eludamos
Journal for Computer Game Culture
Vol. 16, No. 2 (2025)

eludamos.org

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Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture
Volume 16, issue 2 (2025), pp. 95–116

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Abstract

This article examines a particular relationship between game authors and players: the possibility for game authors to co-opt the role of players in the very game they created. Among the various ways in which this can occur, the article concentrates on 'antagonistic game design': the creation of games meant to frustrate and provoke their players. Player engagement, I argue, does not solely arise from the pleasure of overcoming in-game obstacles, participating in the unfolding of the game's narrative or defeating other players, but can also emerge from resisting and opposing an imagined persona: the off-putting and often sadistic (implied) author behind the work. By projecting an unsympathetic and adversarial attitude towards players, antagonistically designed games can establish an asynchronous adversarial relationship with them and foster distinctive avenues for meaning-making and the self-validation of players.

Keywords

Game design; game authorship; implied game designer; play; antagonistic game design; literary theory; aesthetics; player motivation; Bernard Suits; Eugen Fink

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The following text examines game authors and their possibility to intentionally antagonize their audience. Aligning with perspectives emerging from disciplines such as the philosophy of art, I will discuss authorship as a condition that depends on two key requirements: (1) the deliberate production of certain aesthetic effects, and (2) the voluntary participation in the creative processes intended to give rise to those effects (Anscomb, 2022).[1]

[1] In the case of game authorship, and specifically in the context of large commercial game development enterprises, Gualeni et al. argued elsewhere that authorship could be understood as an obsolete analytical category (Gualeni et al., 2019). Our point is that, in those kinds of productions, the possibility to attribute definite creative responsibilities is effectively 'engineered away' during its ramified and distributed production processes (see Jennings, 2016). For game releases by independent developers (and for digital games of any size that are

Eludamos Vol. 16, No. 2 (2025), pp. 95–116
https://doi.org/10.7557/ejcgc.v16i2.8040

The article begins by highlighting the possibilities for players to co-opt authorial roles in their relationships with a game. Through those possibilities, players can claim various degrees of creative responsibility over their own performance and, potentially, the configuration of the game itself (for example, by proposing custom rulesets or designing new levels). In the third section of this article, I argue that the conceptual boundary between producing and consuming playful experiences—between creating and playing a game—can be transgressed in both directions. Not only can players, to varying degrees, take on co-authorial responsibilities in a game, but game authors can also find ways to co-opt the role of players within their ludic creations. From this point in the discussion, the idea that game authors can also be players in their own games becomes central to the article's argument, and foundational to understanding the main contribution of this article: the concept of antagonistic game design. One notable way in which authors can traverse the conceptual boundary separating them from their audience consists in creating playful experiences that oppose the players' immediate interests and desires, and by projecting deliberately frustrating and even sadistic intentions.

While at the beginning of the article my perspective on in-game authorship largely relies on the fairly classical understanding of authorship presented above, the sections of this article that focus more specifically on antagonistic game design adopt a different approach. In those discussions I draw, instead, on the notion of the game's author understood as a fictional figure inferred by the player, that is on what Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni (2020) describe as the "implied (game) designer". Their paper defines the *implied game designer* as:

> the conceptualization of a designer that the player constructs on the basis of their dynamic interpretation of the game (understood widely, together with its paraludic elements, including marketing material). To this inferred figure, the player ascribes all those intentions that they think lie at the basis of the creation of the game in question. (2020, p. 3)

By examining both how games can both motivate and discourage players by annoying and provoking them, this article presents antagonism as a dimension of the aesthetic relationship between game authors and players, articulating this idea through theoretical analysis, illustrative examples, and critical engagement with existing scholarship.

characterized by an identifiable creative vision whose attribution is not ambiguous), instead, the understanding of authorship proposed above can still be considered a useful and relatively unambiguous way of framing creative responsibility that can be helpful when analysing and referencing games.

Players as co-authors

Fully accessing and appreciating the contents of playable media such as board games, videogames, physical puzzles, interactive visual novels and choose-your-own-adventure books, requires non-trivial modes of engagement on the part of their audience (Aarseth, 1997, pp. 1–2; Calleja, 2011, p. 55). In the scholarly field of game studies, player agency is typically considered to be a central factor in how the artefacts we refer to as 'games' are designed and intended to be experienced (see, among others, Nguyen, 2020 and Bódi, 2023). From this perspective, playing is often compared to a creative performance whose meaning emerges from the dynamic interplay (or the *cybernetic intercourse*, as Aarseth (1997) puts it) between a playable artefact and its players.

In media studies and game studies, the performativity that characterizes the audiences' relationship with games is not only key to unpacking their roles and responsibilities when engaging with interactive works and their contents. It is also crucial to how those disciplines frame ideas such as those of creative responsibility and authorship. In relation to how games and videogames afford and disclose various kinds of player agency, it is important to emphasize that *not* every choice or action taken by the player can be fully anticipated and regulated by the authors of a playable artefact. Game scholar Cindy Poremba (2003, p. 5) showed that the performative possibilities of players can extend beyond what the game author (whom she identifies as the game designer) intended to be desirable or even possible during gameplay. Inventively expressing themselves within a gameworld, finding ways to step outside of its boundaries or triggering perplexing glitches are, according to Poremba (2003, p. 5), some of the most obvious ways in which players can claim various degrees of creative responsibility over the playful experience. The fact that recent game titles are often released together with production tools and level editors[2] has similarly been discussed as indicative of a desire on the part of the playing audience to "break down the strict and counterproductive barriers between consumers and designers" (Fisher, 2002). In this context, it is relevant to briefly discuss the emergence of 'folk practices' within player communities, that is, expressive uses of game artefacts that have prompted several researchers to describe the conceptual and practical boundaries between developers and users as flexible and porous (see Aarseth, 1997; Pearce, 2002; Poremba, 2003; Lopes et al., 2018, Gualeni, 2018; Gualeni & Vella, 2020). Among these folk practices, particularly relevant to discuss is that of *modding*, where players use (or even develop from scratch) digital tools that allow them to modify and extend the contents of an already released videogame. Modding is not exclusive to digital games, but is also common in tabletop and role-playing

[2] A number of contemporary videogames offer their players creative tools to modify and extend the game in question. Among the most notorious titles natively featuring level-editing and rule-customization tools are videogames such as *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule, 2008), *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Sora, 2018).

games, where the community of players devises alternative rulesets or propose 'house rules' that give rise to different gameplay situations (see Engelstein, 2020).

Another illustrative practice that is relevant to examine in relation to creative responsibility in ludic practices, is the possibility for players to 'style' their in-game behaviour (see Parker, 2011; Nguyen, 2020). 'Playing with style' means to act under self-imposed rules that further restrict the already limited horizon of agency proposed by a game artefact. From the player's perspective, playing with style means to convert gameplay habits into conscious aesthetic decisions (Nguyen, 2020). Through acts of self-styling, players can decide to disregard some of the possibilities for acting in the gameworld and, potentially, towards other players. In other words, players can give themselves the freedom to perform sub-optimally and ignore the achievement of extrinsically set objectives to, instead, fashion their digital experiences in accordance to self-enforced principles and codes of conduct. These self-imposed constraints typically make gameplay harder and more laborious for self-styling players, but at the same time constitute an occasion for them to assert greater agency over their behaviours and aspirations within a gameworld (Vella & Gualeni, 2019; Gualeni & Vella, 2020, pp. 18–19)[3].

This brief overview of how players can creatively appropriate gameplay pursued two methodological objectives. On the one hand, it introduced some of the difficulties of attributing creative responsibility over interactive performances. On the other hand, it highlighted the idea that authorship in games is mostly—if not exclusively—discussed as ambiguous and contested 'space' due to the emergence subversive kind of plays. At this point in my argument, it is important to note that existing literature on the notion of co-authorship in interactive performances solely focus on players who—constrained by rules, arbitrary criteria for success and scripted narratives—subvert conventional play in pursuit of a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility. In contrast, this article argues that the conceptual boundary between producing and consuming playful experiences—between making and playing games—can be crossed in both directions: players may take on authorial roles, and authors may, in turn, become players within the very games they have created. Focusing on this latter possibility, the next section introduces two philosophical theories that shine a

[3] Intentionally stylized forms of player agency can be recognized, for example, in acts of in-game sportsmanship, such as when a player chooses not to exploit an obvious advantage over an opponent who—due to bad luck or inexperience—has no viable moves (e.g., being cornered in a fighting game). More subversive forms of self-styling appear in ludic practices such as 'pacifist runs' (i.e., playing survival, combat-themed, or adventure games while using as little violence as possible) and 'vegan runs', where players avoid in-game actions that harm sentient species (e.g., attacking creatures unprovoked or using animal products as food or equipment in game; see Westerlaken, 2017). Also notable are 'permadeath runs', which are played under the self-imposed restriction of restarting the game from the beginning after each in-game death.

light on how game authors can plausibly be recognized as participants in their own ludic creations.

Games authors play

In his 1958 essay titled 'Oasis of Happiness: Towards an Ontology of Play', German philosopher Eugen Fink (1905–1975) argues that the creator of a game can indeed also be a player within the same game. He illustrates this point in his argument with the example of a young girl playing with a doll. Through the act of playing, according to the German philosopher, the young girl imaginatively produces a fictional world —a play-world—in which the doll become a proxy for a child (Fink, 2015, pp. 24–25). Playing the mother, Fink explains, does not only have a transformative effect on the lifeless doll that imaginatively becomes a child: in this process of make-believe, the young girl herself takes on the fictional role of the child's mother. The role of the mother is distinct from the girl's actual self, who, in the philosopher's example, does not have children of her own and does not actually take part in activities related to rearing and feeding. In this act of play, Fink recognizes two overlapping roles for the young girl: she is at once the creator of the playworld and a player within the play-world itself.

Over twenty after the publication of Fink's 'Oasis of Happiness', another philosopher reflected on the possibility for the creator of a gameworld to participate in it as a player. I am talking about the American Bernard H. Suits (1925–2007), a familiar figure in game studies as the author of *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (2014), a book that is widely considered one of the early, foundational texts in our field. In it, the American philosopher famously defines a game as an autotelic activity bound by a particular set of rules. Those rules, Suits explains, are devised to give rise to specific difficulties (i.e., specific kinds of inefficiency) in the players' pursuit of certain (prelusory) established goals (2014, pp. 24–25).

Adopting Suits's definition, one could object that the equipment and the playful activity described in Fink's example do not technically constitute a game in the formal sense. Playing the fictional role of the mother can be indeed recognized as a voluntary, unserious mode of acting that the young girl undertakes because of its inherent pleasure. Playing the mother, however, is not an activity defined by prescribed goals that the girl must pursue in accordance to constitutive rules. In other word, the young girl can certainly be said to be playing, but just not a rule-bound and goal-oriented kind of game (i.e., a 'game' in the Suitsian sense). This is not to say that Fink's example is without value for the purposes of this text, or that it was misguided. I decided to mention Fink's theorization of the 'author as a player' because it presents an early account of how those two roles can overlap within interactive, narrative-focused experiences (a topic to which I will return later). To understand how authors and players might instead coexist within more formally structured play, it is useful to turn back to Suits.

Not long after publishing *The Grasshopper*, the American philosopher released an essay that has not, to this day, received the same scholarly attention and scrutiny as his magnum opus. In 'The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature' (1985), Suits argues that the author of literary fiction of the mystery genre deliberately invites the audience into a game-like situation, and he proposes a taxonomy of ways in which mystery fiction can legitimately (i.e., non-metaphorically) be considered a type of game (1985, p. 200). For a contemporary game scholar, the idea of classical, non-interactive literature being treated as a form of structured play might seem surprising. However, this perspective is far from unusual in literary theory: over the past two centuries, prominent critics such as Wolfgang Iser and Peter Hutchinson have frequently, and sometimes rather carelessly, drawn parallels between literary works and games.[4]

In the attempt to develop a nuanced and sound approach to the relationships between literature and games, Suits's 1985 paper focuses on short detective stories (i.e. five-minute mysteries) as a particularly playful literary form where the reader is prompted to solve a fictional case. In his text, Suits articulates an ambiguous role for the author of detective fiction, one that encompasses both the functions of a game author (or *gamewright*, to borrow Suits's words in the same essay) and that of a player of the same game. Having read that, one could object that the absence of explicit and agreed-upon objectives for the activity of reading mystery fiction (other than reading the text word by word to the very end) would automatically disqualify it from being considered a game under Suits's own definition. The objection is a valid one, I think. And so must have thought Suits himself as, in his text, he anticipated this potential criticism. In response to it, and too reconcile his ludic approach to detective stories with his definition of games, Suits makes a contrived conceptual move: he proposes to categorize detective fictions under a special and rare subcategory of games. He calls these ludic rarities 'two-move games,' and defines them as asymmetric playful activities that involve two players and only allow for two moves, one per playing side (1985, pp. 203–204). More specifically, Suits identifies the detective story as a two-move game where the implicit ludic goal of the reader is to

[4] For example, when commenting on Laurence Sterne's 1759 anti-novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Iser discusses Sterne's text as an "arena in which reader and author participate in a game of imagination" (Iser in Hutchinson, 1983, p. 22). Literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes famously stated that the reader 'plays' the text both as one 'plays' a game and as one 'plays' an instrument, insisting on the idea that reading is itself a performative act, a creative process (Barthes, 1977, p. 162). Within this tradition, the work of Peter Hutchinson is particularly interesting for the scopes of this article. One of the central themes of Hutchinson's scholarly production is literary play, a notion that encompasses both playful writing and the possibility of ludic relationships between author and reader. His 1983 book titled *Games Authors Play* in particular focuses on literary play and the playful use of literary devices such as narrative unreliability, adumbration, enigma, allusion, and parody. On these topics, also see Turchi (2014, pp. 52–53).

'outmanoeuvre the authors' by solving the mystery before the fictional detective does (1985, pp. 203–204).

I earlier qualified this conceptual move of Suits as contrived. Presenting mystery stories as two-move games could indeed be deemed a convenient ad-hoc categorization. After all, Suits himself acknowledges that this kind of game is very uncommon. So uncommon, in fact, that the American philosophers cannot invoke other examples of such games in his essay. To illustrate his point, the Suits refers, instead, to specific phases of popular sports such as pitching in baseball, where the pitcher and the batter temporarily engage in an asymmetrical two-move game (one could also think of penalty shooting in soccer, in case that works as a more familiar example). Similarly, he argues, the gamewright and the reader of a detective novel can be framed as players competing in a two-move game: the former as the pitcher of a puzzle in the guise of literary fiction, and the latter swinging the metaphorical bat.

Reacting against this idea of Suits, one could object that the author does not actually take the role of a player in a detective story, since the author is not striving to accomplish established prelusory goals.[5] Without agreed-upon success criteria for the activity of writing mystery fiction, how can the author of a detective story ever be considered a player, let alone an adversary? The idea that a reader might 'win' this implicit 'game' when they get to the bottom of a case before the text lays it down for them rests on some of the aesthetic conventions that characterize that particular literary genre, and not on a preludically established game goal. Wouldn't it be more reasonable, from this perspective, to see the authors as figures who are analogous to those of game designers (or game directors), and interpret their initial 'move' as the 'setup phase' of a puzzle of sorts, rather than a phase in a competitive game? And in case we were to adopt Suits's perspective, what would stop the audience from approaching every kind of creative work—and not only detective novels—as two-move games? Single-player videogames, for example, can also be approached as two-move games between the author and the player (i.e., as two-move metagames). As an example of this possibility of playing on two different layers, let us consider FromSoftware's popular action-adventure role-playing videogame *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022), a title notorious for the obscurity of its narrative and its punishing gameplay (see Figure 1). If we take Suits's argument at face value, when playing *Elden Ring* one does not simply imaginatively and interactively immerse oneself in the videogame's challenging and mysterious fantasy world, but also inevitably participates in a two-move (meta)game against the game's authors. To be more pre-

[5] According to Suits, however, one could see the attempt to satisfy the expectations of the readership as the implicit goals of a literary author. From that perspective, writing literary fiction is an activity that can be itself deemed a game of sorts. The authors of texts not only pursue specific goals, however implicitly stated, but also create their work under strict kinds of inefficiency. These restrictions, in the case of literary production, are not merely self-imposed by the authors themselves, but also depend on the genre conventions that authors might decide to adhere to (1985, pp. 201–202).

cise, as explained in the introduction, players do not actually entertain an antagonistic relationship with the authors of the game themselves, but rather against the sum of the creative intentions that they perceive to lie at the basis of the game (i.e., *implied game designer*; Van de Mosselaer & Gualeni, 2020).

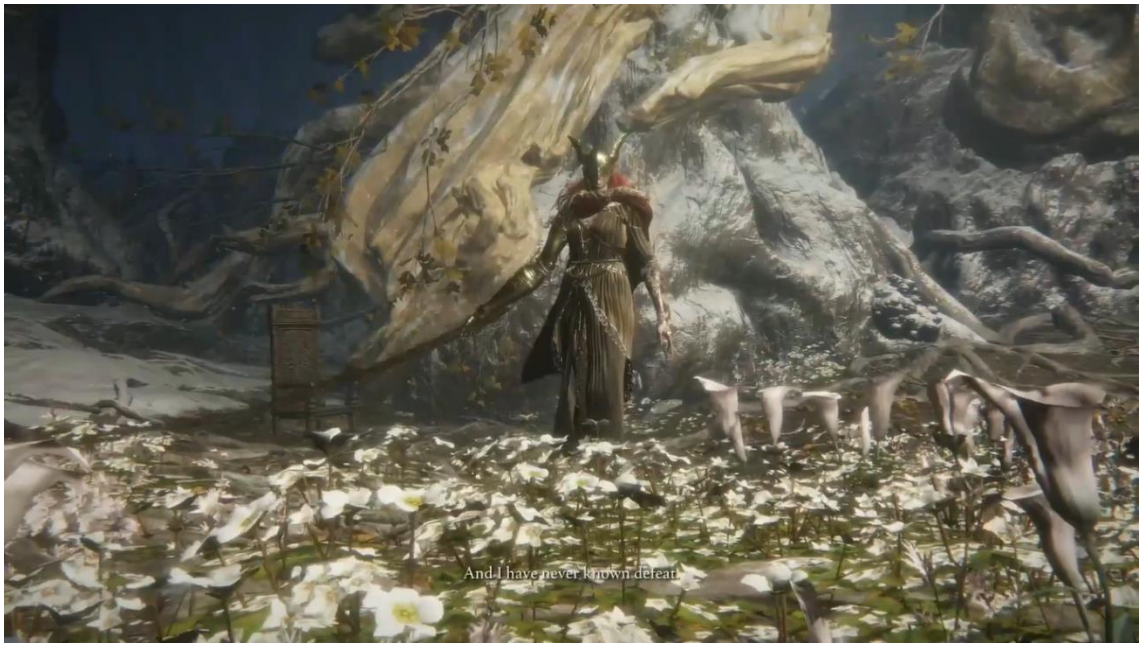

Figure 1. The beginning of the (optional) boss fight against Malenia in *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022), where she declares never having known defeat.

"You are not good enough to defeat this formidable adversary or to fully explore this treacherous dungeon", seems to be the message communicated by one's frequent in-game deaths in *Elden Ring*. When defeated by bosses such as Malenia (see Figure 1), the offhand and disparaging remarks they mutter often seem directed squarely at players. To examine this kind of deliberately unfriendly, antagonistic game design, the following sections draw on examples and theoretical insights that extend those of Fink and Suits, further exploring how the roles of game author and player can intersect and overlap.

Both flesh and not: The author as a player

The authors of a game can be considered players of their own ludic creations in several ways. The three categories that I present below do not aspire to form an exhaustive taxonomy of the possibility for authors to co-opt the role of players, but serve as reference points for introducing the kinds of adversarial relationships that game authors can project with their ludic creations. Authors of games can be plausibly considered players of those same games

CATEGORY 1 – when they succeed in abandoning their disenchanted, professional stance towards the game, and return to it with a playful attitude,

CATEGORY 2 – when they take on the role of one or more characters within the role-playing sessions they are officiating as gamemasters (GMs), or

CATEGORY 3 – when their game (and the game's paraludic materials like trailers and posters, for instance) manifest the authors' intention to tease and frustrate its players.

In the following sub-sections, I discuss each category in detail, clarifying the specific ways in which they contribute to the article's central themes.

CATEGORY 1: *Relinquishing their 'clinical gaze'*

Game testing is arguably a primary component of game development. It is an aspect of quality assurance that is specifically concerned with the operational functionality of game elements. Performing professional tasks related to game-testing during various phases of game development, the authors of a game do not interact with their creation in the enchanted and playful attitudes that can be expected from (ideal) players. The authors' in-game behaviours in the context of game-testing do not serve amusement or narrative purposes, nor does it pursue optimal gameplay. Their engagement with the playable artefact is instead driven by the practical purpose of identifying logical imperfections and/or software malfunctions, and not by seeking entertainment, wonder, or in-game achievements. It is an oft-repeated truism that the detached, professional stance demanded by game testing, as well as its repetitive character, swiftly removes any mystery or enjoyment from interacting with a game, regardless of the digital or analogue constitution of the latter.[6] In any case, the dispassionate approach to the game as a product discussed above will eventually be relinquished, and with enough time passed (and the acquisition of psychological distance) from the production of the work, game authors – much like literary authors—could be able to approach and potentially even enjoy their work as part of the audience. In those cases, a game designer takes two neatly separated roles: that of the author when working on the game, and then that of a player when approaching the same game for leisure.

Significantly different from the case of game-testing is that of play-testing, an aspect of quality-assurance where—instead of technical functionalities—what is probed

[6] This professional stance may be less of a hindrance to approaching the game as a player when the game is designed with the help of AI agents (see Sun & Gualeni, 2025). Such games might offer ludic, narrative, or more broadly aesthetic experiences that can feel, at least in some sense, fresh and surprising for the human authors involved.

and evaluated is player experience (i.e., gameplay). In the specific context of competitive multiplayer game balancing, it is fairly common for people with creative responsibility (typically the lead game designer or the creative director) to take part in play-testing. They are invited to be part of what is informally referred to as the 'core testing group', which is composed by developers and expert players (often recruited from the competitive scene of the previous version of that game or similar titles in the same genre). The 'core testing group' is formed in the final phases of game production, when all game functionalities are implemented and the game is sufficiently stable to be played at a competitive level. The task of its members is to "play against each other and try their hardest to win" to inform the development team about how to optimize and adjust the game for the kind of competitive play that they are after (Sirlin, 2014, part 2).

Unlike the first quality-assurance-related case of game-testing, the role of the author and that of the player do coexist and overlap in competition-oriented play-testing practices.[7]

CATEGORY 2: *Officiating a role-playing game session*

In the context of role-playing games (RPGs), and particularly in the table-top and live-action role-playing game communities, the way players interpret their character is often analysed according to what is commonly referred to as 'stance theory'. Stance theory explores the different perspectives, or 'stances', that players adopt during gameplay (Edwards, 2001, chap. 3). This notion underscores that, while participating in a role-playing experience, one is not bound to a single point of view or a fixed set of preferences and aspirations. Stance theory is thus useful for understanding how players navigate the tension between narrative immersion, group dynamics, and personal expression in RPGs. It includes three main perspectives from which players can approach their role-playing experience, namely the actor's stance, the author's stance, and the director's stance (Edwards, 2001, chap. 3).[8] These three stances refer

[7] As players, we also sometimes get to play against the game authors (or rather the digital ghosts of their playtests), like in the infamous *WipEout HD* (Studio Liverpool, 2008) Gold trophy 'Beat Zico'. To obtain the trophy, players must achieve a lap time equal to or faster than 30.82 seconds on Anulpha Pass (Forward) in Speed Lap mode, Venom Class**,** while piloting the Piranha ship (either the original or Fury variant). This trophy challenge originated during internal play-testing, when developers repeatedly competed under these specific conditions and, finding them engaging and suitably difficult, decided to formalize them as a trophy requirement. When the final benchmark time was recorded, Zico Liu, one of the game's programmers, emerged as the fastest, posting the 30.82-second lap. In recognition of his performance, the trophy was named after him (see [deleted], 2021).

[8] The three stances respectively address the players' attitudes towards action and decision-making within a role-playing game (Edwards, 2001). Those attitudes

- can be based on what the player-character would do only on the basis of their limited knowledge and perceptions of the gameworld (i.e., the actor's stance),

to perspectives and attitudes that players can adopt in relation to the gameworld, a gameworld that they are at the same time fictionally inhabiting and co-authoring in a way that is analogous to that of the young girl playing with the doll in Fink's work. Stance theory does not, however, account for the idea that GMs also need to adopt various perspectives and attitudes towards gameplay, one of which is ideally geared towards disclosing the best possible experience for the players in terms of their enjoyment and engagement. This additional stance, which could be called 'the master's stance', should be familiar to anyone who has ever directed a role-playing game session. It is relevant to highlight that, during gameplay, GMs frequently interpret one or more characters within the playworld that they are orchestrating. When impersonating their character(s), the GMs need to switch among a variety of potentially conflicting stances. Among those, the 'master's stance' is necessary in cases when the GM intends to move the narrative along, nudge players towards certain choices, add clarity and detail to the process of worldbuilding, or alter the social dynamics among the player-characters.

To be sure, what I outlined in the previous paragraph is of course not true for all kinds of role-playing games. The spectrum of this type of ludic activities also comprise, for example, games where the GM has functions that are closer to those of a narrator or an adjudicator, than that of a game director enforcing a certain pace to the experience or a specific narrative direction. That said, it is often the case that—while officiating a game session—a GM participates in gameplay by taking a number of overlapping and interlocking stances, some of which have a greater of creative responsibility and control over the performance while some other align more closely with *being-in-the-gameworld* as a player (Gualeni & Vella, 2020, pp. xxv-xxvi)[9].

In role-playing games, the roles of author and player are often ambiguous. In various occasions they can overlap and interlock, with both GMs and players frequently shifting between shaping the gameworld and inhabiting it as fictional characters.

- can be instead rooted in the player's own personal priorities and preferences (i.e., the author's stance),
- can be taken in ways that affect the context, timing, and spatial circumstances of those actions, or even features of the gameworld apart from the player-character (i.e., the director's stance).

[9] The first category presented game designers and creative directors of games as unambiguously having creative responsibilities over games they worked on. The authorial role of the game master (GM) in a role-playing session, instead, more contentious. After all, the GM in question may not have authored the game system used in that particular session. The GM might not even have structured the specific campaign being played, which could instead have been purchased as a pre-made package. Finally, as already mentioned, there are also instances where the GM has only facilitation and jurisdictional responsibilities over gameplay. Can the GM be considered a game author in those situations?

CATEGORY 3: *Projecting antagonistic authorial intentions*

In *The Grasshopper*, Suits maintains that players accept to behave under the constraints of arbitrary rules because they expect that the activities and situations that result from their submission to the game will be pleasurable (2014, pp. 17–18). This 'lusory attitude' (as he calls it) is what makes meaningful play possible. The promise of pleasure, however, does not entail that the authors of a game are always bound to keep that promise, or must be unceasingly fair, trustworthy, and benevolent towards players. The obvious imbalance of power between authors and players is particularly evident in single-player games and videogames. It can manifest in acts of deliberate deception on the part of the authors, and even in forms of cruelty towards players. It is not unusual for game authors to intentionally put players in awkward or unpleasant in-game situations. Existing literature in game studies has already explored ludic creations that appear to be consciously designed to work against the players' interests, for example with the idea of:

- **Abusive Game Design**, where games can be understood as technologies mediating a personal relationship between the designers and the players—a relationship that can be ambiguous, mischievous, or even sadistic (see Wilson & Sicart, 2010), or

There are also publications that talk about how unreliable and deceitful authors could carry out their devious intentions in what they perceive to be, really, the best interest of the player in terms of enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation. That is the case of

- **Deceptive Game Design**, discussed by Gualeni & Van de Mosselaer (2021), which focuses on game design strategies and tricks meant to deliberately misinform and misguide players with the objective of eliciting specific aesthetic effects.

Regardless of whether these game design approaches are used to scratch some of the designers' itches or to better engage players aesthetically and emotionally, both the scholarly works mentioned above examine an undependable and oppositional relationship between game authors and the players of their games. While these types of game design could raise important ethical concerns—particularly regarding player consent and emotional manipulation—this article does not directly engage with those questions. Debates on the ethics of game design are undoubtedly valuable, but they fall outside the scope of the present discussion.

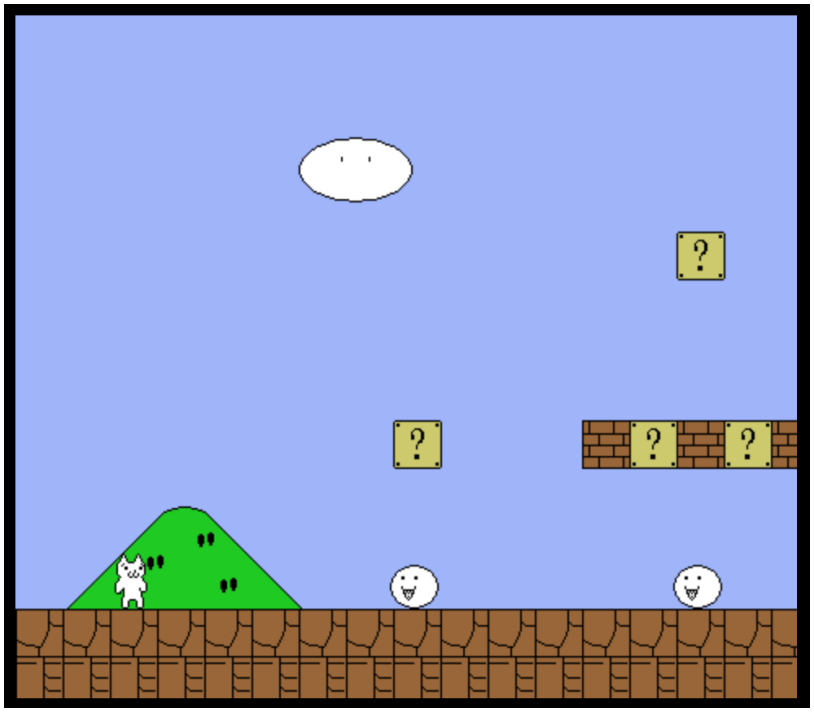

Figure 1. A screenshot taken at the start of Syobon No Action (Chiku 2007).

Within this third category, the rest of this article focuses specifically on an antagonistic approach to game design, that is on the deliberate projection—on the part of the game designers—of a (fictional, implied) game author[10] that is adversarial to the players, derisive of their efforts, or outright cruel to them. An antagonistically designed game invites players to adopt a combative stance against those authorial intentions that they perceive in that work, engaging them in a Suitsian 'two-move game' of sorts, where the author—or, more precisely, the implied author—assumes the role of an adversary. By making uses of case studies and practical examples, the coming sections of this article have the objective of adding clarity, detail, and scholarly depth to the idea of antagonistic game design.

Antagonistic game design

As anticipated at the end of the previous section, antagonistic game design consists in the deliberate projection—on the part of the game designers—of a (fictional, implied) game author that is hostile to the players, derisive of their efforts, or outright

[10] Collaborative works of fiction such as movies or digital games are arguably better understood as the product of distributed authorship (see Jennings, 2016). In this article, however, I follow Currie in arguing that it is unproblematic to imagine just one author per work (Currie, 1990, pp. 11–12). Accordingly, the notion of the implied game designer does not refer to an actual person, but—as already explained—is understood as the sum of the creative intentions that the audience perceives to lie at the basis of a work.

cruel to them. Game authors have several ways to convey their antagonistic intentions: they can do so indirectly, by embedding those cues and intentions in the gameworld, in its narratives, its affordances and functionalities, or they can take a more straightforward approach, communicating them directly to the players

By posing as a *Super Mario Bros.* clone, *Syobon No Action* invites the player to interpret its gameworld (and act within it) as if the two games followed similar design principles. When playing *Syobon No Action* for the first time, this might appear to be the case: the feline player-character seems to respond to player input in a way that is analogous to Mario in *Super Mario Bros.* and appears to have similar dimensions and relationships with the elements populating its gameworld (see Figure 2). Soon, however, *Syobon No Action* subverts this initial impression, disrupting the player's sense of familiarity through the introduction of behaviours and challenges that not only diverge sharply from those in *Super Mario Bros.* but also exhibit internal inconsistency. An in-game course of action that has proven effective or desirable may suddenly become ineffective in new gameplay situations, or even lead to the character's death. The game was evidently designed to surprise and frustrate the player obstacle after obstacle, exception after exception, maddening level after maddening level. Despite the game's reassuring and familiar appearance, the implied author of *Syobon No Action* is intent on systematically challenging established assumptions about videogames and their creators while deliberately subjecting players to an experience of sustained frustration. Like other titles designed in an antagonistic fashion,[11] *Syobon No Action* is akin to a playable prank at the expense of the player: an infuriating experience that relies on mockery and deception, and does not allow for the development of systematic knowledge about the game's functioning or its narratives.

When it comes to examples of antagonistic intentions that are, instead, communicated to players in direct and explicit ways, I will rely on examples taken from *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (Bennett Foddy, 2017) and *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* (Crows Crows Crows, 2022). In The *Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe*, one of the most notorious optional sequences is the so-called 'Baby Game,' a nested game presented by the game narrator as a demo that is still in development and in need to be tested. In its initial form, the Baby Game consists in preventing a cardboard cut-out of a crawling infant, positioned on the right side of a wall, from reaching a fire burning on the opposite side of the wall. The player can accomplish this by repeatedly pressing a red button, which resets the mock-baby back to its original position every time it is pressed (see Figure 3).

[11] Comparable titles that are often mentioned next to *Syobon No Action* are *I Wanna Be the Guy: The Movie: The Game* (O'Reilly, 2007) or *Trap Adventure 2* (Oshiba, 2016).

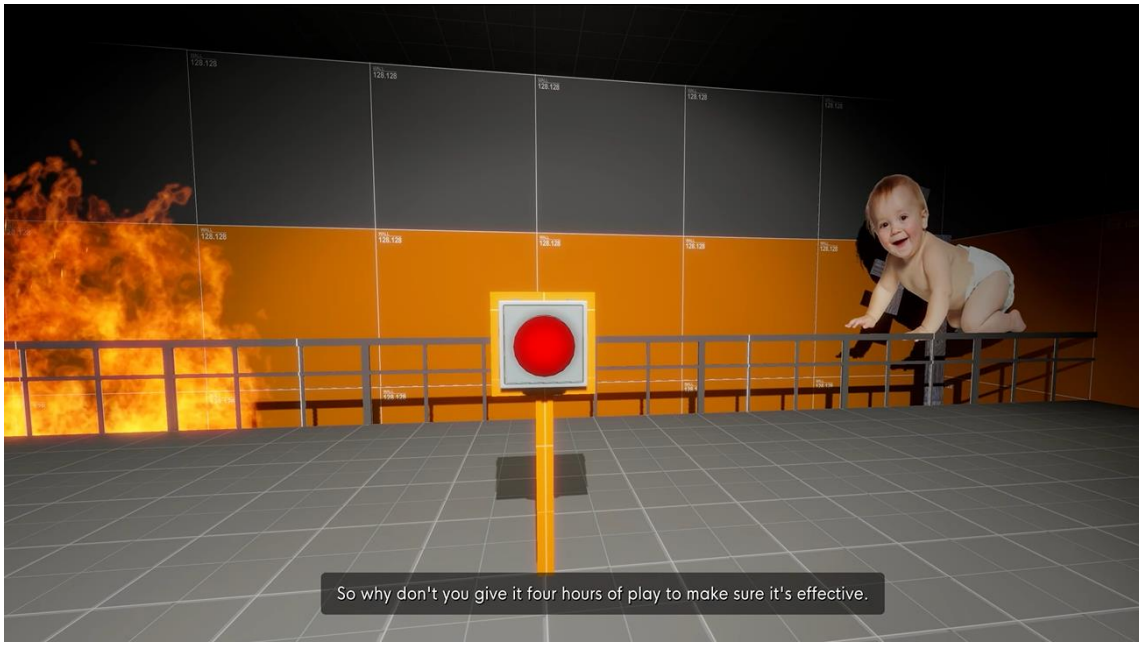

Figure 3. The setup of the Baby Game in *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* (Crows Crows Crows, 2022).

To 'complete' this game, an achievement that is both technically possible and narratively absurd, the player must sustain this action for four consecutive real-time hours. Approximately two hours into the sequence, the narrator introduces an additional challenge: a puppy on the verge of falling into a pool filled with piranhas. A second (blue) button is also added to the scene, which must be pressed periodically to save the puppy. This requires the player to alternate between the two buttons to protect both characters. If the player persists for the full four hours and succeeds in saving both the baby and the puppy, a spectral figure referred to as the "Essence of Divine Art" appears, delivering a satirical monologue that commends the player's perseverance and commitment to this (ultimately futile) ludic task. The evidently absurd premises of the 'Baby Game', the perverse duration of its gameplay and the final, sneering oration are all blatant clues for the audience to infer an unreliable and sadistic implied game author.

A second and similar example is the action-platformer game *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, where the player controls a male, human character the bottom half of whose body is stuck in a metal cauldron. The player-character wields a Yosemite hammer, which he can use move around, grip onto objects and propel himself up the mountainous pile of objects that constitute the intractable gameworld (see Figure 4). As players climb upwards towards the summit, they are at a constant risk of losing some or all of their progress, since the game offers no checkpoints (see Pöhlmann, 2021). The game's description on online stores openly advertises the title as "a punishing climbing game", also specifying that the experience comprises "between 2 and ∞ hours of agonizing gameplay", in which you, the player, will get to

"feel new types of frustration you didn't know you were capable of" (Bennett Foddy, 2022).

Figure 4. A screenshot of *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (Bennet Foddy, 2017).

Aside from the author's description of their game on online stores, *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* also includes Bennett Foddy's own voice-recorded commentary. These audio cues are triggered during gameplay to remark on the player's progress (in this case, positive comments on discipline, self-improvement, and overcoming difficulties) as well as to address the player's inevitable setbacks. In the latter case, Foddy existentially reflects on the nature of failure and on how to deal frustration with a tone that is often plainly sarcastic.

Sticking it to the (implied) man

In the previous section I discussed a few examples of videogames that can be recognized as antagonistically designed in the sense that they are meant to deliberately incite an adversarial response in their players. This happens through a variety of design strategies that, as already examined, feature the deliberate frustration of players, game elements and clues meant to misguide and deceive them, as well as a flagrant and jeering disregard of their expectations and aspirations.

The taunts and provocations of an antagonistic (implied) author might be received differently by different players. For some, such antagonism does not serve as a deterrent or a reason to abandon the game, but rather as a motivation to persist in

their ludic tasks. Playing masocore[12] games like *Getting Over It* or *Syobon No Action* means to continue playing and trying to overcome challenges frustrations as a way of resisting the attitudes and intentions perceived to be projected by the game. It is to learn patterns and long series of inputs by heart for the satisfaction of 'sticking it to the (implied) man'. In this sense, perseverance itself becomes a form of counter-performance through which players emphasize their agency and validate their skills.

The idea that some players can be motivated to play out of a desire to overcome challenges and prove themselves is obviously not new. The notion of antagonistic play proposed in this paper does in fact resonate with Nicole Lazzaro's concept of 'hard fun,' which links challenge-based enjoyment to emotions such as frustration and pride. It also bear clear resemblances with Nguyen's (2020) notion of 'striving play,' where players voluntarily (and temporarily) take up an unserious activity for the inherent pleasure that emerges from dealing with its difficulties and limitations (and from getting better at it). More broadly, the idea that certain forms of play engage and motivate players by confronting them with challenges has been central to game studies since its inception, ranging from Roger Caillois's (1958) concept of agonistic play to the work of contemporary scholars who have examined player motivation, including, among others, Richard Bartle, Nick Yee, and Elisa Meckler.

To that theoretical landscape, antagonistic game design adds the idea that a player can find an additional source of motivation to play in the perceived intentions of adversarial, off-putting, and often sadistic implied designer. Through an oppositional relationship with the (implied) authors of the game they are playing, players often attempt to validate their autonomy and mastery as playing subjects. To ground these ideas in a practical example, the players of *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* can be motivated to continue to climb and eventually reach the top of the mountain by a combination of these well-trodden sets of challenge-related reasons:

- **DIEGETIC/ROLE-PLAYING MOTIVATIONS:** players are likely going to be emotionally invested in the pursuit of the "Great mysteries and a wonderful reward" that, according to the game's narrative, await those "who reach the top of the mountain". Players can thus find the motivation to 'get over' the game's obstacles for reasons related to the role they are playing in the gameworld (their motivation: fulfil their character's in-game aspirations and/or getting to the bottom—or, rather, on top—of the game's mysteries).

[12] 'Masocore' is an informal term used to describe games characterized by extreme difficulty and purposely-frustrating functionalities, often featuring potentially unfair gameplay and hidden game mechanics. The name combines 'masochism' and 'hardcore', highlighting the enjoyment that some players find in conquering challenges that appear insurmountable (see Waszkiewicz, 2025).

- **ACHIEVEMENT/LUDIC MOTIVATIONS:** players can be fuelled by the sense of personal accomplishment and pride (*fiero*) that they expect to feel once they will reach the summit of the mountain (their motivation: proving themselves capable of overcoming a colossal in-game challenge and/or receiving validation on one's commitment and skills from the game in the form of trophies and achievements).

- **SOCIAL/STATUS MOTIVATIONS:** players might also be after the legitimization of their standing within one's gamer community or group of friends. Interestingly, the game takes players who completed their climb to a chat room where "only those who have climbed are welcome," as an additional way to socially validate their accomplishments (their motivation: sharing their skills and dedication with a community of like-minded people, and have one's skills and reputation be socially recognized).

But players of Foddy's game can also be fuelled by

- **ANTAGONISTIC/VENGEFUL MOTIVATIONS:** some players respond to the game's direct taunts and provocations by trying to overcome the often-unreasonable challenges issued by an (implied) author. Those players interpret the author's intentions as unfair, cruel, and dismissive of their efforts, which they use as incentives to continue to put time and effort into the game (their motivation: sticking it to a sadistic and mocking implied game designer).

To be sure, a player's ability to adopt an adversarial attitude toward the implied authors of a game does not require games to be explicitly foregrounding jeering, unreliable, or sadistic authors. Audience antagonism attitude can emerge in virtually any kind of game and, more broadly, in all forms of cultural production. The oppositional kind of reading described by Stuart Hall (2010), for example, entails resisting and challenging the intended (or "preferred") meanings encoded in a text. Hall presents this process of reading against the grain as a method for bringing to the fore perspectives and beliefs that are alternative and often antagonistic to the ones originally proposed by the author. Although an antagonistic stance toward reading has often been discussed as a strategy for resisting and opposing the hegemonic or imperialistic ideologies embedded in specific texts, it can, in principle, be adopted toward any form of text. Likewise, as explored in game studies through concepts such as *critical play* (Flanagan, 2013), *transgressive play* (Aarseth, 2014) and *counterplay* (Meades, 2015), players may choose to 'play against the grain', and subvert the beliefs and intentions that they perceive within a playable artefact. Returning to antagonistic game design, it is important to note that the presence of an explicitly antagonistic author is not a prerequisite for adopting such a stance in interpreting or interacting with a work.

Conclusion

This article expands the current understanding of challenge-based engagement by incorporating the notion of antagonistic game design into its theoretical framework. As discussed, antagonistic game design entails the deliberate projection—on the part of game designers—of a fictional or implied authorial presence that adopts an adversarial stance toward the player: deriding their efforts, obstructing their progress, being outright cruel to them. Conversely, to engage in antagonistic play is to accept these provocations, responding to the implied designer's perceived sadistic intentions with (resentment-fuelled) determination and ingenuity.

By identifying the possibility of a deliberately designed adversarial relationship between implied authors and players, this study contributes to ongoing debates in game studies and the philosophy of play. It also highlights antagonistic play as a distinct mode of engagement, one that adds to the complex—and often oppositional—interplay between game authorship and player agency.

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