

Cheating Against the Machine

Reclaiming (Game) Space in *The Hunger Games*

Anh-Thu Nguyen

Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture
Volume 16, issue 1 (Fictional Games), pp. 23–37

Cheating Against the Machine

Reclaiming (Game) Space in *The Hunger Games*

ANH-THU NGUYEN

Abstract

This paper explores the arena of *The Hunger Games* series (2008–2010) as game space, focusing on power dynamics between the Capitol and the tributes. The Hunger Games, as a televised deathmatch, exemplifies a battle royale setting orchestrated by a totalitarian regime to maintain control over subjugated districts through a brutal spectacle. This analysis examines the Capitol's oppressive control, reflected in the meticulously designed arena—a setting where tributes are subjected to constant surveillance and manipulated by the Gamemakers to maximize entertainment value. Using Michael Nitsche's framework of video-game spaces, the analysis dissects the arena as rule-based, mediated, fictional, social, and play space, each aspect reinforcing the Capitol's authority. In spite of this, tributes like Katniss Everdeen reclaim limited agency through acts of defiance and exploitation of the arena's inherent flaws, allowing resistance from within the game system through cheating and deception.

Keywords

The Hunger Games; battle royale; game space; cheating

Before battle royale games would become a mainstream phenomenon in the videogames industry, popularized by titles such as *H1Z1* (Daybreak Game Company, 2015), *PUBG: Battlegrounds* (Krafton, 2017), *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), or *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019), it was first a literary phenomenon. Pitting contestants, usually teenagers, against one another until only one survivor remains is a concept most prominently attributed to *Battle Royale* by Kōushun Takami (1999), a dystopian horror novel set in an alternative post-war Japan that had emerged victorious from World War II. Although a commercial hit with a movie adaptation in Japan, a sequel, and a planned-but-scrapped attempt at an international television adaptation, it would be the *The Hunger Games* series to bring battle royales to global success. In this regard, battle royales have their roots as fictional games—games not

meant to be played, existing only in works of fiction (Gualeni, 2021, p. 188). Different to battle royale games, battle royale novels seem to have an inherent political disposition: while both *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale* imagine an alternative society with authoritarian and fascist governments who operate on systemic oppression, the battle royale genre for videogames largely abstracts these political contexts, focusing instead on competitive gameplay mechanics. The battle royale, as a fictional game, is consequently a narrative device to explore themes of power, control, and ultimately resistance.

The young adult dystopian series *The Hunger Games* is set in Panem, a state that reigns over the remains of what was once North America. In this totalitarian society, Panem is divided into various districts, each subservient to the Capitol, the nation's central governing power. As a tool to maintain control, the games are an annual event in which contestants from the ages twelve to eighteen are put against one another until one survivor remains. Fashioned to be a grand media spectacle, the Hunger Games are broadcasted across Panem for entertainment. In the first book, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), protagonist Katniss, from poverty-stricken District 12, volunteers in place of her younger sister, Prim, who was chosen by chance as the female 'tribute'—the official term used by the Capitol for the contestants. Through her show of determination, survival skills as a hunter, marketability as a heroine, and on-camera romance with fellow District 12 tribute Peeta Mellark, she and Peeta become the Capitol's darlings after winning the games. Yet her show of kindness to District 11's tribute Rue, despite being enemies, inevitably forces the Gamemakers to let both Katniss and Peeta win the games. In resisting the Capitol's rules and, ultimately, President Snow, Katniss is incidentally elevated to a symbol of resistance. In *Catching Fire* (Collins, 2009), the second book, to curb growing revolts in the districts, President Snow puts Katniss in yet another year of the Hunger Games in an attempt to eliminate her. This eventually leads to a rebel faction invading the game's arena, saving her, and putting a larger military revolt against the Capitol in motion, ultimately leading to the Capitol's downfall with Katniss acting as the symbol for resistance and revolution in the final book, *Mockingjay* (Collins, 2010).

As the name suggests, the Hunger Games frame themselves as games and serve as the narrative centre pieces across the trilogy. As a fictional game, the Hunger Games embody the "ideological paradigms that circulate in a certain fictional culture" (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 65), namely the reign of an affluent, wealthy elite in the Capitol over the 12 districts subservient to them. Drawing on Louis Althusser, Stefano Gualeni and Ricardo Fassone (2023, p. 63) observe that "games, at least in their commodified versions, can thus be said to participate in the functioning and perpetuation of the ideological state apparatus". The Capitol as state is consequently keen on maintaining power structures in Panem, and the Hunger Games serve as an oppressive tool to ensure the districts remain subservient. As Gualeni and Fassone write on fictional games, those that serve as social instruments are "designed to be persuasive and pervasive, and they often work on the basis of the coercion of players" (2023, p. 50). Because oppressive structures are so deeply engrained into

Panem and the games act as a tool to maintain it, examining the Hunger Games in terms of their game rules reveal how exactly games and play are used to keep a fictional society in check.

This paper suggests exploring the Hunger Games, particularly its arena, through the lens of game studies. In this case, this paper begins with Johan Huizinga's (1951) position that "all play has its rules", which gives games "a stable and identifiable structure" (Suter 2018, p. 19). As the Hunger Games occupy a concrete, actual space within its fictional universe in which they take place, "game spaces represent a spatial expression of the set of rules" (Götz, 2018, p. 261). By using Michael Nitsche's (2008) analytical planes for videogame spaces in the first part of this paper as a close-reading approach, I will address the symbiotic relationship between game space and its rules. Examining the Hunger Games as if they were videogames is not in judgement of its playability, in which, as a fictional game, its unplayability is an intrinsic feature (Gualeni & Fassone, 2023, p. 24). Rather, beyond analysing how power structures are embodied as game rules, using this lens also aims to reveal certain assumption about videogames in comparison to fictional games. The second part concerns how its contestants, or tributes, can nevertheless challenge the game's rules through cheating, or rather, through exploits. This not only allows for individual agency but also literally allows them to reclaim (game) space that is otherwise in the hands of the Capitol.

To explore these arguments, the following will examine the arena from the first two novels, as well as corresponding scenes from its film adaptations. As the novels are written from Katniss' perspective, the adaptations have scenes that provide further context to the game's arena, its rules, and particularly how Gamemakers are allowed to manipulate them at will. The analysis will not include the third novel, *Mockingjay*, in which the games do not exist in the same shape or form as in the preceding titles, although this does not mean the following analysis does not relate to the novel in any way. However, the rebellion seizes control of the Capitol in which its last lines of defence is the Capitol city itself that has turned into an arena in an attempt to fend off the rebels. At this point, the Hunger Games loses much of its character that had been customary for the games, such as the selection of tributes and the media spectacle before, during, and after the games. It certainly raises other interesting questions, such as the gamified dimension of a battlefield, or the nature in which Katniss navigates this arena as a propaganda tool for the rebellion—however, these questions far exceed the scope of the intended analysis for this paper.

War as spectacle, games as war

To analyse the Hunger Games as games, promptly connects the novels' main themes of violence and war for entertainment to the often-violent spectacle of videogames. Having young contestants slaughter each other in a game as a "means of social control" as part of the Capitol's apparatus of "propaganda, fear, and force" (McEvoy-Levi

2018, p. 187) brings forth discussions on the close relationship of the military and entertainment. Author Suzanne Collins herself recounts the idea for *The Hunger Games* being incepted from channel surfing, with some channels running reality TV show programs, others showing footage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Collins, 2008). As the origin of Western videogames themselves are found in the U.S. military-industrial complex (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009, p. xxix), militainment about games is a natural extension. They place “virtual games within a system of global ownership, privatized property, coercive class relations, military operations, and radical struggle” (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009, p. xxix). At its core, the Hunger Games are fictional games in which such a system is expressed, namely through a deeply totalitarian, oppressive and Orwellian regime. Treating the Hunger Games from a game studies perspective then, fits within the greater framework of militainment, or as Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter (2009) put it, games as empire. Collins’ novels can certainly be read as a critique of such systems, and further, they can be interpreted on how to resist these. It should be noted that although this paper primarily focuses on the arena, a major point of the novels is how the games never end and how the means of keeping the districts and its citizens in check are pervasive. Focusing on the arena itself should not suggest that the Capitol only expresses its power through it, rather, it should be understood as a crucial tool to maintain control, alongside its many other arms of power, such as through surveillance and military enforcement. These powers should not be isolated from the arena or vice versa, rather, it is the arena where the Capitol can exhibit its prowess.

Viewed through a game studies lens, the arena poses the following questions: How does a regime like the Capitol express itself through a game and how does it attempt to maintain its power through game rules? The following analysis will consider the arena in its representational and spatial dimensions of the Hunger Games as a (fictional) game by using Michael Nitsche’s five analytical planes of game spaces.

Space(s) of control

The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemaker-made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do. (Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, Collins, 2008, p. 209)

The main spectacle of the Hunger Games takes place in an exclusively built arena created by the Capitol. Fitted with various forms of technology, it allows Gamemakers, a team with administrative access spearheaded by a Head Gamemaker, to manipulate the arena at will and keep track of the tributes. As the trilogy draws on themes of “state oppression and popular resistance”, the arena is “designed to demoralize the districts and deter further revolts” (McEvoy-Levy, 2018, p. 187). Indeed,

the existence of the Hunger Games leads back to a failed rebellion by the districts and the games were consequently installed by the victorious Capitol as a reminder of their failed rebellion and continued subservience. It is in this sense that no part of the games nor the arena can be described as fair, rather, the tributes' fates lie in the hands of the Capitol's whims and the efforts of the Gamemakers, whose job is to make the games entertaining for the affluent elite of the Capitol yet cruel enough for the district citizens to remain subservient.

To understand how this control is reflected within the arena, I will examine it as a game space by applying Michael Nitsche's (2008) analytical planes for videogame spaces: rule-based, mediated, fictional, play, and social space. Each of these planes help to dissect the various forces active in maintaining the arena as a tool of social control. These planes should not be understood as isolated from one another, but rather, must "work in combination" to deliver a "fluent gaming experience" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 16). In the context of the Hunger Games, the planes can dissect in detail how the Capitol expresses its power through the arena's space, restricting the actions of tributes and controlling them if necessary.

Rule-based and mediated space

From the first seconds of the games, the arena is guided by rules that define the Hunger Games: tributes are launched into the arena from underground catacombs that run beneath it. Once inside the arena, they must stay on the platform for sixty seconds until the ring of a gong signals the start of the games; leaving the platform earlier risks triggering landmines. A rule-based space, according to Nitsche, refers to the "mathematical rules based on physics, sounds, AI, and game-level architecture" (2008, p. 15). In other words, these may refer to algorithmic structures not immediately visible to the player in videogame spaces, it is "defined by the code, the data, and hardware restrictions" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 16). The arena expresses this through automated processes running within its embedded technologies, be it cameras, sensors, day and nighttime simulations as well as weather simulations. These technologies are not purely algorithmic in nature as the real-physical components of the arena remain ontologically different from a digital space, such as a videogame space, e.g. the hybrid forms of technology in the shape of genetically modified animals, 'muttations'. However, a rule-based space speaks to the inherent artificial quality of its space, created through technology and ensures the surveillance apparatus by the Capitol, a power that runs both within and outside of the Games (Ann, 2020, p. 21). This in turn gives rise to what audiences and tributes see: the mediated space that "consists of all the output of the system can provide in order to present the rule-based game universe to the player" (Ann, 2020, p. 16). The dome-shaped limits of the arena's ceiling are the arena's skybox, a videogame's cube or sphere to simulate a "seemingly undefinable vastness by the players' point of view within the game world" (Bonner, 2021, p. 67). The weather simulations also suggest a "worldliness" (Bonner, 2021, p. 68) within its space, the make-believe of freedom and infinite

space. The first arena of the trilogy presents itself as a forest with open skies, complete with streams, lakes, and rivers, and with varying degrees of topography befitting for such a biome, such as muddy banks or rocky terrains. For Katniss, this arena gives her an unintended advantage, being a skilled hunter with foraging knowledge, as she was regularly hunting for extra food in the forest beyond District 12's borders. The direct dangers she encounters are consequently human made, both by fellow tributes and the Gamemakers.

Fictional and social space

The false sky as skybox and its promise of infinite space is not an illusion Katniss actually falls for, yet she attempts to escape the danger by removing herself from other tributes as far as possible. Promptly at the beginning of the game, Katniss runs away into the forest as opposed to the large metal structure at its center, the Cornucopia. Situated in an open plain, the structure is easy to spot and littered with valuable items and weapons essential for survival and combat. Despite this, Katniss is aware that the Cornucopia is a provocation by the Gamemakers to lure in as many tributes as possible for an immediate bloodbath just as the games commence. Running away from the structure and into the forest, Katniss treks for several days before ultimately becoming exhausted. Finding safety by climbing up a tree then falling asleep in exhaustion, she is woken by a wall of fire descending onto her. Immediately, she knows that this fire is not natural, not one that could have been laid by fellow tributes. Rather its unnatural look and height is only possible through technological manipulation at the hands of the Gamemakers. The film provides additional context to this scene by showing the Gamemakers' control room. As it turns out, Katniss had nearly reached the edge of the arena and was too far from other tributes. The Gamemakers thus force her to run back into the arena again, into others. A holographic map at the center of the room shows the full access Gamemakers have over the arena, full control over cameras as well as being able to manipulate the arena at will. Gamemakers fulfill a dual role of managing the arena, but also being a production team to create the spectacle that are the Hunger Games.

The team of Gamemakers in their control room create a fictional space: "the space 'imagined' by players from their comprehension of the available images" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 16). Different to the rule-based space, Nitsche refers to the sum of information arising from the arrangement of different sources and planes, in this case, the sky box, the arena's topography, audiovisual effects, and so forth. According to Nitsche (2008, p. 16), decisions made by players are based on their comprehension of the fictional world. With the Hunger Games however, fictional space is twofold, depending on who is seen as the player. At first glance, tributes might be considered players as they are participants. The crude reality of the Hunger Games suggests, however, as Katniss herself observes, that tributes are being manipulated into fighting each other at the whims and control of the Gamemakers, and consequently, the Capitol. Katniss is hesitant in actively participating in this, avoiding confronta-

tions whenever possible—both because she is unable to face more combat-experienced contestants but also because she is aware of her status as a tool for entertainment. Katniss, reluctantly playing along with the Capitol's machine, is constrained and careful with her actions knowing that cameras are pointed at her. Drawing on Michel Foucault and surveillance power, Kayla Ann notes the panoptic power of the Capitol's surveillance even during the training stages preceding the Games, noting that the “prevalent fear of surveillance immobilizes all tributes from even considering escape or suicide even though they are often left to their own devices in their rooms at night” (2020, p. 22).

Calling Katniss a *player* from a game studies perspective seems erroneous, as being a player and taking part in play is usually associated with a voluntary act, the free choice of doing so. Roger Caillois (1958/2001, p. 26) considers basic freedom essential to play, while Huizinga (1951) associates play with leisure, not a necessity (p. 8). To participate in play requires a form of agency to do so. For Janet Murray (2016, p. 125), practicing one's agency in videogames is most obviously expressed through spatial navigation. Yet in the case of Katniss, her spatial navigation towards the edge of the arena and away from tributes warrants punishment from the Gamemakers. As Murray comments, actions alone do not give rise to agency: “The players' actions have effect, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are not related to the players' intentions” (2016, p. 125). In a system in which freedoms are restricted, nearly no agency is held by citizens of the districts, in which children are made participant in these games. From a game studies perspective that grounds itself in Huizinga, the tributes may be regarded as no players at all, only pawns. Yet, in a fictional game, they are still players. This contradiction is a necessary transgression of games as fictional games, in particular, dystopian fictional games. Alberto Boschi (2017, p. 279) notes the following characteristics for the dystopian fictional game: players are part of a forced competition, the game does not provide equal opportunities for all its players, rules are subject to change, and the game is only partially isolated from the ‘real’ world. As he poignantly concludes, “the imaginary competitions described ... constitute the perversion, or if one prefers the sinister parody, of the Huizingan and Cailloisian concept of play” (2017, p. 279).¹

Instead, agency and freedom are held by wealthy and influential Citizens of the Capitol. Beyond being the audience, the Capitol citizens are able to influence the games' outcome by sponsoring tributes, e.g. by sending much-needed items. After Katniss is severely injured by the man-made fire, she receives medicine from a sponsor to

¹ Translated from original: “le immaginarie competizioni descritte in queste pagine costituiscono la perversione, o se si preferisce la sinistra parodia, del concetto huizinghiano e cailloisiano di gioco” (Boschi, 2017, p. 279).

treat her wound. This plane is Nitsche's (2008) social space, "defined by the interaction with others, meaning the game space of other players affected" (p. 14), that is, if one were to consider Capitol citizens as part of the game. Although Nitsche refers to multi-player games, the nature of the Hunger Games and how citizens 'interact' with the games and players through sponsorships affects its players directly. Katniss attempts to be 'likable' in front of cameras, to play a role assigned to her to garner sympathy, which is to be a girl from District 12 who is falling in love with her fellow tribute from the same district, Peeta. Because the Hunger Games' media spectacle begins way before the actual games but is in truth a whole array of different media appearances for the tributes, "Capitol viewers develop fanlike identifications with different tributes" (McEvoy-Levy, 2018, p. 190). Collins' portrayal of games is a "spectacle and virtual, interactive war: the Capitol viewers of the Games think they are involved and are emotionally invested, from a position of voyeuristic safety" (McEvoy-Levy, 2018, p. 190). It is through this plane of fictional and social space that Katniss performs her role to appeal to the Capitol audience.

The crucial role the Capitol audience inhabits as not just passive viewers but, at times, active participants, which makes them both complicit and necessary for when the Hunger Games takes a sharp turn. Their participation is suddenly fuel against the Capitol: As both Katniss and Peeta are thrown into the Hunger Games again in the following year after their victory, the two feign a pregnancy in an interview leading to the new Hunger Games, causing dismay among the Capitol audience. As a last-minute attempt to stop the Hunger Games, they appeal to the audience through the story they had crafted on-camera. As the Capitol's darlings through their on-screen romance, playing the roles of star-crossed lovers, the Capitol audience also seem to be slowly revolting against having their beloved celebrities thrown into the arena once more. Despite this, the Hunger Games proceed. While the Capitol audience may hold a degree of agency and freedom, certainly more than the actual tributes, their influence is indirect at best and therefore insufficient to truly rattle at the pillars of the Games themselves. They are tolerated by the system as long as they play within the rules, not against them, as the power they wield is conditional and merely tolerated. The porous nature of the game space is therefore not only asymmetrical but also highly hierarchical, speaking to the inequality of all parties involved: the tributes, Gamemakers, and the Capitol audience are all within a system upheld by President Snow. Consequently, President Snow emerges as one of the central antagonists throughout the trilogy, as he is seen to forcefully implement and enforce rules according to his political motivations—perhaps the only character who can be regarded consistently as a player throughout much of the trilogy.

Play space

The question of who really is the *player* brings forth the next plane of videogame space: the play space, "meaning the space of the play, which includes the player and the videogame hardware" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 14). As shown earlier, it is not the tributes who have access to any of the hardware but rather, the Gamemakers. In their

dual role of game administrators and production team, they control ways of interaction in a system that only allows one-way communication. As far as videogames are concerned, the term interactivity or interaction has often been used vaguely, resulting in a “too-broad application that conflates interaction with any action causing an outcome” (Landay, 2014, p. 174). Even if this were the case however, the form in which interaction is seen in the Hunger Games is limited. Assuming that a game’s system is a system of communication, the Hunger Game’s arena is one of closed interactivity, to borrow Lev Manovich’s (2001, p. 40) distinction of open and closed systems, the latter using fixed elements within a fixed branching structure. Consequently, this system is the opposite of what many videogames attempt to do, “in which interaction is like a conversation built up through an exchange of information” (Landay, 2014, p. 175). For the Gamemakers, there is only one goal: to kill off tributes until one remains. In the film, the Gamemakers are shown to almost exhibit a playful joy when sending tributes into deathly situations through traps. This alone encapsulates that the play space—the space that includes the player and the hardware—does not (only) refer to the tributes, but also the Gamemakers in their control room.

In these considerations of game space, each plane is directly controlled by the Gamemakers through the logics of the Capitol’s totalitarian rule. In the arena, this is characterised by the overpowering control the Gamemakers have over the tributes, their ability to manipulate the arena at will and a surveillance system that leaves no angle uncovered. Despite death being the likely outcome, the rules must be obeyed. As Collins shows however, every (game) system has its flaws that may be exploited. By the end of the first games, Katniss and Peeta are the only tributes left. Having played the roles of star-crossed lovers from District 12, Katniss takes out Nightlock berries—a fruit with deadly consequences when consumed. After falling in love on-screen for the audiences, it seems that the couple has resolved to die together in the ultimate turn of romantic tragedy. After both take the berries into their mouths, the games are stopped, or rather, Head Gamemaker Seneca Crane declares both Katniss and Peeta as the winners of the 74th Hunger Games. Against all odds, both Katniss and Peeta survive, sparking the flame that would eventually lead to the Capitol’s downfall. A direct violation of the Hunger Games’ most important rule of only crowning one winner forces the Capitol to accept two and shows that the game can indeed be played on the tributes’ terms. President Snow is keenly aware of how this victory can be perceived as weakness and punishes Seneca Crane with his life. Despite the power Gamemakers yield over the tributes, even Gamemakers must obey rules to sustain the state apparatus of the Capitol. However, it is also Katniss who reclaims agency and is not merely a pawn to the Games, as Ann observes: “Katniss Everdeen does not lose agency due to the power the government exerts of her body, but rather she first establishes agency through the power she exerts through her own body” (2020, p. 22).

Reclaiming space: Agency and exploits

Katniss' threat of a double suicide is not her first act of defiance against the Capitol. During training sessions in which tributes are ranked in front of a jury before entering the actual arena, Katniss shoots an arrow into an apple displayed on a roasted pig platter for the Gamemakers. This is perhaps one of Katniss' more significant acts of defiance early on, an impulsive moment that happens out of frustration and anger with the Gamemakers seemingly valuing food more than her. It is a show of how little Gamemakers care for the lives of tributes, as performance scores may attract sponsorship deals essential to survival, contrasted with the Capitol's opulent lifestyle. In the following year, Katniss and Peeta are thrown into the games once more—an attempt by President Snow to eliminate the root of growing uprisings across districts. During this training, a force field barrier has been set up between the tributes and the Gamemakers. Katniss comments that she is likely responsible for it, remembering her outburst from the previous year. Unwittingly, she had exposed a potential weakness of the Capitol. With the same force field that separates the arena's space with the beyond, the Gamemakers attempt to draw the spatial borders again to separate the tributes from themselves, but this time out of fear for their own safety.

The force field is detrimental to the Capitol's powers and its survival, acting as dividers of space between those subjugated and the ones in control. Returning to the idea of a game's skybox, Markus Rautzenberg (2015, p. 250) argues that no video-game space can truly escape its inherent cave structure, in which the impenetrable skybox ends all attempts of exploration of the beyond eventually—at least in theory. Although Marc Bonner (2021, p. 73) disagrees with Rautzenberg in his analogy to the cave, both make a case for never needing to leave the cave and seek beyond its borders as staying within is a necessary condition of experiencing the world. This, of course, is not the case for the tributes. In the 75th Hunger Games, it is Katniss who once more unwittingly breaks the force field from within, allowing rebel forces to enter the arena. Katniss' repeatedly attempts to reclaim agency, usually challenging the Capitol itself whenever she does so, even if she is not always aware of the full scope in which she acts. This act then, is about breaking the borders and limits of the arena, through an exploit that makes use of the force field's weakness, levelling the playing field and reclaiming space from the hands of the Capitol. When framing the arena and its rules as a game space, Katniss is making use of exploits. In other words, in order to fight against the Capitol, the tributes must cheat. Cheating itself becomes an act of resistance, the only way to reshape an oppressive system. As Gualeni and Fassone point out in reference to dystopian fictional games, they carry the potential to “function as utopian devices” (2023, p. 50). Their observation on the possibility of transgression is particularly applicable:

Games, understood as rigid and inescapable systems of control and interdiction, can nevertheless be transgressed, broken away from and re-

vealed to be not only arbitrary but also imperfect and unjust. This revelation can then apply, as synecdoche, to the social structure and the system of power in which the games are played, typically leading to revolutionary acts and the eventual collapse of the established power in the fictional world. (2023, p. 94)

The force field, it turns out, has been a point of weakness before, allowing itself to be exploited by a tribute to help him achieve his victory. Haymitch Abernathy, mentor of Katniss and Peeta in the 74th and 75th Hunger Games, became a victor of the 50th Hunger Games through exploiting the force field to his own advantage. Similar to Katniss, Haymitch treks the arena until he reaches the edge. When he reaches the cliffs and drops a pebble, it comes back to him. In a confrontation shortly after, Haymitch lures his opponent to the edges of the arena. When his enemy throws an axe at him, Haymitch dodges it, with the axe falling off the cliff. Obvious to him but not to his attacker, the axe returns, lodging itself into Haymitch's attacker and killing her in the process. With only Haymitch left, he is declared the winner of the 50th Hunger Games.

Even if Haymitch was not intentionally using the force field as an exploit, the Capitol's punishment following his victory evidently illustrates that this use was not intended. The bounce-back effect of the force field was instead designed to bring tributes back into the arena in case of attempted suicides. By manipulating the arena in ways not intended by the Gamemakers, he demonstrates "the intelligence and personal agency of a nobody-tribute from nowhere—District 12—granting himself too much power and autonomy" (Ann, 2020, p. 112). Consequently, in the aftermath of Haymitch's victory, his family, closest friends and partner are killed as his actions were seen as ridiculing the Capitol's power. As Katniss comments: "You know they didn't expect that to happen. It wasn't meant to be part of the arena. They never planned on anyone using it as a weapon. It made them look stupid that he figured it out" (Collins, 2009, p. 228). Katniss' remark is twofold: not only is individual agency a threat to the Capitol, but Haymitch was exploiting an unintended feature. As Grant Tavinor describes:

In computer science, an *exploit* is a use or manipulation of a piece of computer technology that creates an unanticipated effect, usually at odds with its intended use. In gaming, exploits are behaviours performed by gamers that take advantage of the bugs or vulnerabilities in a game, and again which are at odds with the intended use; as such, they form a way in which gamers can breach the norms of gaming practice. (2009, p. 107)

Katniss and Peeta indirectly threaten the Gamemakers with Nightlock berries that are meant to be accidentally consumed; the berries were not meant to be used for suicide, nor for a double suicide for that matter. Individual agency challenges the Capitol's power and therefore its legitimacy. For videogames, while most players might accept a game's formal rules, "some players do not engage in gameplay, but

instead play against the rules” (Tavinor, 2009, p. 103). From Tavinor’s point of view, cheating is “breaking the rules of the game” (2009, p. 107), and therefore a disruption of the formal frameworks laid out by the designers.² Cheats, then, are means of gaining an “unfair advantage” (Tavinor, 2009, p. 107).

Ironically then, despite being built from the ground by the Capitol, the arena’s in-built flaws allow for individual agency to challenge the capitol, through means of exploits and cheating. As all game systems, the Hunger Games are determined by rules. With information on the arena being withheld from tributes until they are inside, these rules are “often are not known in advance and must be discovered through play” (Tavinor, 2009, pp. 96–97), in the same way Haymitch walks to the edges of the arena in hopes of finding anything he can use. Due to game systems being “encoded in a computer ... the game cannot be manipulated except through the means encoded in its affordances” (Tavinor, 2009, p. 107). In other words, tributes engage with the arena’s rules through (deadly) play and, at times, figure out ways to use these affordances against the Gamemakers’ intentions.

Perhaps rather than cheating, Haymitch, Katniss and Peeta take part in deceptions. Deriving from J. Barton Bowyer, Mia Consalvo notes “cheating in virtual worlds is to view it as a form of lying or deception. If practices are about gaining unfair advantage, they often involve some level of deception” (2007, p. 170). To play against the Capitol’s rules, to exploit the arena, to deceive both the Capitol and its audiences are major motifs across the trilogy. From the on-camera romance of Katniss and Peeta, to their act of consuming Nightlock berries, to Katniss’ forced performance of femininity in the roles of either a protective older sister or the girl in love (Miller, 2012, p. 146), deception is part of the forces working with, but also, for the Capitol.

To take one step further, by the second book, *Catching Fire*, Katniss is no longer just cheating or deceiving. To borrow Huizinga’s (1951, p. 11) term, she is now a spoil-sport: “The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game ... the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself”. Huizinga describes the spoilsport as a threat to the play-community as a whole and therefore must be “cast out” (1951, p. 11). It is in this same way in which Katniss, as the heroine of trilogy, first exploited the Games to win them together with Peeta, but was still acknowledging the overall power structures of the Capitol that dominated the Games as well as her life. It is not until the crucial moment in *Catching Fire*

² It should be noted that others have argued for the use of videogame errors to be part of the play experience as opposed to breaking gaming practice, see: *I AM ERROR. Störungen des Computerspiels* (Beil at al., 2012). Similarly, others have discussed intentional glitches and other malfunctions in videogames as ways of the game system referencing its own materiality becoming visible (Janik, 2017). Rather than a disturbance, these types of glitches carry a transformative potential for the relationship between player and virtual world, offering alternatives of engaging with its assumed affordances (Gualeni, 2019).

when she shatters the arena, rearranging the conditions of the Games. Huizinga includes revolutionaries, of which Katniss ascends to as a symbol of the resistance, as spoilsports who can create a new community with rules of its own (Huizinga, 1951, p. 11). It is within these frameworks that speak against play and games that Katniss can act on her own accord, with her own agency to pave way for drastic sociopolitical change.

Conclusion

As Andrew Zimmermann Jones concludes in his analysis of the Hunger Games through mathematical models of game theory, “from a game-theory standpoint, that makes them very poorly defined games, but it makes for an interesting world and a great trilogy of novels” (2012, pp. 247–248). From the perspective of game studies as understood in relation to video games, it is difficult to conceive of the Hunger Games as games, as they are conducted as a series of involuntary, coercive, and deadly media spectacle with children for the amusement of an elite class, posing an inherent ethical issue. Even leaving this aside, the Games’ own rules and spatial boundaries are neither consistently reinforced nor are they without inherent flaws, being contested not only by its own tributes, but also by the Capitol’s elite and the Gamemakers. Jones’ sentiment expresses the unstable, and even unpredictable nature of the Hunger Games.

As a fictional game however, the answer to the questions of who the player is and who is being played is a dynamic one, always in tension and in motion with one another as the events of the trilogy unfold and several parties fight for their right to wield power to bring down the same system it produces. As a fictional game, the Hunger Games serve as a rigid state apparatus meant to sustain it, yet as the trilogy unfolds, the Games become the showplace for a struggle between those who seek to use the same rules to turn it against itself. The question of who plays is therefore not only directly related to the Hunger Games, but affects the hierarchical oppressive system of who has the ability to distribute power, how they wield it, and how it is perceived by tributes, citizens, Gamemakers, and later, by both the resistance and its oppressors. The inherently unethical, coercive, and oppressive nature of the Hunger Games are far from what games conventionally ought to be; as the already high stakes escalate, the challenge to its rules transforms into revolutionary war. As a fictional game, the Hunger Games allow readers to explore a radically alternative idea of what a game is, perhaps only to arrive at the conclusion that the Hunger Games are games in their name only.

References

- Ann, K. (2020). *Agency in the hunger games: Desire, intent and action in the novels*. McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Bonner, M. (2021). *Game | World | Architectonics: Transdisciplinary approaches on structures and mechanics, levels and spaces, aesthetics and perception*. Heidelberg University Publishing.
- Boschi, A. (2017). "Let the games begin!" La figura del gioco distopico nel cinema e nella letteratura fantascientifica. *Cinergie – Il Cinema e le altre Arti*, 6(12), 269–280. <https://doi.org/10.6092/ISSN.2280-9481/7389>
- Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play, and games* (M. Barash, Trans.). University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1958)
- Collins, S. (2008). *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic.
- Collins, S. (2009). *The Hunger Games: Catching fire*. Scholastic.
- Collins, S. (2010). *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay*. Scholastic.
- Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: Gaining advantage in videogames*. MIT Press.
- Epic Games. (2017). *Fortnite* [PC]. Epic Games.
- Daybreak Game Company. (2015). *H1Z1* [PC]. Daybreak Game Company.
- Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Gualeni, S. (2019). On the de-familiarizing and re-ontologizing effects of glitches and glitch-alikes. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2019 Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*. *DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*. <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/1060>
- Gualeni, S. (2021). Fictional games and utopia: The case of *Azad*. *Science Fiction Film & Television*, 14(2), 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.3828/sfftv.2021.13>
- Gualeni, S., & Fassone, R. (2023). *Fictional games: A philosophy of worldbuilding and imaginary play*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Götz, U. (2018). Rules shape spaces – spaces shape rules. In R. Bauer, M. Kocher, & B. Suter (Eds.), *Games and rules: Game mechanics for the "magic circle"* (pp. 259–266). transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839443040-013>
- Huizinga, J. (1951). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Routledge.

- Janik, J. (2017). Glitched perception: Beyond the transparency and visibility of the video game object. *TransMissions: The Journal of Film and Media Studies*, 2(2), 65–82. <https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/entities/publication/916ea367-f745-4873-997d-1b90bdbf03db>
- Krafton. (2017). *PUBG: Battlegrounds* [PC]. Krafton's PUBG Studios.
- Jones, A. Z. (2012). The tribute's dilemma: *The Hunger Games* and game theory. In G. A. Dunn & N. Michaud (Eds.), *The Hunger Games and philosophy: A critique of pure treason* (pp. 235–249). Wiley.
- Landay, L. (2014). Interactivity. In M. J. P. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to video game studies*. Routledge.
- Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. MIT Press.
- McEvoy-Levy, S. (2018). *Peace and resistance in youth cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-49871-7>
- Miller, J. (2012). "She has no idea. The effect she can have.": Katniss and the politics of gender. In G. A. Dunn & N. Michaud (Eds.), *The Hunger Games and philosophy: A critique of pure treason* (pp. 145–161). Wiley.
- Murray, J. H. (2017). *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (Updated edition). MIT Press. (Original work published 1997)
- Nitsche, M. (2008). *Video game spaces: Image, play, and structure in 3D worlds*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262141017.001.0001>
- Rautzenberg, M., Wolfsteiner, A., Bojahr, P., Schwingeler, S., Beil, B., & Hensel, T. (2012). *I am error: Störungen des Computerspiels*. universi – Universitätsverlag Siegen. <https://dspace.ub.uni-siegen.de/handle/ubsi/822>
- Suter, B. (2019). Rules of play as a framework for the "magic circle". In M. Kocher & R. Bauer (Eds.), *Games and rules: Game mechanics for the "magic circle"* (pp. 19–33). transcript Verlag.
- Takami, K. (1999). *Battle royale*. Ohta Publishing.
- Tavinor, G. (2009). *The art of videogames*. Wiley.
- Respawn Entertainment. (2019). *Fortnite* [PC]. Electronic Arts.