Play Everywhere: Can We Play (in) Auschwitz?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Pokémon Go (Niantic) went live in the summer of 2016. Soon thereafter, there were complaints by the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC of people trying to catch Pokémon inside the museum's premises (Meyjes 2016). This caused the directors of the museum to officially ask Nintendo to remove Pokémon from the museum (Barrat 2016). The same situation affected Hiroshima Memorial Park (Matulef 2016), while Auschwitz Museum openly asked people to refrain from playing inside its premises (Hines 2016). Play, it seems, is not for everywhere. Even more, some themes and topics are deemed inappropriate to play with. An escape room in the Czech Republic that used imagery and references of Auschwitz closed down amidst public outcry (Fox 2017). Equal fate had the video game *The Cost of Freedom*, which if released would have put the players in the role of SS guards or camp prisoners (Bridge 2018). As a matter of fact, while WWII is a frequent setting for games very few actually touch upon the Holocaust and the concentration camps.[1]

The subsequent question is why games are considered inappropriate for some places and themes. This can be a multifaceted answer based on the affordances of the medium, the cultural situatedness of play in society, and also the specificities of each topic (Rothberg 2000). In this presentation, emphasis is given to the challenges from a design perspective of positioning the player in the role of a concentration camp prisoner as part of a digital game. As Frasca (2000) explains, the challenge arises from the fact that most games have a win or lose scenario and the goal of the player is to win through trial and error. In many of those cases, games convey to their players that they have failed using death as signification. Those two facets together cause, for Frasca, games to be unable to simulate tragic events since players rarely face persistent consequences for their actions. They can simply reload the game and do something different until they succeed, trivializing thus the experience of the traumatic event. Indeed, this experience cannot work for a game about Auschwitz if the player is to take on the role of a camp prisoner. Surviving in the concentration camp had nothing to do with winning or losing because death was a matter of chance (Levi 1996). Even for those who did survive there was no feeling of winning and success but only trauma, guilt, and the responsibility of the witness for all of those who died (Agamben 1999).

That being said not all games are about winning or losing. Admittedly, this is a medium convention but it does not mean that games can only be experienced as narratives of success. There are games that show that no matter the player's choices there are some situations that cannot be won.[2] Chapman and Linderoth (2015) rather position the point of tension in terms of Goffman's frame theory. As they contend, when we play a game the objects inside the game take on an extra framing which is intrinsic to their function as game objects, in other words, they become ludified. While playing the player is, then, attuned first and

foremost to what they can do with each game piece in the context of the game. As such, the attention they attribute to what this object represents comes second. It is then understandable that when game objects refer to themes and topics that are culturally charged, like Auschwitz, substituting their original meaning with their ludic meaning is considered tactless, if not outright disrespectful.

This, however, does not deem games and trauma irreconcilable by default. Indeed, this ability of games to personally engage the players and have them invested in the game progress can result in the players being deeply and immediately affected by the game experience and, consequently, about the real-life event the game simulates. Instead one of the main reasons that a game about Auschwitz would potentially create tension is due to the medium convention of having the player as the ultimate protagonist in narratives of empowerment (Linderoth 2013).[3] In this case, the player has to focus their attention on how to master the skills for winning or finishing the game and as a result, their capacity to care about the referential meaning of the game objects suffers. This becomes especially tensive in the case of Auschwitz exactly because the concept of winning was not part of the experience.

To showcase this in practical terms a game design is proposed, which draws from a personal history that due to its singularities can be translated into gameplay without the game frame trivializing its referential frame. The design example is inspired by Salamo Arouch, a Greek Jew who survived Auschwitz by fighting exhibition boxing matches for the Nazi officers (Hawtree 2009). A conventional game design of Arouch's story could be that the players as Arouch need to keep winning so as to come out alive at the end of the game. They then would need to master the game's rules so as to follow an upward course to the ultimate success, reducing thus the experience to that of a fighting game. It is argued that a way to overcome this is by tampering with the conventions of winning and losing; neither would have consequences for the player. Arouch will keep boxing and he will eventually survive no matter what. Yet, each time Arouch wins he will get a bigger portion of food, which he can share with other inmates in a very strict economy constructed around sustaining oneself and helping others. This action will not have any deterministic effect on the final fate of the other prisoners, hence relinquishing winning or losing from any actual agency for the player. Winning would only offer a limited and futile ability to provide for others out of mere compassion. The player's attention would then be freed from trying to win as a means to conventional success thus mediating appropriately Arouch's experience of the concentration camp.

ENDNOTES

[1] At the time of writing, a Steam search about WW2 games gave about 417 results (Steam). In comparison, based on the author's research there are three game titles that directly refer to Auschwitz and/or concentration camps: *Train* by Brenda Romero (2009), *Call of Duty: WW2* (Sledgehammer Games 2017), and *KZ Manager* (The Missionaries 1990), a series of concentration camp resource management video games believed to be neo-Nazi propaganda (The New York Times 1991). There is also *Anne Frank* (Resari 2013), which has the player spending a day as the eponymous person, and *Drama in the Delta*, which takes place in two Japanese American concentration camps during WW2 (University of California 2011). Both of those, however, are educative projects that have not been released as full games.

[2] Indicative titles include *Harpooned* (Conor O'Kane 2008), *Bury me, my Love* (The Pixel Hunt et al. 2017), *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC 2013), and *Passages* (UNHCR 1995). In these games even if there can be a winning state, thematically there is not a satisfactory win since they constitute reflections on the sacrifices one has to make so as to survive and sustain oneself.

[3] The most overt example is that of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014) mission in Camp Belica, a fictional concentration camp in the alternate history universe of the game series. During the mission the player manages to kill off Nazi officers and free themselves and other prisoners.

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