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Gertrude Stein plays video games

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The article juxtaposes the problems of spatiality and repetition in video game narrative with Gertrude Stein's notion of the landscape play, in which the linear plot dissolves in favour of a complex network of connections between different elements of the work. Several examples are discussed, from The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild to the Dark Souls series, showing the possible links between video games and Stein's writing techniques, especially in the field of open world games, where the large, easily accessible spaces make it more difficult to build coherent, organised plots.

Keywords: landscape; video game narrative; Gertrude Stein; The Legend of Zelda; play

Play, play every day, play and play and play away, and then play the play you played to-day, the play you play every day, play it and play it.

Gertrude Stein, *Play*

When there's a way, I play, and there's always a way, so I'll play till my computer fails…

MC Archero, *A True Tibian's Song* (*Piosenka prawdziwego Tibijczyka, trans. PS)*

Putting Gertrude Stein's work alongside video games may seem strange – the hermetic avant-garde author seems, at a first glance, to have little in common with one the most important phenomena in contemporary popular culture. However, some devices present in Stein's writing are a surprisingly good match for the problems faced by today's game designers. One of the crucial design issues in games is the relationship between narrative and landscape – large spaces represented in games make it difficult (and sometimes even impossible) to deliver a coherent and clear narrative, as they encourage the players to wander freely rather than follow the main plotline. It is a problem very similar to the one described by Stein in reference to her model of plays, a radical departure from traditional drama and its strictly determined structure. The notion of the landscape becomes an alternative for linear narrative, introducing a completely different approach towards the perception of the events and their sequence, as well as the passage of time. The postdramatic element of Stein's work can become an interesting source of inspiration for designers coping with the problems of video game dramaturgy, and a familiarity with the experience of playing games can help understand some approaches to Stein's complex texts. Their relation to games is natural inasmuch as Stein's understanding of the word "play" is very ambiguous – as a noun it might refer to drama and theatre, but its meaning as a verb refers to ludic activity. Children (and many adults) know that there is nothing frivolous about play – it is an important way of understanding and creating the world, giving more freedom in terms of action and thinking than activities guarded by

prohibitions and limitations.

In research there is a long tradition of looking at video games through the focus of narrative. Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* is one of the key books in the field of digital humanities. Imagining the future of digital culture in 1997, Murray focuses on storytelling – it is the ability to present complex, moving stories that is supposed to be an indicator of quality and innovation in the emerging medium. Interestingly, it is drama and theatre, not film or the novel, that becomes the main reference point here. The reference to *Hamlet* probably needs no explanation, but the word "holodeck" used in the title might require a few words. For MIT scholars of the time, *Star Trek*was at least as important as Shakespeare's work. A holodeck is an uncannily realistic VR environment present in the *Star Trek* universe since *ST: The Next Generation*. It allowed the crew and passengers of spaceships to get a temporary respite from the tight corridors. In her book, Murray refers to a particular application of the holodeck. In *Star Trek: Voyager*, captain Kathryn Janeway enters a simulation where she plays the role of the heroine of a Victorian melodrama. She acts according to the rules of the genre, and the virtual environment adapts to her actions; at the same time, she is fully aware that she is taking part in something highly conventional (Murray, 1997, p. 24-25). It is similar not to watching a film or reading a novel, but rather performing in improvisational theatre or LARP. As the improvisation is controlled by a computer, it never loses its clear narrative structure – still not that impressive in comparison to *Hamlet*, but who knows what the future will bring.

Murray calls this form (in which an ordered narrative emerges from the participant's interaction with a virtual world reacting to her actions)

cyberdrama (Murray, 1997, p. 271); seven years later she will point out *The Sims* as one of the most interesting embodiment of the idea (Murray, 2004, p. 5). The game (in which the player observes and, to a certain extent, guides the interaction of AI-driven characters living in a small neighbourhood) can be regarded a plot generator, creating narratives on the basis of the shifting relationships between the characters, whose actions are determined both by the player and computer algorithms. Even though the term "cyberdrama" clearly refers to drama, Murray refers predominantly to examples drawn from film (some crucial arguments are based on *Casablanca*) and a number of TV series. More substantial links between her thought and classic drama appear in the work of researcher and game designer Michael Mateas (2004, p. 20), who mentions Brenda Laurel, the author of *Computers as Theatre*, as an important precursor of the idea of cyberdrama. Laurel suggests that Aristotle's *Poetics* should serve as an inspiration for interface design, so that each user experience could take the form of a distinct dramatic structure, with a clearly determined beginning, middle and ending (Laurel, 2013, p. 79-95). Together with Andrew Stern, Mateas created the experimental game *Façade*, in which the player enters the role of a guest visiting a conflicted couple. The point of departure is clearly reminiscent of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and the game itself is like a chamber play, taking place in the small space of the couple's flat. The player enjoys complete freedom, and the characters dynamically react to her actions and words, and the narrative engine of the game constantly adjusts the plot, so that the final result could be an ordered story with a distinct ending. Mateas and Stern dreamed of a program generating (together with the player) a plot whose structure would be based on a variant of Aristotle's theory from *Poetics*, taking into account the player's actions (Mateas, 2004, pp. 19-23).

Dreams of creating a digital Sophocles or Shakespeare have long been an

important element of the development of video games. Emphasising the role of a well-constructed plot, which could compete with film, television or literature, often became a key argument in building the cultural prestige of video games. Serious research on video games started with Mary Ann Buckles' PhD thesis which juxtaposed the interactive fiction game *Adventure* with Vladimir Propp's work on the folk tale. The authors of the earliest articles on games in academic journals also looked at the subject in the context of the narrative arts – this was the case with Niesz, Holland 1984 (introducing into the humanities the still functioning term "interactive fiction") or Costanzo, 1986 (viewing text adventure games as a new narrative literary genre). Infocom, a company specialising in text adventures, sold its games not only in computer stores, but also in bookshops. Well-known authors were sometimes hired as game writers – Robert Pinsky co-created *Mindwheel* (1984), and Thomas M. Disch wrote the text for *Amnesia* (1986). The narrative aspect developed more dynamically in adventure games (originally text-based, and later – starting with Sierra-On-Line's breakthrough *King's Quest* from 1984 – showing the gameworld by means of animated graphics). However, other genres, where the plot played a secondary role, gradually enhanced their narrative layer, first through a short backstory in the physical documentation of the game, and later through more and more complex cutscenes, giving a narrative context to the players' actions. As the computers and consoles grew more powerful in terms of graphics, games started to refer to film, using its narrative devices. The narrative became a favourite catchprase not only for researchers, but also game developers – today, "storytelling" is one of the most common words used in promoting digital culture products (from various apps, through social media, to games), and video games are particularly adept at telling stories.

The rapid development of the narrative layer of video games, as well as the attention of such researchers as Laurel or Murray, led to the famous conflict known today as the debate between the narratologists and ludologists. In 2001, Markku Eskelinen complained that when "[…] when games and especially computer games are studied and theorized they are almost without exception colonised from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies. Games are seen as interactive narratives, procedural stories or remediated cinema" (Eskelinen, 2001). The ludologist camp (including Eskelinen, Gonzalo Frasca or Jesper Juul) pointed out that games are first and foremost complex rule-based systems, and presenting them in terms of the narrative arts moves us away from their essence. This essence often runs contrary to a structured plot, because it assumes the player's freedom of action, which can make the situations emerging within the game evolve in various directions, not only in ways imposed by the designers. Of course, there are also a lot of games where the narrative aspect is nonexistent or purely decorative, with no impact on the gameplay.

The dispute ended with a series of conciliatory articles (such as Gonzalo Frasca's *Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place*) – the two rivaling camps disappeared, and what remained was a deeper awareness of the fact that there are numerous features specific to games which resist classic narrative devices. One of the more interesting voices looking for a common denominator linking games and narratives is Henry Jenkins' *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, where the author points out a vital connection between narrative and organisation of space in video games: "The organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds" in such a way that some places will contain obstacles stopping the player, and others will give specific affordances, allowing them to progress (Jenkins, 2003). Thus, the plot

becomes encoded in the game space, and the narrative emerges during the traversal from a clearly defined beginning to the goal, like in classic spatial stories, starting with the *Odyssey*. It is one more variant of the dream of a system which collaborates with the player in creating varied, but properly structured plots – within the large game space, the player can act freely, so the playthrough will be different each time, but in specific places she will have to deal with specific challenges, and the affordances created by the designers point at specific ways of overcoming these challenges.

Michael Nitsche points out that games are based on a strong connection between time and space, similar to the one present in architecture – the user is able to experience the space only in fragments, which change as she traverses it, i.e. in time (Nitsche, 2007, p. 147). Building spatial and temporal axes for the player may therefore mean building a specific narrative, consisting of events situated along the axes. Such trails are easiest to construct in closed spaces, where the walls allow the designer to control the player character's movement. The more freedom of movement, the more difficult it is to keep control of the plot. It is the most difficult in a vast landscape, where the player can roam wherever she wants.

As the computers and consoles became more powerful, the designers of many narrative games created larger and larger settings. It is the most visible in RPGs, such as *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* or *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and action games with a clearly delineated plot, such as the *Grand Theft Auto*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *Assassin's Creed* franchises. In earlier 3D games it was necessary to reduce the number of elements displayed on the screen for technical reasons, for example by covering them with walls, darkness or dense fog. New technical solutions gave the designers the opportunity to display vast landscapes, where even the most distant objects

are visible (a tendency particularly visible since the release of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* in 2006), but then the landscape often proved to overwhelm the characters acting within it, and the story emerging from these actions.

Writing about the role of landscape in Gertrude Stein's work, Linda Voris refers to the tradition of spectacular illusionist theatre, whose development initially weakened the impact of individual characters, less and less visible in the complex stage design, and ultimately led to the creation of dioramas – a form in which the characters simply disappeared (Voris, 2016, pp. xix-xx). It can be said that many designers of video games and virtual spaces are in a similar position. However, landscape does not have to be viewed as a problem – for Gertrude Stein it was a way out of the crisis of the traditional dramatic forms. Some of her thoughts about the relationship between stories and landscapes resonate with the way the issue of landscape is handled in video games.

In her lecture *Plays*, delivered in New York in 1934, Getrude Stein describes the reasons for which theatre makes her "nervous". The most important one is the lack of synchronisation of the viewers' emotions with what is happening on the stage. The emotions always either move ahead of the scene, or cannot catch up with it. The time of the performance runs at a different pace from the time of the audience – a shift which Stein compares to syncopation in music (Stein, 1995, pp. xxx-xxxi). This approach to the theatre, focusing on the relationship between the emotions and perceptions which give rise to them, may result from the fact that Stein's thinking was largely shaped by William James, who perceived emotions as the result of specific physiological phenomena, which in turn followed the perception of facts causing them (Frank, 2015, p. 100). In everyday exciting situations, the

movement between these stages is instantaneous. In theatre – it can be much less obvious.

The reasons for this lack of synchronization are varied – Stein puts a special emphasis on the question of the viewer's acquaintance with the characters (Stein, 1995, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii). She compares theatre to life and literature, showing how different it is in terms of such acquaintance. In exciting situations we experience personally, one usually knows the most important participants, and perceive the situation as exceptional precisely because one knows them – and sees they are behaving in unusual ways (Stein, 1995, p. xxxvi). Reading a play, the reader becomes acquainted with the characters in a longer process, and when they get confused, they can always go back to an earlier fragment or the list of characters (Stein, 1995, p. xxxviii), all of which allows to get through the process of remembering and getting to know characters at one's own pace. The constant returning to the list did not mean that Stein found plays with a large cast problematic – on the contrary, she recalls rereading Shakespeare's *Henry VI* numerous times with pleasure, because "there were so many characters and there were so many little bits in it that were lively words" (Stein, 1995, p. xxxix). Therefore, the problem lies not in the complexity, but in the conditions in which we get acquainted with it. In the theatre it is difficult to find time for this task, because one has to focus on too many things: "it was a matter of both seeing and of hearing were clothes, voices, what they the actors said, how they were dressed and how that related itself to their moving around" (Stein, 1995, p. xli). Moreover, the performance is over too quickly – when reading, one can return to earlier parts of the text, which is impossible in the theatre (Stein, 1995, p. xli). In Stein's childhood memories of her contact with the theatre referred to in *Plays*, she never remembers entire performances, but discrete details – a specific escape scene from a stage version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

or the way Edwin Booth as Hamlet lay down at Gertrude's feet. At the age of sixteen, Stein experienced some relief – and an awareness that a different kind of theatrical experience is also possible – watching Sarah Bernhardt guest performance in San Francisco. She remembers it as follows: "I knew a little french of course but really it did not matter, it was all so foreign and her voice being so varied and it all being so French I could rest in it untroubled. And I did" (Stein, 1995, s. xlii). The performance was „a thing in itself and it existed in and for itself as the poetica plays had that I used so much to read, there were s omany characters just as there were in those plays and you did not have to know them they were so foreign […]. It was for me a very simple direct and moving pleasure" (Stein, 1995, p. xlii).

At a first glance, Stein moves away from understanding the performance, starting with the level of language, the most basic one for many of her contemporaries. The fact that Bernhardt speaks a language the American teenager barely understands, encourages the girl to stop trying to understand what the actors are talking about. Her reception focuses not on the unfolding plot, explained by the characters' speeches, but on the moment-to-moment experience. It is one of the patterns that will determine the course of Stein's later plays. The departure from understanding is only apparent – Linda Voris proves that Stein's works feature a different kind of epistemology. It does not look for referents for signs, but rather for relationships between elements of equal status – here, Stein clearly follows the empiricism advocated by her teacher, William James (Voris, 2016, p. xxxvi). James distinguished two kinds of knowledge – knowledge by acquaintance, i.e. direct experience of a given phenomenon in all its complexity, and knowledge about, derived from information on the phenomenon (Gutowski, 2011, p. 173); cognition in Stein's works has more

in common with acquaintance. In *Plays*, she explains the bases of her thinking through a reference to the landscape she saw through the window of her home in Bilignin: „I felt if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it but it does not with you, it is there […]" (Stein, 1995, p. xlvi). The landscape does not impose a pace at which one makes acquaintance with it (the word choice clearly refers to James) – it's simply there, waiting for free exploration, whose course is determined by the observer, paying attention to the relationship „trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other". For Stein, such a form is more general than a traditionally understood story: "the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway" (Stein, 1995, p. xlvii). The story can also be viewed through the focus of landscape, whose elements are present at once, in the present. Stein recalls the display window of a Parisian photographer's shop, where she saw a sequence of photos documenting the transformation of young women into nuns (Stein, 1995, p. li). She used this idea in *Four Saints*, featuring a vision of a similar series of photos of St. Theresa (Bay-Cheng 2003, p. 58). When the subsequent stages of a story are put next to each other, they all exist at once, and the relationships between them unfold not in time, but in space.

This way of thinking formed the basis of a number of Stein's plays, starting with *Lend a Hand or Four Religions* (1922). The first part of this play contains an unclear description of a situation – a woman kneels by a stream and sees somebody approaching. The characters (if the word can be used in the case of this text) – the eponymous four religions - take turns speaking about her. Each time they repeat more or less the same information, but

every now and then a new layer appears – the origin and religious beliefs (she is a Chinese Christian), her plans for the future (furnishing her home), the grass growing in the area… The text builds the impression of an image that does not change, but gradually grows.

For Stein, landscape is a model for the text, and in video games it is often the most important way of showing the virtual world. It definitely is a significant difference, but for our purposes the most important fact is that vast landscapes in games encourage (and sometimes indeed force) the players to traverse the game world like a reader, listener or viewer traverses Stein's texts – meandering, examining the relationships between elements at their own pace, exploring unknown trails.

In the first scene of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* the protagonist, a young man by the name of Link, stands at the edge of a grassy cliff and looks at the boundless space unfolding before him. Wandering across this space will constitute most of the gameplay, sometimes reminiscent of an orienteering exercise. In the distance, Link can see a huge castle, a smoking volcano and two peaks separated by a ravine, so that the whole makes the impression of a mountain cut in two. All these landmarks will not only help in finding the way, but also serve as places crucial for plot development. It is a common device in video game openings: showing a place which the player is supposed to reach in the end. In the experimental narrative game *Dear Esther*, the protagonist explores a dreamlike space built partly from landscapes reminiscent of the Scottish Hebrides, and partly from his own traumatic memories he is trying to cope with. In the first scene he sees a red light blinking from the top of a tower he will climb in the final scene, where he will remember all the details of what happened to him. At the beginning of *Fallout 3*, an RPG showing the United States after a disastrous nuclear

conflict, the player character emerges from a fallout shelter purposely placed on a mountain in order to provide an unobstructed view at the distant ruins of the Capitol and the Washington obelisk towering over the skyline – this is where the ending of the game will unfold. The emotional image of the ruined US capital is on the one hand a point of departure, showing the dismal reality of the game world, and on the other – the promise of a spectacular ending. In *Journey*, a poetic metaphor of life, filled with Buddhist symbolism, the landscape in the opening scene lies at the foot of an enormous mountain with a luminous summit, which the player character will ultimately climb – and which will serve as a landmark directing the player for almost the whole of the game. In all these examples, the point in which the story begins offers a good view on the inevitable ending. In *Dear Esther* and *Journey*, the route of traversal is strictly determined by means of subsequent challenges and landmarks. It's a very common practice – even though large spaces give a feeling of total freedom, designers fill them with tasks whose stages are placed in such a way as to determine specific routes for the player character (Burgess, 2017, p. 259).

Such solutions are not limited to games – the appear in various kinds of virtual spaces, also those present in the theatre. It was the way taken by Dream Adoption Society, directed by Krzysztof Garbaczewski in the performance *Nietota*, based on fragments from Tadeusz Miciński's experimental mystical novel (Teatr Powszechny, Wasraw, 2018). Parts of the performance take place in virtual reality – the audience put on VR goggles and enter a digital, psychedelic vision of the Tatra Mountains based on Miciński's text. They find themselves in a large open space which they can freely explore by jumping (with each shake of the the goggles, the viewer's avatar moves forward). There are a lot of landmarks – houses, trees, a stone circle not unlike Stonehenge, a giant spiral path going up, towards the sky,

or a chapel embedded in the rocks. In order to prevent feelings of confusion among the viewers, the performance features a guiding narrator, whose voice directs the audience along a particular route, explaining the sights. The viewers are encouraged to follow a trail of totems. The guided tour is not obligatory, but the narration accompanies also those who choose to follow their own path. It is understandable – for many viewers this can be their first exploration of such a space. At the same time, it can be felt that the guide's narration and the vastness of the space are somehow at odds. A viewer following the guide is unable to grasp all the environmental details. They have to become acquainted with them at a pace that is imposed on them from the outside. They can feel the kind of anxiety Stein describes in *Plays* – the audience's emotions are not always synchronized with the course of the performance. It is similar to the experiences of a player in a game from the *Assassin's Creed*franchise, exploring an immense, meticulously detailed reconstruction of ancient Athens or Alexandria, but instead of being able to focus on the environment, they have to follow the trail of tasks and challenges planned by the designers.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild chooses a different strategy. After completing some initial tasks meant to familiarize with the most important gameplay mechanics, the players are given access to all the important landmarks – they are within their range of view and walking distance. The game world is built in a way that makes them visible from most locations. It is enough to climb a suitably high vantage point. These include not only higher hills or mountains, but also huge towers scattered over the area, allowing the player to freely examine the landscape. What is more, the game lacks natural barriers, such as mountains too steep to climb – here, with a bit of ingenuity and determination, it is possible to reach almost any spot. In

such an environment, it is much more difficult to present a linear, ordered narrative – it is built in such a way that it constantly reminds of the freedom of movement and places the player character has already visited or means to visit. The plot of the game is constructed out of discrete episodes which can be experienced in any order or skipped altogether – their aim is to increase the player's chances in the final confrontation with a powerful enemy. Each of the episodes is strongly linked to a specific place, so discovering the plot is strictly connected to spatial exploration. Building a network of relationships "trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other" is something natural in *Breath of the Wild* – climbing another vantage point, the player immediately looks for others they have already visited. The progress in the game is not as much about the fragments of the narrative the player has experienced, but recognizing more and more places visible in the distance (sometimes – but not always – tied to the narrative). The game often helps – some of the buildings the player character has visited change their colour from red to blue, and thus become a visible reminder of the earlier stages of the journey. Their constant presence in the field of view results in a different perception of the plot – instead of viewing it diachronically, the player can think about it in synchronic terms, like the series of photographs mention by Stein in *Plays*. The atomisation of the elements of the plot and the reduction of their importance are particularly visible in *Breath of the Wild*, but the issue of the blurring of the plotline within a vast landscape is a problem for all designers making games set in large three-dimensional spaces. Instead of trying to overcome it, the designers of *Breath of the Wild* decided to use it in creative ways. Like in Stein's writing, instead of linear progress, the game builds the impression of a gradual growth of subsequent layers of the landscape – it gains new meanings and reminds of places already visited.

The landscape leads to an emancipation of the present. It no longer plays the role of a link between the past and the future, a transient stage of the process of getting acquainted with the characters and the plot. It becomes a dominating element, which not as much connects the past and the future, as contains them. Thus, it allows the viewer (or player) to focus on the here and now, on the continuous present. Stein introduces the terms “prolonged present” and “continuous present” in her lecture *Composition as Explanation* (1927). In them, she sees the principle organizing her earlier works, such as *Melanctha* or *The Making of Americans*. Ulla Dydo suggests that the emphasis on the present could be linked to the experience of the First World War, disrupting the normal functioning of time – after such an ordeal one can be no longer sure of the future, and thus has to focus on the present (Dydo, 2003, p. 95).

As Dydo notes, one of the ways that Stein consistently employs in order to achieve the effect of the continuous present is “beginning again and again” , visible in all of her work (Dydo, 2003, p. 95). Her texts base on cyclical repetitions of words and phrases, even though, as Stein insists, repeated words are never identical to those said earlier (for a broader discussion of this uniqueness of each repetition in Stein’s work cf. Lorange, 2014, pp. 206-222). Each iteration is different, maybe because, like in the description of the young woman in *Four Religions*, in enriches the repeated fragment with some new information, rearranges the words or simply works differently from what came before by virtue of being a repetition. In Stein’s texts it is the words that are repeated, but Robert Wilson, a great enthusiast of her work, showed how to translate this device into stage action. Even though *Einstein on the Beach* does not use Stein’s texts directly, it is a model embodiment of her idea of the continuous present. Wilson neutralises the passage of time, building repetitions in many different spheres, on many

different scales. What is repeated are not just the words or phrases, but also gestures and choreography. Subjects and stage design from earlier scenes also recur. Like in Stein's vision, these repetitions are not identical – the performance plays with combinatorics and links the previously used elements in all possible configurations, just like Stein liked to check the number of ways in which the words of a recently written phrase could be recombined.

The principle of "beginning again and again" has been natural for games ever since their beginnings. The first text adventure games (one of the earliest genres of digital literature, which gained immense popularity at American universities in the early 1970s) did not allow to save the game state, so the players had to start from scratch every time they played, trying to avoid the hazards that ended their previous session. The narrative took shape in layers, with each subsequent attempt – these layers were very similar to each other, but differed at crucial points, where the players took different decisions – a process surprisingly similar to Stein's technique of building and developing her textual landscapes by layering repetitive descriptions. Repetition was also the basis of game arcades, key for the early history of interactive entertainment. Arcade games were relatively short, but very difficult, so the players had to make numerous attempts at completing them (and each attempt meant another coin left in the game cabinet). For the layperson each subsequent playthrough appeared similar, but the connoisseurs saw the differences determining the victory or failure.

Repetition in games is often linked to the necessity to overcome difficult challenges, requiring at least several attempts. Failure usually means returning to an earlier stage – an interesting example of rupturing the temporal continuity of the events unfolding within the game world. Jesper

Juul proposed fundamental division into play time and event time. The former refers to the time spent by the player on playing the game, and the latter – to the time that passes within the game world (Juul 2004, p. 138). In a more traditional view, failed attempts belong to play time, but not to event time. However, there are also different approaches. In *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* the protagonist also serves as the narrator, telling the story of his past exploits. When the player fails, the narrator says that the *actual* story was different. This attempt at merging play time and event time results in a very complex, diverse and multi-layered temporal structure (the protagonist recalls his past experiences, including the narrative dead ends, and the player is able to slow down and turn back time – cf. Hanson, 2018, p. 152).

In *Dark Souls*, a series of games famous for the high level of difficulty, the protagonist belongs to the caste of the undead. They cannot die – when they do, they are reborn at one of the campfires scattered around the game world. The sinister, Gothic world of *Dark Souls* is based on a similar principle – it is imprisoned in a cycle in which a magical fire directing the course of the world, which strengthens and wanes. In the game world, this form of immortality is consider a curse rather than a blessing. The undead are doomed to an incessant cycle of deaths and resurrection, and every time they go back to a specific moment in time, so that the enemies they have already defeated reappear in the same places. Thanks to the in-game explanation of this process of repetition, game time involving failure is included in event time. In early video games, repetition stemmed from the necessity to start all over again. Later, with the possibility of saving game states, the experience of playing became much more fragmentary and mosaiclike – one could play in smaller sessions, testing different approaches,

returning to earlier saved games in case of failure. This changed the aesthetics of the games and the experience of playing – breaking the uniform playthrough into fragments moving in different directions can be compared to the changes in painting effectuated by cubism, a great inspiration for Stein's fragmentary writing. *Dark Souls* and its imitators do not treat these changes as a mere side effect of the idea of saving the game state, but also try to thematize the resulting structure and incorporate the instances of branching and repetition into the overall flow of the game.

The action of fighting is, of course, also repetitive. *Dark Souls* features a large, but ultimately limited number of opponents who can be defeated by means of a limited set of movements. The essence of the gameplay is not that each confrontation is very different from the previous one, but in the varied ways of combining the elements of a limited arsenal of moves and opponents. The fighting mechanics and enemy behaviour are interesting enough to allow the player to find pleasure in discovering different possibilities of acting in the same places, with the same moves used against the same opponents. This combinatorial pleasure is typical of video games, where good design relies on the ability to create the largest possible variety by means of minimalist, repetitive means. Another parallel could be drawn between this use of repetition and the way in which Stein uses it in her texts.

In video games, repetition can also carry complex meanings. Porpentine is one of the leading designers working in Twine – a simple tool for text game creation, which became the main form of expression for queer designers in the early 2010s. Porpentine's games use repetition and loops to build images of confinement. In *Howling Dogs* the player character is imprisoned in a cell, and the rhythm of her life is determined by everyday actions, such as washing or eating. Their monotony is interspersed with surrealist,

transgressive visions experienced by the protagonist in virtual reality – their leading motif is escape, be it from an abusive partner or from rules ordering women's lives. After each such vision, the protagonist returns to her gradually deteriorating cell. The confinement can also be metaphorical – the protagonist of *With Those We Love Alive* is imprisoned in a web of complex rituals she is involved in as a craftswoman at the court of a monstrous insect empress. The monotony of the passing days is sometimes broken by the empress's orders or increasingly disturbing national holidays. The empress molts and the protagonist also changes her body – she takes hormone medication and tattoos her body (the players are also encouraged to mark their bodies, e.g. with felt-tip pens). Both games rely on minimal, sometimes hardly visible differences between the following days. The rhythm of action is determined not by the plot, but by the basic actions concerning the needs of the body – eating, drinking and hygiene in *Howling Dogs* or hormone therapy in *With Those We Love Alive*. In both games Porpentine refers to her experience as a trans woman, but here they are a point of reference form common experiences of our bodies, responsible for our simplest and most direct experience of repetition.

Stein's texts always focus on the here and now. Even though in their repetitiveness they return to earlier fragments, they do so not in order to look back, but rather to build, like a playing child, new buildings from the same blocks. A more and more complex textual universe grows around simple actions (playing with merging or intertwining meanings; using words in new contexts)– not through linear progress, but because thanks to the repetitions the reader has more opportunities to examine it. Video games – even the narrative ones – do not grow out of complex, structured stories. On the contrary – everything starts with a simple action, with play, basic mechanics around which the world of the game grows. This is a description

of designing games, but also playing them – and play in general. Stein was one of the foremost experts on sometimes humorous, and sometimes dead serious play.

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