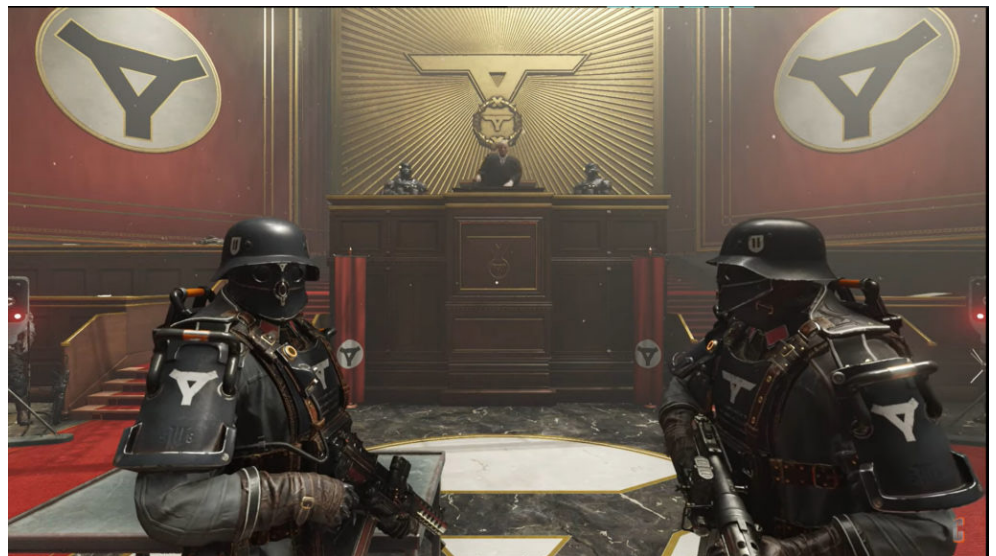

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Introduction

Locating the Taboos of Game Studies



Source: Screenshot from *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*.

What are the taboos of game studies, and is it even possible to identify taboos in a highly interdisciplinary field like game studies? And how are games and game studies tackling topics that are considered cultural or social taboos? This special issue is taking a stab at these questions, tracing both the disciplinary controversies of our field, as well as debating specific taboo topics and the theoretical and methodological approaches through which they have been addressed.

This collection discusses taboos in game studies, ranging from research into taboo subjects to the taboo methods and approaches. Game studies is still a young field, and while specific paradigms may not have yet settled, it is likely that the areas that are deemed taboo for researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds will contribute to crystallize certain research paradigms or shift the focus of inquiry on specific issues. In this volume, we aim to tease out the taboos of game studies by looking at subjects and fields that researchers dare

not venture into, and by studying how games treat topics that are commonly believed to be inappropriate for games and play. We also discuss scholarship that relates to other societal taboos, such as research projects involving people associated with criminal environments. We hope that this collection will contribute to a better understanding of the field of game studies by providing insight into topics that are rarely addressed but potentially create large divisive gaps between research traditions in game studies.

According to dictionary definitions, a *taboo* can be understood as “a prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Taboos are topics or acts that are off limits, often for reasons based in social conduct, convention, or norm and associated with morality; in most cases these are unspoken agreements and expectations that one has come to learn through socialization and engagement with a community. Although there are certain taboos that appear to be virtually universal and thus also implemented into the juridical system, such as incest, cannibalism, and murder, taboos are also changing with culture and time (Lambek, 2001).

Taboos can be found in all parts of society and guide our practices in many ways. In research, talking about taboos may seem counterintuitive as an ideal common to all research is a fundamentally critical disposition where researchers question assumptions and accepted truths in order to understand a phenomenon as thoroughly as possible. In cases where there is disagreement about the interpretation of data or the phenomenology of a subject matter, this could certainly be controversial, but would be considered a source for academic debate rather than a taboo as such. However, this does not mean that research is void of taboos.

On an overarching level, we can find the taboos of science and research are closely related to the norms and restrictions regulating research practices. As society’s primary producers of knowledge, research and science have a social responsibility and are held accountable for scientific rigor and validity. Scientific taboos that span disciplines from mathematics and medicine, to philosophy, law, history, sociology – and indeed game studies – are

practices that break our ability to confide in the results presented. Fabricating data, dishonest or “creative” interpretation, misquotation and plagiarism are thus obvious, largely universal taboos in the academic community. Closely related are the violation of research ethics. Experiments and tests that do harm to participants, in particular when carried out on non-consenting or unaware subjects, are examples of this (Carlson, Boyd & Webb, 2004).

However, if we consider the taboos of a specific research field, we must look for *issues that go against the norms or established truths of that field*. A glance at our own

practices of game scholars indicates that finding universal taboos for the field may be challenging due to its interdisciplinary nature. This indicates different perspectives that may sometimes stand in stark contrast or opposition to each other. While researchers may cherish the research paradigms and methodologies of their native field, they are confronted with colleagues of different persuasions, while simultaneously experiencing pressure from culture and society about the ways in which games *should* be addressed. This indicates that what may seem controversial in a certain field may not be so in another. As game studies grows into maturity, the field has been through several debates, spanning the disputes about effects and learning, the so-called narratology vs. ludology debate, to the discussions about how to respond to the #gamergate controversy.

In his article, Frans Mäyrä takes an introspective view where he discusses disputes of game studies by adopting the perspective of a broader intellectual history. He describes current game studies as taking part in a “charged intellectual and political landscape” that seems to increase the differences rather than build bridges in the field. While admitting that descriptions of academic differences often tend to appear as more polarized than they may actually be, he describes today’s situation as dominated by two traditions; one “formalist” tradition and a “politically committed” tradition. He traces these traditions back, not simply to the narratology vs. ludology debate, but further to the history of thought brought forward by the idealist and empiricist positions of epistemology. In the contemporary climate of culture wars, this also resonates with the current polarization between right-wing and conservative activists and progressive and feminist intellectuals that were at the barricades in the #gamergate controversy. Addressing the political and theoretical polarization of the field, Mäyrä argues for need to banish taboos in discussing the topic, arguing that while setting up clear dichotomies might serve educational and analytical purposes, it is ethically important to remember to acknowledge both the value and limitations in (ostensibly “value-neutral”) formalist as well as in (politically committed) contextual, critical and cultural studies positions in the game studies field. Mäyrä’s piece uncovers many of the issues that are disputed in the field of game studies, and by doing so he points out some of the areas in which the taboos of game studies can be found. He suggests that one of these perceived taboos is the realization that a formalist approach to game studies appears unable to tackle some of the pressing issues in gaming culture relating to misogyny, racism, and homophobia, and the attacks by #gamergate.

The fact that games and game culture may be oblivious to their own ignorance of racial issues can in itself be understood as a product of one of the taboos of the field of game studies. In his essay, Aaron Trammell is addressing the relationship between blackness and games by investigating the connection between play and torture. The article engages with the important thought that

games and play are not always safe, consensual, and fun, and that the link between torture and play is an important one in understanding black experiences of play. The author takes us on an uncomfortable journey through the history of play as torture in the black experience. This peculiar configuration is traced back to American slavery and reminds us that play often goes hand in hand with more sinister practices, and that it is our duty as game scholars to shed light on this fact.

While Mäyrä and Trammell's essays offer viewpoints on what can be considered taboos in game studies, addressing overarching issues on how we think about knowledge production in our field, and how we construct the ontology of play, we can also look at *how game studies deals with topics that are considered cultural or social taboos*. Public debates about games have revealed the existence of certain topics that tend to be perceived as inappropriate for games. Chapman and Linderoth claim that games appear to have a trivializing effect on subject matters because they simplify and thus risk representing issues in a disrespectful way (Chapman & Linderoth, 2015). For this reason, some are of the assumption that games cannot deal with topics that need to be handled with sensitivity. Two of the papers in this special issue discuss how games deal with World War II. While the popularity of military conflict in games hardly makes the topic a taboo in itself, war in games is generally sanitized in the sense that everything that would remind the player about the problematic aspects of war is removed (Pötzsch, 2017). This means that war games tend to avoid civilian casualties or war crimes. In their piece, Eugen Pfister and Martin Tschiggerl discuss how videogames navigate the representation of historical taboos relating to World War II and analyze the moments where games and players violate these taboos. While World War II is a shared European cultural and historical trauma, the authors reflect on how its representation has been the subject of different regulations and interpretations in different cultural contexts and on the impact of this process on the idea of authenticity in historical representations. They discuss the peculiar situations that occur when game developers attempt to work around national regulations such as the German banning of Nazi symbolism in entertainment, which sometimes result in a paradoxical exposure of the taboos that the regulations are trying to protect. The authors also discuss how the idea of authenticity creates taboos in game culture, illustrated by debates on how the presence of female soldiers in historical games is perceived not only as inaccurate but as a transgression against a shared historical reality.

A debate about the representation of taboos would be incomplete without a discussion of the Holocaust, an event whose *visibility* has been a major preoccupation for philosophers and historians in the XX Century (see e.g. Didi-Huberman, 2003). While this is an issue also in Pfister and Tschiggerl's piece, it takes the center stage in Tomasz Z. Majkowski and Katarzyna Suszkiewicz's paper.

Rather than discussing how games deal with the representation of the taboos of Holocaust, Majkowski and Suszkiewicz are investigating how the design of a game about Holocaust can be both a pedagogical tool as well as a way for game scholars to better understand the affordances of games in communicating culturally and historically sensitive matters. Thus, the piece is both asking how games as well as game studies can deal with taboos. The paper documents a boardgame design workshop organized by game scholars, historians, and Holocaust educators during which high school students designed a board game that would raise awareness on the Holocaust history of the Polish town of Radecznica. While the design workshop itself is an innovative and even radical way of dealing with sensitive issues, the aim is not to break taboos or make the students engage in transgressive practices. Instead, the authors' aim is *de-tabooization*: a refusal of the idea of the Holocaust as a taboo that games cannot address and a demonstration that games can tackle this historical trauma in a respectful way, allowing the student-designers to take an active role in the meaning-making process relating to their local history.

The last paper in this special issue concerns a common but often neglected topic for many fields in social research: the fact that research sometimes intersects with crime and criminal environments. To study games and game culture is generally a safe endeavor unless the researcher gets involved in issues that provoke online harassment campaigns (Chess & Shawm 2015; 2016; Mortensen, 2016). For Hanna Wirman and Rhys Jones, however, a research on Hong Kong arcades, or “amusement game centers” (遊戲機中心), put them into a situation where they became engaged with environments with a perceived relation to organized crime. While the respondents in Wirman and Jones' studies report that local arcades are dominated by cartels, this is also a taboo in the sense that it is obviously not on any public records. At the same time, the simple – and without doubt real – possibility that such a link exists, creates a number of issues for researchers. In addition to the potential threats towards their own safety and the fact that simply researching arcades can cause reactions by the cartels, this situation exposes a number of fundamental questions concerning methods and research ethics, including to what degree researchers themselves are willing to – or should – break not only social norms but also the law, in their pursuit of knowledge.

As a concluding remark it is worth bringing up a possible elephant in the room – whether we have at all been able to address the *actual* taboos of game studies. A problem about taboos is that they are by definition that which should not be spoken about, and for this reason simply addressing them would in itself be socially unacceptable and potentially lead to social stigma. Research is by its very nature investigative and based on curiosity and the willingness to challenge the establishment to understand all aspects of a topic, which implies that even taboos should be challenged and broken. At the same time, research is also a

part of the social world where issues such as social stigma is real, and it is thus unlikely that there should be no taboos in research. For this reason, it may seem like a paradox to discuss the taboos of game studies and comes as no surprise that identifying the taboos of a research field may be difficult.

While we do not claim to have exposed all taboos in the field of game studies, what we have done is to take a first stab at identifying areas of research in which the taboos of game studies can be found. The papers in this special issue have been able to identify both certain disputes inside game studies that involve some of the taboos of our field, as well as providing in-depth discussion of how games and game studies tackle topics that are considered taboo in culture and society. This is important for the maturation of the field: It is only through exposing the taboos of our field that we can start having an informed scholarly debate about our taboos, and about the ways in which they may hinder the progress of our field by reducing the space for dialogue.

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