authors present a study based on interviews with young adult players who self-reported having exhibited what they see as toxic behavior in game play. After a review over the current state of research, the authors outline how their interview partners reflected upon their own negative behaviors and order the results into three thematic areas: (1) games as affective spaces and encounters, (2) game affordances and norm systems of game cultures, and (3) player agencies. Rather than merely offering a new model, the authors show the complexity of the phenomenon and the contingency of the observed patterns. The article ends with a future-bound perspective on

possible ways of addressing the issues of toxicity and negative behavior in game play and game cultures.

Finally, in our non-peer-reviewed section Rob Gallagher reviews Andrew Burn's monograph *Literature, Videogames, and Learning* (Routledge, 2022) showing how it addresses potentials and pitfalls of games for future education, before Austin Kelmore and Jamie Woodcock in their commentary use the example of the Game Worker Solidarity (GWS) project to discuss the importance of unions and worker mobilization for just, inclusive, and progressive futures of the games industry and beyond. Together, the contributions gathered in this issue offer a variation of critical approaches addressing potential future developments in the multiple relations between games and play, politics, society, the economy, culture, and the planetary ecosphere.

Before closing this editorial, we want to address a few internal issues at *Eludamos*. From 1 January 2024, two new members join our editorial board, and we wish to warmly welcome Agata Waszkiewicz from the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and Zoheb Mashiur from UiT The Arctic University of Norway to our team. We would also like to thank Aurora Eide for her help with formatting and copy-editing. Finally, it is worth mentioning that we have set up an advisory board to provide institutionalized frames for regular scholarly feedback on the development of the journal.

We end, once again, with a well-deserved thank you to all the authors for their fine contributions and to all the reviewers for assessing and improving many of the articles brought together here. Without your continuous engagement and support, the future of this journal would look bleak, indeed. Thank you all!

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