“Who am I now?” Sense of Gender and Place in Digital Gameplay

Affective dimensions of gameplay in XCOM: Enemy Within

“Vem är jag nu?” Känslor och betydelser av genus och plats i digitalt spelande: affektiva dimensionerna av spelande i XCOM: Enemy Within

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Abstract

In this essay I analyze the ways in which gender and space are shaped and made sense of through digital gameplay. Specifically in the turn based strategy game *XCOM: Enemy Within* for the MacBook Air with a computer mouse as the primary input device. Using a mixed methods approach consisting of gameplay sessions of *XCOM* and qualitative interviews with two players regarding their gameplay I argue that earlier research on space within game studies has overlooked the ways in which the shaping of space in gameplay is also gendered. Developing a theoretical framework influenced by gender studies, critical theory, affect theory, assemblage theories of space, and game theory, I argue for how the shaping of space and gender in gameplay is interdependent. This in that the shaping of space and gender in digital gameplay is in constant relation and tension with societal norms and the affective capacities of bodies and digital games. In conclusion, I reflect on the possibilities to develop more empirical research based on the the theoretical framework explored in the essay.

Keywords: game studies, space, gender, performativity, interpellation, assemblage theory, affect theory, digital games, human-computer interaction

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1

INTRODUCTION

> You know the game designers design our behavior. It's amazing if you think about it. They kind of control our free will. They direct us toward a certain kind of personality.
>
> (P. Antonelli, interview for ABC News)

> […] he would reflect that reality does not tend to coincide with forecasts about it. With perverse logic he inferred that to foresee a circumstantial detail is to prevent its happening.
>
> (J. L. Borges, 'The Secret Miracle'. In: *Ficciones,* p. 115)

1.1 Why Study Gender and Space In Digital Gameplay?

The tensions that arise in the coupling of these two quotations is quite purposeful, as in my reading of them they point to two very different ways of understanding the relation between a games design and the actual gameplay of that game. On the one hand, there's the position that the possibilities of gameplay are all but restricted to what the game designers have planned for. On the other, the position that the possible actions which the game has been designed for will not occur. My intention here is to use these tensions to lead into a larger debate regarding gameplay and the social shaping of space and gender.

Space has held quite a central function in understandings of videogames and computer games, and renowned scholars such as Espen Aarseth (2000: 153) who has claimed that "[t]he defining element in computer games is spatiality". Space has also been at the forefront of scholarly discussions in regards to how interactive environments are being designed, such as James Ash concept of "intense spaces" (2014) for describing the ways in which multiplayer FPS (first-person shooter) game spaces are designed to keep players emotionally and physically invested in them for long periods of time .

One of the most influential conceptualization of space in game studies came through Huizinga's formulation of the "magic circle" in *Homo Ludens* (1949). Here he conceptualized games as "temporary worlds" which present their own rules and norms within the space afforded through play, heralding a "temporary suspension of normal life…" (Huzinga 1949: 10-12). Crawford (2015: 577) however directs a critique of this leisurely conceptualisation in arguing that "focusing on play in an isolated space, *centres* it, and runs the risk of ignoring its wider social context." To reformulate his phrasing, what Crawford (2015) argues is that a game space cannot be 'outside' the socio-cultural space in which play occurs. A more recent way of thinking

about the spaces of videogames has been through game designer Will Wright's (2004) concept of "possibility spaces", denoting a constant tension during play between the norms and rules introduced through the game's design, and the norms and rules of the socio-cultural context. Jones (2013: 76) captures the magnitude of this debate in referring to possibility spaces as "paradoxical spaces", arguing that "play and games may not be distinguishable from ordinary life, but all play occurs, nevertheless, within an implied or arbitrarily defined playing space." What becomes important for researchers in light of these critiques of game space, then, is to provide an analysis of the tensions between rules and norms implemented through the games design and the socio-cultural norms and rules present at gameplay and how they are both involved in the social shaping of game space. The way I conceptualize the social shaping of game space in this essay will incorporate these critiques through my understanding of game space as *affectively interacted*. By game space being affectively interacted I refer to how a player's understanding of the game space is constantly changing based on their own bodily gestures (such as moving the mouse cursor) coupled with in-game actions and emotional relations to characters in the game.

Gender, on the other hand, has not been at the forefront of game studies, other than through research projects which have (purposefully or not) re-inscribed gender differences between cis-boys and cis-girls, and in so doing, also the gender binary (Westecott 2008; Jenson & de Castell 2008). This has been done through three means in particular, Jenson and de Castell (2010) argue. In the first instance, the role of gender is not taken into consideration as it is conflated with the category of sex (and the assumption that there are only two 'sexes'), followed by problem representations wherein the constructed category of 'woman' is conceived of as lacking and different from constructions of 'men'. Examples of this can be found in debates or research that focus on such matters as 'girl-friendly' game design, where a common discourse has been that of girls liking 'cooperation' whereas boys like 'competition', an idea deconstructed by Jenson and de Castell (2010). Secondly, the persistence of researchers to identify patterns of gameplay and preferences which are "sex-specific" wherein difference is re-inscribed under the rubric of gender equity. And third, that gender may be ostensibly used as a variable in research, only to be discarded along the way as "irrelevant" without further interrogations of gender "in" and "at" play. Jenson and de Castell (2008: 15) have pointed towards these inabilities or deficiencies of researchers as far from accidental, and that rather, they should be considered as "Efficiencies [...] which induce a perception of the constructed and artificial as "natural" and essential..." A view very similar to that of philosopher Judith Butler (2005), who argues that power holds a double function in that it both creates the (gendered) subject and then that it hides this fact in order to naturalize and legitimize this order of organization. One of the results of this androcentric bias within research on games and design practices, Jenson and de Castell (2010) argue, is the systematic exclusion of women and femininity in game design, and an un-

derrepresentation of women in games. Scholars such as Landström (2007) argues further that a major shortcoming in many of the accounts that seek to interrogate the relationship between gender and technology is the way in which heteronormativity is reproduced. What this leads to, she argues, are accounts leading to "analyses representing gender as stable and technology as malleable." (Landström 2007, 8). That is, in these accounts a persons gender identity is 'fixed', and thus serves as a cause for how technology is being shaped through interaction, rather than focusing on how the use of technology also shapes gender identity. This reproduction of heteronormativity, and not only the androcentric bias postulated by Jenson and de Castell (2010), Landström argues, is a driving factor in how women, men, and technology are being represented in research. To counter such heteronormative accounts, wherein gender is defined as an account of stable opposites between masculine and feminine expressed by men and women, Landström (2007) argues that a good analysis of the coproduction of gender and technology must afford an analytical symmetry between gender and technology, wherein both are regarded as being shaped through interaction. The importance of this, according to Landström (2007) lies in that much of earlier research has represented a 'sameness' between women from a heteronormative standard, and which has neglected analyses based on other important social stratifications.

What I see as lacking in current discourses on space and gameplay is precisely a focus on its gendered aspects, and especially gender research which falls into a heteronormative pitfall wherein gender identity is seen as stable and locked in a binary structure. Rather, I would look towards instances of mutual shaping, such as how the gendering of in-game characters affords players with a multitude of gender expressions, or the gendered dynamics of how game space is affectively interacted. I propose to investigate these themes by basing my analysis on two players gameplay of the single-player computer game *XCOM: Enemy Within* (2K Games 2013).

1.2 Purpose and problem formulation

The main aim of this essay is to investigate the complexity of relations and tensions between the shaping of gender and the shaping of space in gameplay, and the ways through which this shaping affects gameplay. To investigate this complexity, I suggest the following problem formulations:

1. *How is game space affectively interacted by players of XCOM: Enemy Within?*
2. *Throughout a players gameplay, how is gender "at play" and "in play"? That is, how is gender both performed and felt during gameplay, and how is gender embedded in the very technologies through which play becomes possible?*

2

Background

> Like a playwright, game designers can work to create a framework and structure that helps orchestrate a gameplay experience that unfolds across space and time. So players (of a game) can explore and discover the possibility space of a game, which is how they shape their experience with the game.
> (D. Davidson, 'The Performance of Gameplay: Developing a Ludoliteracy', p. 2)

2.1 From Games to Play in Gender & Game Studies

One of the main controversies within research on games is the difficulty for researchers to find a set of agreed upon terms to define their field of study (Perron & Wolf 2009). Crawford (2015: 574) argues that this is not pedantic nitpicking, but rather that it points to an ontological problem in that researchers "do not necessarily agree on the fundamental nature of what it is they are studying…" Kirkpatrick (2009: 138) has also voiced the interesting, if uncommon, position that "[j]ust as early photography merely mimicked painting, especially in portraiture, so play with computers has so far been limited to mimicking games." Whilst I would not go so far as the type of derogatory comments launched at digital games by Kirkpatrick, I am of the position that it is important to reflect upon the usage of terms for the objects we are engaged with.

In the following, I will present a brief 'unpacking' of the term I have encountered most often in research, namely 'videogames'. However, I will instead be using the term 'digital games' and hope the following arguments will make such a choice clear. I should note that my arguments here are informed by my background in film studies, twenty years of experience with digital games of different types, and some amateurish experience in programming. This self-positioning is informed by Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledge', described by Nina Lykke (2009: 19-22) as an epistemological principle which denotes that all production of knowledge must be understood as "localized" (situated), and that this knowledge makes up a "partial insight" into reality, based on the researches situatedness rather than a "grand narrative".

First off, what is meant by 'video'? The word stems from Latin, meaning "I see" (Valpy 1828: 509). I argue that the very term and its uses point towards an ocularcentric bias within research on games and design. This is something which I consider important to reflect upon as it draws attention from some of the most fundamental aspects of the practice of interaction between players and digital games, which are related both to how space is affectively interacted and the ways in which gender is "in" play and "at" play.

In 1982, Sony produced the first video still camera called the MAVICA, and the main difference between 'film' and 'video' lies in that 'video' stores and produces images through electronic means, whilst 'film' does so through a chemical process involving the films emulsion (Howells & Negreiros 2014: 188; Kawin 1992: 128). The reason as to why this is important is that such processes are hardly present in the production of 'videogames'. Instead, everything from scenarios to objects and milieus are produced through the input of code in a computer software. So not only is the term 'video' not particularly descriptive of how such games are produced, but also, and more importantly, it betrays the fundamental activity of interaction in digital games, or the 'play' aspect. The reason for this can be explained through the simple question: is play done solely by seeing?

The term video, as was mentioned, refers to the act of seeing. As Challis (n.d.) argues, what most guides users interaction in a GUI (graphical user interface), is not only sight or hearing, but also movement and touch. In referencing an experimental study, Challis (n.d.) relates how the participants were asked to examine the top parts of some blocks of wood lying on a table using only their sight. The bottom parts of these wooden blocks, however, were located beneath the table, and so the participants had to examine them by touch. The findings of this study indicated that when the participants then would describe the wooden blocks, there was a large disparity between these accounts. For the researchers, this indicated that the previous hypothesis that vision was the dominant sense for information retrieval could not be supported. Rather than focusing solely on vision, Challis (n.d.) argues that the retrieval and processing of information undertaken by the human body is done through a feedback system between the physical and perceptual level. The physical level denotes the gathering of information through the peripheral nervous system, and the perceptual level the processing of this information.[1] This leads in to one of the most neglected aspects of research on digital games, argues Kirkpatrick (2009), namely how interaction between the human and software is performed through hand-controllers, keyboard, mouse, and similar technologies.

It is here that I regard the concept of *haptic interaction,* or the combination of movement and touch as especially important for understanding play and 'videogames'. As D. N. Edwards argues in his commentary on Challis (n.d.):

> [...] the ubiquitous keyboard and mouse input relies heavily on haptic and proprioceptive senses [sensory information about the state of the body, such as 'feeling' where your arm is] in an unconscious way that we tend to take for granted. Thus, most people probably do not think that they engage in haptic interaction, but would acknowledge that it must be useful for those who lack other

[1] For a critique of hierarchizations between the peripheral and central nervous system (primarily the function and centrality of the brain in these accounts) which bypasses the functions of the enteric nervous system (the gut), see Wilson (2004).

> senses (notably sight) for whom tactile communication such as braille would seem invaluable." (Edwards n.d.)

As Edwards commentary highlights, the ways in which users are interacting with software is highly unconscious in relation to what is done with their bodies in interaction, but also that the ways in which interfaces are designed are done in relation to societal norms. As Lundmark and Nordmark (2014: 237) have argued, interaction design always carries with it certain societal norms in that "[t]he assumptions about the user and the use of the artifact and/or arenas are embedded in the design." Not only, then, does the 'video' in 'videogames' point towards an unreflective account of the properties of digital games, but this unreflectiveness also feeds back into, and informs how games are designed according to a normative standard (Challis n.d.).

I also became aware of something closely related to this when I conducted the gameplay sessions for producing my material. I had informed both players that they were free to play with their own computer mouses but that I could supply one if need be. What I had not thought of here was the fact that my own mouse (a Logitech MX 518 Optical Gaming mouse) is specifically designed for persons who are right handed (as most computer mouses are), displaying my own bias of 'handedness' in assuming that everyone is right-handed. Or rather, not even thinking about it. Thankfully, my negligence and bias did not affect anyone else but me (both players also being right-handed), but rather it constituted a learning experience in just some of the ways in which societal norms are embedded in technology.

2.2 Earlier Research

Beyond what has been sketched in the introduction and background, I base my problem formulation and methodological considerations for my essay on three earlier studies in particular. The first is authored by Ratan et al. (2015) where the issue at hand is the gendered dynamics of gameplay in the popular computer game *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009). The second is a study by Martey et al. (2014) on gender performances and gender-switching in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) , where player behavior is related to the performance of gender. The third is James Ash (2010) study on the the practices of game designers to plan for contingency in FPS (first-person shooters) games.

In Ratan's et. al. (2015) article 'Stand by Your Man: An Examination of Gender Disparity in *League of Legends*' what is of particular interest for my own essay is both their mixed-methods approach, which I have adapted for my own study (more on this in section 3.2), and their analysis of the means by which female gamers are being marginalized in gaming communities, both on a personal and competitive level. By referring to a vast literature on the many benefits of access to digital games, such as cognitive abilities, knowledge acquisition and influence on education (among others), they see the marginalization of women from these arenas as highly

problematic. Female gamers also have to negotiate their gameplay with stereotypes which depict women as either hyper sexualized or "naturally" inferior than men in the use of technology. This is one of the ways in which I aim to investigate how gender is "in play", namely in how the players I have interviewed see themselves in relation to the technologies of gameplay. Earlier ethnographic studies which they cite also show that gender is not the only important social stratification for marginalization and power dynamics, but that an "intersectional" (Crenshaw, 1991) approach may be necessary for the analysis of intersecting forms of oppression. To investigate these dynamics Ratan et. al. (2015) provide an analysis of gender-based interaction between players in *League of Legends,* where they highlight how gender disparities both inside and outside the game shape the way female players experience their own gameplay.

In the article by Martey et al. (2014) 'The strategic female: gender-switching and player behaviour in online games' the authors investigate the relationship between player and avatar[2] gender and how such a relation influences in-game behavior. The most interesting aspect of their research for this essay are their findings on the affordances and constraints of gendered avatars for the expression of a gendered identity. Their research indicated that men (not explained whether cis or trans) often used female avatars, and in so doing, their in-game behavior changed from when they used male avatars. This change of behavior included things such as a higher frequency of jumping, emoting, and asking in-game questions to other players. What these findings indicate, I argue, is that the possible 'affects of gameplay' (further explanation of this in section 4.5) are related to performances of gender, such that the socio-cultural norms of appropriate gender behavior is negotiated through the actions of in-game characters and the ways through which they are gendered.

In Ash's (2010) ethnographic study 'Architectures of affect: anticipating and manipulating the event in processes of videogame design and testing' he investigates the processes of designing and testing levels for multiplayer games. He argues against the view that game designers seek to determine all the multiform types of interaction that players are capable of. Rather, he argues that the spaces of these videogames are shaped to allow for contingencies, and that "videogames are predicated on producing ethologically limited worlds, with a limited capacity for users to affect them…" (Ash 2010: 658). What his research points towards is the importance of an analysis of how space is being shaped through gameplay, and how the possible affects of gameplay are involved in this shaping. He does not, however, provide an analysis of the role of gender within either the shaping of game space or the affects of gameplay, a point which I see as lacking in his account.

[2] The word 'avatar' comes from the Sanskrit 'avatara', meaning "incarnation" (Messinger et al. 2008). In computer games, the in-game character(s) which the player navigates the game space with are often referred to as avatars.

3

Methodology & Material

> What is being shaped in the social shaping of artifacts is no mere thought-stuff, but obdurate physical reality. Indeed, the very materiality of machines is crucial to their social role.
> (D. Mackenzie and J. Wajcman, *The Social Shaping of Technology,* p. 18)

3.1 Introduction: the map as a heuristic

In Miroslav Holub's lovely poem 'Brief Reflection on Maps' (1984, in Phillips, 2010: 174-175) is a small Hungarian unit of soldiers who are sent out into the frosty wasteland of the Alps by their lieutenant. Upon their departure, snow starts to fall, and they are not seen for two days. The lieutenant is distraught, fearing he has sent his men to their deaths. But on the third day, they all return alive and well, and tell of how this was so. It seems that awaiting their end, one of the men had found *a* map in his pocket, and following it, they had found their way back. The last stanza of the poem reads as follows: "The lieutenant asked to see that remarkable map in/ order to/ Study it. It wasn't a map of the Alps/ But the Pyrenees.// Goodbye,".

But what does this somewhat puzzling and surprising poem about maps have to do with my methodology for this essay? The aim of this essay is very much about producing knowledge on how place and gameplay mutually interact in the shaping of one another, and for that I suggest the use the map as a "heuristic", or a "tool for thinking" (Scollon & Scollon 2012: 3). Maps abound in both my material (gameplay in *XCOM* is divided into what is often referred to as "maps" within gaming communities, being defined by a fixed spatial location wherein gameplay is possible), methodology, and theory. So it seemed only sensible for maps to play an integral part of my way of thinking as well.

Kim Dovey (2010: 28) suggests that "the mapping of places" is a key methodological consideration for a better understanding of place. He argues this through his reformulation of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of the "abstract machine" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013) as "a diagram or map of the forces comprising an assemblage" that is simultaneously part of it (Dovey 2010: 27). My practical application of this will be articulated in section 3.4.

But there are many ways to use a map, and as Holub's poem indicates, some that might go against the grain of common sense. Becker (2008) argues that one of the problems of 'categories', such as that of the map which I use here in relation to my reading of Holub's poem, is how we in our analyses should account for those categories which are so taken for granted that we are unconscious of the ways through which they define our way of thinking. More often than not, a map is used to represent a correspondence to a given territory albeit at a different

scale, such as 1:10,000. In the one-paragraph-long short story "On Exactitude in Science" by Jorge Luis Borges, this ideal of using a map to represent (the greatness of) a territory is humorously ridiculed wherein "…the Cartographers Guild struck a map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it." (1975: 704-705). My former professor in Film Studies, John Sundholm, related Borges' parable to us student when we were writing our C-essay as a means of discussing how we were to perform our selection of material. As he meant to impart on us, and as Becker (2008) also points out, it is not sensible, nor desirable, to include 'everything'. Rather, a well-thought out selection is a more useful approach. So unlike the map dreamt up by Borges, what I suggest by the use of the map as a heuristic is the opening up towards possibilities and surprises through the selection of material, like what poorly sketched maps from the treasure hunts of children might offer to those who navigate by them.

3.2 Material: *XCOM: Enemy Within*

Computer games can be quite messy to those who have never played them before, as I have realized on many occasions where I have tried to explain to someone who does not know what precisely is going on. What my failed attempts of explaining this has shown me, is that I don't really "know" either. Rather, what I typically do in a computer game is not simply the result of a translation from cognition (I am going to do this) to action (there, I did it!), even though this is part of it as well. This is especially true when I am learning how to interact with the game. But operating together with this is something more automatic and embodied, or what Ash (2013) discusses as 'tacit knowledge' from Polanyi's (1966: 4) quote that "we know more than we can tell." Will Wright, founder of the popular *Sim City* (1989-2012) and *The Sims* (2000-2014) series of games made the following, I think very apt, comment in a seminar on how players learn the games they are playing by using a linguistic analogy. In his analogy, the things a player can do are verbs, and objects one can interact with are nouns:

> "In a lot of games you actually go around, trying to discover the nouns and verbs. You know, in first person shooters, one of the first things most players do is they get a crowbar or a gun, and they start shooting all the objects or hitting them with the crowbar. And certain ones will break up and there will be little prizes in them, other ones—nothing happens, and so you actually teach yourself what the meaningful nouns are just by interacting with the world. By beating on it." (Will Wright, 2004)

So what then is the 'material' of a computer game? I can make no grand gestures of definition, precisely because it is so many things. Instead, I take the more pragmatic approach of defining my material here based on my research questions. First, I have chosen to limit myself to one game, namely the computer game *XCOM: Enemy Within* (2013). The three most important

reasons for this are: 1) it is based on gameplay where the player interacts through several characters, rather than one; 2) it is a turn-based strategy game where a large part of the interaction is based on navigating around the actions of MOBs (mobile objects) rather than other players (most studies focus on interaction between several players, and not on players and the software); and 3), it is a game I know quite well, and which I wrote my B-essay on, even though the research questions were different.

In the following, I will provide some brief exposition of *XCOM* in the hopes that it will help my readers to follow my arguments more closely later in the analysis.

XCOM: Enemy Within was released in 2013 by 2K Games and Firaxis Games for PC, and Feral Interactive for MAC and Linux. It is as an expansion pack to *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* which was released in 2012. The game is played in single-player mode and features sci-fi themes of alien invasion and bodily modification of human soldiers. The following description comes from the blurb to *XCOM* (featured both on their website and Steam page):

> "XCOM: Enemy Unknown will place you in control of a secret paramilitary organization called XCOM. As the XCOM commander, you will defend against a terrifying global alien invasion by managing resources, advancing technologies, and overseeing combat strategies and individual unit tactics." (xcom.com/xcom-enemy-unknown)

The gameplay is 'split' into two sections, where one aspect focuses on base-building, quite similar to gameplay in the *Civilization* (MicroProse; Firaxis; 2K Games 1991-2015) or *Total War* (Creative Assembly 2000-2015) series. The other focuses on turn-based gameplay, similar to games such as Chess. This second part of the gameplay consists of skirmishes in different maps (or levels) around the world, where the player controls a squadron of soldiers to fight against the alien invaders. Some of the new features of the expansion pack include new enemies, weapons and equipment for soldiers, and various other 'upgrades' for soldiers in terms of either biological engineering, where the player is able to splice alien DNA with that of human subjects to appropriate some of their features. With features such as increased recovery rate from wounds, or the ability to perform superhuman jumps to gain tactical advantage on the battlefield. And secondly, through cybernetics, where everything but the human soldiers head and brain is stripped and replaced with a robotic interface that can be fit into a battle suit, or the 'Mechanized Exoskeletal Cybersuit' (MEC for short). Another important change for this study was the implementation of a 50:50 ratio of female to male soldiers. In *Enemy Unknown,* the ratio was heavily lopsided towards male soldiers.[3] What this implementation grants for this es-

[3] A quick google search on "xcom enemy within male [or female] soldiers" turns up with several forum threads where these ratios are discussed, and I leave the reader to pick up the differences in how these matters are discussed since it lies outside the scope of this essay.

say is the further study of gendered interaction through avatars or characters, as was discussed in the section on 'earlier research'.

3.3 Selection of Players

A map is often a selection, as was mentioned earlier, but a selection of what? and guided by which principles? The type of map I am sketching here is not one I make in order to reach a destination I have envisioned *a priori,* but to lead me to unexpected places in order to surprise myself. Precisely the ability to be surprised by one's own research, rather than just re-inscribing what is already thought to be known about a subject, is something that Becker (2008: 94-97) highlights as an especially important aspect of good research, and Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell (2008: 20) argues that it can be a tool for eliminating epistemic bias in research on gender and gaming.

What I have done, on my part, to be surprised by my own research is both found in my choice of theories and methods, taking support from a multitude of practices and ways of thinking from diverse fields, locations, and times. It is also present in my choice of players, where I have proceeded by the principle of "strategic selection" (Esaiasson et al. 2012) in not selecting cis-male players for my study. This in order to counter-act the androcentric bias which Jenson and de Castell (2008) have indicated is prevalent in game studies, and as philosopher Sandra Harding (1993) has argued to be present in other research fields as well. As for why this type of choice is important I am influenced by Harding's postulate (1993: 51-57) that knowledge production and knowledge claims are always socially situated (meaning that they are never 'objective' in a positivist sense), and that it therefore is vital from which situation knowledge is produced. So rather than to adhere to a type of androcentrism that is prevalent within game studies—where cis-men or boys are the normative research subjects and cis-women or girls act as counterpoints to produce gendered differences (Jenson & de Castell 2008)—I follow from Harding's argument "for 'starting off thought'" from those who are being marginalized in research (1993: 56).

3.3 Gameplay Mappings

The material produced for this essay has been done through a mixed-methods approach, where I have used recordings of gameplay of *XCOM*, qualitative interviews, and spatial analysis from said gameplay by two players.[4] This method I call 'gameplay mappings', and is inspired both by the methodological guidance presented earlier by Dovey (2010: 29) on 'the mapping of places', for being able to analyze "how places work and how they are transformed" and the method of

[4] During these sessions I have followed the ethical guidelines from VR (Vetenskapliga Rådet 2011).

using recorded gameplay during qualitative interviews to understand their gameplay better, as used by Ratan et al. (2015).

The recordings were done on my computer, a MacBook Air, at two different occasions and places (each player being allowed to decide for themselves where and when the gameplay sessions would take place) using the software *MacX Video Converter Pro*. My rationale when conducting these recordings was to allow the players to be as comfortable as possible rather than striving to reproduce the same experimental setting. Thereby valuing the comfort of each player more highly than the 'reproducibility of each experiment' since my ambitions for this essay are much more theoretical than empirical. Also informed by my own somewhat post-modernist frame of thought, the "experimental design" and its affordances and constraints (KAU n.d.) were not something which I strove to uphold from the start, valuing more highly unsuspected and qualitative results based on the interviews, with the recordings serving as a basis of discussion more than a material in itself.

The two players chosen were both students between 20 and 25 years with several years of experience of playing digital games of various kinds. The first player identified herself as female and the second identified themselves as non-binary or gender queer. I have not kept their names in this essay due to reasons of confidentiality. During each session, I would inform each player that they could oversee the general settings of the game (mouse sensitivity, graphics, etc.) and then help them start the game, after which I would leave them on their own to play the game. This choice was informed by a reflexive stance taken by Ratan et al. (2015: 447) who argued, based on the findings of 'stereotype threat theory', that "when people are reminded of a negative stereotype about a demographic to which they belong, they are more likely to conform to that stereotype". Whilst I would make no audible comments to such an effect, my own situatedness as a white male player/researcher during these sessions might very well affect the gameplay of each individual player negatively since I conform to two demographics pertaining to the stereotypical gamer (Ratan et al. 2015: 440). As was felt during the first session when I returned to the players home between maps and the player asked me for some very brief instructions and my reply made them skip over an important step of character customization that they would otherwise have performed. As such, my presence, unwittingly, became authoritarian within the context of gameplay and we were forced to re-do some of the steps.

Each player was asked to play two maps of the game, but they were allowed to choose their own squadrons freely. Due to the RNG (random number generator) system of the game, none of these maps were the same. This might be critiqued as a flaw if adhering to an "experimental design" which strives to control the influence of outside variables, and the measurement of influence from a specific variable (KAU n.d.). But on the other hand, if regarded within the research design of a "case study", or even more so in light of Dovey's understanding of space, this type of critique is unfounded in that "sense of place is outward-looking, defined by multiple

identities and histories," where "its character comes from connections and interactions rather than original sources and enclosing boundaries." (Dovey 2010: 18). The point being that even if the maps had been identical for both players gameplay, they would still have been different places in how they were being experienced and made sense of.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted shortly after each session of gameplay, and proceeded for forty to sixty minutes based mostly on how much there was to talk about from the material of the gameplay. Each interview began with some background questions of the type, 'How long have you been playing games', 'How often do you play', 'What do you like most about them', 'What gender(s) do you identify as' and 'How have you felt your gender(s) in relation to gaming'. The purpose of this was for me to get a grasp of their own relations to gaming and gender, and which served as a support during the next stage where we discussed their gameplay. During the interviews, I screened each players gameplay and we discussed some what they had felt to be key moments of gameplay, what it felt like playing the game, how they negotiated the multiple character element of the gameplay with identity, what the mood of the game was, and so on. This part was, at least for me, the most rewarding as it pointed towards very different types of engagement with games in general, and *XCOM* in particular, and pointed towards a type of complexity I would not have been able to achieve had I only based the analysis of my own gameplay. Rather, the tensions and relations to gender, space and gameplay were multiple, prone to undergo constant transformations within a single session of gameplay.

4

Theoretical Framework

> [...] rejecting this way of defining by kind and specific difference, Spinoza suggests a completely different way, linked to the common notions: beings will be defined by their *capacity for being affected*, by the affectations of which they are capable, the excitations to which they react, those by which they are unaffected, and those which exceed their capacity and make them ill or cause them to die.
>
> (G. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* p. 45)

4.1 Introduction

In this section I will present an exposition of the theoretical framework which I suggest for the analysis. This in accord with my previous problem formulation. This framework consists of Judith Butlers (1993; 2005) performative gender theory and Althusser's (2008) concept of interpellation, affect theory from Gilles Deleuze (1988) and James Ash (2010; 2013), Kim Dovey's (2010) assemblage theory of space, and theories of gameplay postulated as "possibility spaces" (Wright 2004; Jensen 2013). Whilst these theories are seemingly disparate, I will argue for how they are interrelated and can be used to produce an understanding of how space is affectively interacted. And how during gameplay gender is both "at play" and "in play".

4.2 Performative Gender Theory & Interpellation: The I'ing of myself

Key to understanding Butler's understanding of gender comes through her concepts of *genealogy* and *performativity*, argues Tiina Rosenberg in her introduction to an anthology of Butler's writings (Butler 2005). Genealogy, or the genealogical approach is found originally in the critical tradition of Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*) and later Foucault (*The Will to Knowledge*).[5] The approach consists of not accepting categories such as sex/gender as *natural* or *naturally given*, but an analysis of how these categories are being socially shaped. An example of this is the project undertaken by historian Thomas Laqueur (1990) who analyzed the formation of a two-gender system (male/female as opposites) that rose to dominance at the end of the seventeenth century in the West.

Butler's conceptualization of *performativity* comes in part from the famous linguist J.L. Austin's (1975) formulation of "speech acts" by which he argued that words are not only used to make assertions of reality, but that they also *do* something. But what does the performance of

[5] For an interesting albeit quite different approach, see Deleuze and Guattari (2013) in "1000 BC: The Geology of Morals (Who Does the Earth Think It Is?)" where they exchange the discursive account for a materialist one.

gender *do*, then? Butler (1993: 2) argues that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names." That is, she is here criticizing earlier accounts of "gender roles" which bears the connotation that gender is like a role which one 'steps into' and dons deliberately at various junctures. Rather, her point is that the continuous doing of gender produces gendered subjects as an effect (rather than gendered subjects being a cause for behavior) that does not implicate any 'already existing' gender. The point being that there is no such thing. Instead, she argues that "the speaking 'I'" (or the subject) is "subjectivated by gender" in that "the 'I' neither precedes or follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves." (Butler 1993: 7). Key to understanding her formulation here is Althusser's (2008) concept of *interpellation,* since the process Butler is speaking of is a 'naming' which she explains as "at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm." (Butler 1993: 8)

Althusser provides an example for illustrating this processes which he also refers to as *hailing*. In his example a police officer calls out: "Hey, you there!" (2008: 48) and an imagined individual (out on the street) turns around and *recognizes* that it is them that are hailed, or addressed. Althusser describes this as a "strange phenomenon" (2008: 48) because this act very rarely misses it mark, and the person being hailed almost without fail recognizes that it is addressed to them. In my earlier playthroughs of *XCOM* I have located several points where this type of hailing takes place, wherein the player becomes named (and therefore recognized themselves as) the 'Commander'. However, these are only the more overt instances of interpellation, and part of my study will be to in greater detail several strategies of interpellation, not least those which are of a more affective (especially the role which 'care' plays in interpellating the subject) than linguistic nature. This will be dealt with by innervating the concept of interpellation with affect theory in an effort to combine the resources of both linguistic and affective theoretical stances.

As Althusser himself addresses, this example also gives rise to the idea that interpellation takes on "the form of a temporal succession", when in fact "these things happen without succession." (2008: 48-9) The reason for this is that ideology and interpellation are one and the same thing, or that interpellation 'inheres' in ideology. The point Althusser here is making is that there is no 'outside' or 'before' ideology, but one of the main functions of ideology is to make it appear as if it does. This 'hiding' of the obvious (that one is always-already 'in' ideology) is what Butler (2005) refers to as the second facet of power, in that it not only creates the subjects which it names, but also hides this fact in order to legitimize and naturalize this specific organization. So rather than there being a pre-ideological sphere which ideology then is imprinted on in the constituting of subjects, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects" (Althusser 2008: 49).

4.3 Affect Theory: attunement and the affectively vulnerable body

I would like to begin this section by briefly providing an exposition of the term *affect,* especially since there seems to be little consensus on the usage of the term (Koivunen 2010). For scholars such as Brian Massumi (2002), the distinction between *affect* and *emotion* is crucial, since he conceptualizes affects as a pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive "intensity" of the body in its inherent relationality. He describes intensity as "embodied in purely automatic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things." (Massumi 2002: 25). He supplies an example of this through the discussion of an experiment which he calls "the mystery of the missing half second" (Massumi 2002: 28). In the experiment, patients brainwaves were monitored by an electroencephalograph, and they were asked to flex a finger (whenever they so chose) and then to note the time at which they had made the 'decision' to flex their finger based on a clock-face in front of them. The results showed that the actual flexing occurred 0.2 seconds after they themselves had noted that they did it, but that the machine had registered a related brain activity 0.3 seconds before the finger had been flexed, leaving a gap of 0.5 seconds between the brain activity and the impression of activity from the patient. From this, Massumi argues that "the half second is missed not because it is empty, but because it is overfull, in excess of the actually-performed action and of its ascribed meaning." (Massumi 2002: 29). It is in this sense that Massumi conceptualizes affect as intensity, as something too-much for cognition. Emotion, on the other hand he describes as,

> "a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically, and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning." (Massumi 2002: 28)

By this, I take Massumi to mean that emotions acts as an "apparatus of capture" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 493) which seizes, linearizes and narrativizes the intensity of affects for the production of the 'self'. The 'I' emerges as a function of this in the capacity to provide a structure of cause-and-effect, whereby the too-much of affect is translated into a graspable entity placed within a personal history. Other scholars such as Ruth Leys (2011) sees such a position as untenable, as it re-instates the very type of mind-body dualism that it seeks to deconstruct. Such a position has also been criticized by Blackman (2010) who argues that it favors the individual over the social in that "it sets affective processes within the flesh," and in so doing it evades William James' "'problem of personality'…" and "the question of how subjects can be both 'one and many'…" (Blackman 2010: 178). For Blackman, Massumi's position thereby eschews the relationality of bodies that the position ostensibly strives for.

For my part, I am basing my conceptualization of affect through readings of James Ash (2010; 2013) and Gilles Deleuze (1988). Here, affect stands for "the body's capacity to act and produce associated positive senses of intensity." (Ash 2010: 654). To bring it more in line with the content of this essay (and so that it hopefully can be better understood), I see the affects of gameplay as anything that the player is able to *do* or *feel*[6] whilst playing, based on the technologies present (keyboard, the human body, computer mouse, etc.) and the way in which the game has been designed (for instance, what types of interaction is made possible, such as shooting, jumping, emoting and the like). Thus, affects constitutes a realm of possibilities in gameplay in terms of both action and emotion. And based on which affects are present during gameplay, space is what I call *affectively interacted*. For instance, if I feel care for my soldiers in *XCOM*, I will attempt to keep them safe from harm. This might result in such things as grouping them together in clusters, researching defensive items which will make them more resilient, or adapt other defensive tactics during my gameplay. All in accord with what types of affects are made possible from the way in which the game has been designed. In this way, the way space is shaped and experienced during gameplay is interdependent on the possible affects of the game itself. For instance, the game may not support the research of defensive items, in which case other tactics need to be deployed. The point here being that affect is absolutely integral to the way in which a game is played or how the space itself is experienced. As Ash argues,

> "affect does not simply operate *between* body and world on an unconscious level, but actively creates associations between various material 'cusps' which exist within and across a variety of biological and physical levels." (Ash 2013: 29-30)

What Ash points towards here is what Kavka has termed the "mattering of affect", or how boundaries (such as those between bodies, or bodies themselves) are "mattered" and brought into existence through affective associations. What is especially important here, Ash (2013) stresses, is not to see the body as enclosed or 'numb' (as gamers bodies often have been conceptualized, shut off from the world) but as radically 'open' and 'vulnerable' for gameplay to happen. Ash (2013) argues that this is done through a players "attunement" to the affects possible in play, wherein "affect and cognition are interdependent" due to the fact that "[p]rocesses of cognition can shape affective capacities and affects themselves can work to rewire the relationship between thought and action." (Ash 2013: 29). That is, in this account there is no clear separation between affective- and cognitive states as was the case with Massumi. Rather, both are co-constitutive of gameplay. Ash (2013: 34) works through the interdependence of affects and cognition by the concept of "attunement", and argues that players become attuned to *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2007) "…by developing various bodily capacities for action and devising ways of pre-empting how and where other users will move and what they will do." As such, the

[6] An updated and more colloquial usage of Deleuze's (1988: 27) division of affects into the analytic levels of *actions* and *passions*.

way players become attuned to *XCOM* figures as a key point of analyzing how space in the game is affectively interacted.

4.4 Assemblage theory of Space, Or: experiental sense of space

The concept of space, Kim Dovey (2010) argues, tends to pivot between two poles of understanding. In the first account it adheres to post-structuralist understanding in which it is formulated as "discourse without intrinsic meaning" (Dovey 2010: 4). That is, the way in which space is made sense of depends not at all on the materiality or ontology of that space, but only the ways in which it is made sense of through discursive means. In the second account it is formulated according to an essentialist understanding in which the ontology of place is highlighted at the cost of an understanding of how place is socially constructed, and how place is in constant change (Dovey 2010). Dovey, however, sees flaws with both of these approaches taken by themselves, and argues instead that "[i]n the end the question of place hinges on the relation between spatiality and sociality" because whilst it is true that "space is socially constructed, the social is spatially constructed." (Dovey 2010: 6). That is, it is fruitless and potentially hazardous to try and separate the social from the spatial because they are so deeply entwined. To do this, Dovey suggests that we should replace Heidegger's formulation of "being-in-the world" and its static conceptualization of place and identity formation with Deleuze's formulation of "becoming-in-the-world" which prioritizes a fluid and dynamic understanding of the relations and co-dependence of the social with the spatial (2010: 6). Whilst part of Dovey's (2010) work also focuses on Bordieu's concept of the "habitus" or how space is made to appear as static and normalized, I here favor the approach of Deleuze which Dovey present precisely because it is more in line with the aims of this essay. This in its focus on space as "assemblage", or connections which temporarily congeal into a "state of affairs" made up of contingent parts (Dovey 2010: 16). One of the most important aspects of the theory of space as "assemblage" as I see it is that "it gives priority to experience and sensation…" over a static ontology of space (Dovey 2010: 16). Thereby bringing such an understanding of space more in line with my understanding of space in *XCOM* as affectively interacted. Such an understanding of space is also compatible with the theory of gender as I presented earlier through a focus of movements of 'territorialization/deterretorialization', or forces that constantly attempt to stabilize and disrupt the assemblage through repetition without ever pointing towards an original or natural state of the space.

There are three further analytical concepts beyond what has already been mentioned that I consider particularly helpful for producing an understanding of how space is affectively interacted. These being collected under the rubric "segmentarity", or how "boundaries are used to inscribe territories" (Dovey 2010: 18). The first is "binary segmentarity", or division according to a binary logic, such as the ally/enemy divide which is one example from gameplay of *XCOM*.

The second is "circular segmentarity", or the ways in which hierarchical relations are constructed and come to "resonate" with each other. An example being the various ways in which character classes in *XCOM*, such as the 'support' class which grants offensive and defensive bonuses to other soldiers and the 'assault' class which is optimized to move quickly and deal damage to enemies involves a specific set of relations, connections and therefore an experience of space in the game. The third is "linear segmentarity", or how space is experienced and ordered through progression, such as a pattern of "DROP OFF → COVER → ATTACK → COVER → LOCATE RESOURCES → COVER → ERADICATE, etc."[7] which I have noted elsewhere in relation to gameplay in *XCOM* (Andersson 2016: 17).

Whilst these are different types of segmentarity, they are not, as Dovey (2010: 19) mentions, mutually exclusive but rather "interconnected and overlapped since segments [of the assemblage] may be lodged in binary, nested and sequential relations simultaneously". That is, the way space is being affectively interacted often involves the 'doing' of all types of segmentarities at the same time.

4.5 Theory of Gameplay: the paida/ludus continuum

To begin this discussion of a theory of gameplay I will first have to introduce brief definitions of the terms "play" and "game", and the relations and tensions between them which I denote as the "possibility space" (Will Wright 2004) of gameplay.

Jensen (2013: 69) presents three models for understanding play, where in the first is is "a highly structured set of activity or set of activities designed to ward off boredom." In the second, Jensen (2013: 69) describes play as "an outlet for expression, a spontaneous and complex manifestation of human emotions." And in the third, which is based on formulations by John Huizinga, play is not only a human endeavour, but one undertaken by non-human animals as well and where play is an important part of the formation of culture (Jensen 2013). This third formulation is the one which Jensen (2013) has grounded his arguments of play in digital games on, and so is the one I will use myself for this essay, even though I value the input from the two earlier definitions as well. Especially in their focus on play as 'structured set of activities' and as 'an outlet for expression'.

Games, on the other hand, are defined as a type of contest governed by a specific set of rules, and which may with a winner and a loser. It is especially important here, I argue, to reflect on the ways in which this definition of a 'game' is gendered. As was mentioned in the introduction to this essay, one of the practices through which gender differences have been re-inscribed

[7] Each map in *XCOM* begins with the squadron of soldiers being dropped off at a certain location, where the player will then need to complete various objectives, such as killing all enemies that are present, locate and extract resources needed for character and item enhancements, and keep the soldiers safe from harm.

through research has been through the representation of gameplay by cis-boys as 'competetive' whereas gameplay from cis-girls has been represented as 'cooperative' (Jenson & de Castell 2008). Here I wish to bring up a problematic in defining games based on the binary outcome of either winning or losing since this definition favors the qualification of something as a 'game' by virtue of it containing competitive elements, whilst it simultaneously may neglect aspects of cooperation. Rather, I see competition and cooperation as equally important aspects of games which are by no means mutually exclusive, but rather working together. Such a reframing I consider important for an understanding of games that does not favor one aspect over another, but rather looks towards the relations between competitive and cooperative elements and how they are innervated by each other.

Two concepts in particular for understanding the relation between play and game in gameplay comes through Caillos formulation of *ludus* and *paida*, argues Jensen (2013). *Ludus*, or the *ludic aspect* of gameplay stands for the explicit rules which are presented through the game's design and which may lead to a winning scenario, such as the requirement of players to kill all enemies in each map of *XCOM* to progress to the next one. *Paida,* or the *paidic* aspect of gameplay stands for the possibilities to improvise or have fun with the gameplay, as well as the implicit socio-cultural rules of gameplay which may not lead to a winning scenario, but informs a set of rules for gameplay that are defined by players themselves. Such as not losing any soldiers in *XCOM*, gathering the maximum amount of resources, or playing with an all-female squadron[8]. Jensen (2013) stresses, however, that *ludus* and *paida* are not to be seen as opposites, bur rather that they fold into each other and make up a continuum of gameplay, wherein the constant tension between them is what makes up the "possibility space" of a game. This is described as a "a site of constant but productive, generative conflict between order and chaos, between rules and uninhibited play." (Jensen 2013: 69). One phenomenon in particular is important for understanding these tensions, that being "metagaming" which stands for rules that are implemented by players or player communities, with the most famous example probably being 'speedruns'.[9] The practices of "metagaming," as Jensen (2013: 72) notes, are socio-culturally influenced, such as how goals of accumulating wealth within the game are more prevalent in individualistic societies, and collectivistic societies may develop a metagame more focused on social ties and building a community. In this sense, Jensen (2013: 70) highlights the very real danger of viewing the virtual spaces of games as disconnected from the physical social space in which they are played because "…the playing of video games [should be understood as] an engagement with the sociocultural values that inform, and informed by, play itself." It is in

[8] An interesting development in game design in the past decade has been the implementation of 'achievments' or 'rewards' in the games design, where the completion of such scenarios award the player with tokens or badges which they may display in various communities.

[9] A 'speedrun' denotes the practice of completing a game in the shortest time possible, such as the "Games Done Quick" events that are done for charity. Website: https://gamesdonequick.com/

this sense, in the constant tensions between *paida* and *ludus,* that I see it as especially important to investigate the ways in which game space is affectively interacted.

5

Analysis

5.1 Introduction

In this section I will present my analysis of the gameplay sessions and interviews with the two players who participated. The interviews were originally conducted in Swedish, but are here translated for consistency with the language of the essay. The analysis will be structured around the interviews of both players, where I will present them in turn. Each section will be introduced through a description of the players, their background with playing digital games, and how they have experienced their gender(s) in relation to gaming. Following this is an analysis of their gameplay of *XCOM*.

5.2 Estée: background with digital games

"Estée," a university student in her twenties was the first to agree to a gameplay session for this study. The session was conducted in her home, where I would provide brief instructions to the game and then leave her on her own during the actual gameplay, so as not to affect her choices and experiences negatively. In our interview session, when I asked about her background with digital games, she mentioned that she had been playing on and off for roughly seventeen years. Her first game had been *The Sims*, which was also one of her favorite game series. In general, she says that she likes game with role-playing aspects, such as *GTA* (Grand Theft Auto), even though she dislikes FPS games. Saying that "I haven't played that many first person shooters, but those I've played have been boring." As she was saying this, she sounded stumped over her own answer, as if mulling over what she found to be an inconsistency between not liking shooting-games, but liking *GTA* which features plenty of gameplay wherein shooting takes centre stage. After thinking it over for a while, she interrupts me (who has moved on to another question) by saying:

> Estée: "and there's also this that you can just drive a cab if you want … I know that the two things I like the most about the first *GTA* we [her and her sister] had was on the one hand driving a cab, on the other, police missions were also fun, but the other was car-chases. You know, to start killing and get more and more stars[10], drive around in

[10] In the GTA series, when you commit a crime you get one or several 'stars' which pop up on the screen, and by which the player can track how wanted they are by the police.

> the car … I had this place on a roof where I could stand and just shoot all these cops and survive for as long as possible."

What her comment here gives examples of is a practice that is referred to as "metagaming," or how socio-cultural 'rules', known as *paida,* come to influence the explicit 'game rules', or *ludus* (Jensen 2013). Her practice of using *GTA*, on some occasions, as a type of taxi-simulator and on others for rampant killing sprees of police officers is not something which leads to a 'winning situation' within the game, yet these practices are still supported by the games affects. The reason for why I have chosen to focus on this commentary from Estée is that I think it gives a clear example of what Wright (2004) has called "possibility spaces". The possibility space of GTA, for instance, is different from that of another game, such as *The Sims* because the affects of *The Sims* does not allow for the same type of gameplay as that of *GTA*. But a game's possibility space, as I see it, also denotes how such practices are not only informed by the possible affects of the game (such as being able to drive a taxi, or shoot police officers), but how they also shape what Dovey (2010) calls a 'sense of place'. In his discussion of space as assemblage, he says that

> "… a street is not a thing or just a collection of discreet things. The buildings, trees, cars, sidewalk, goods, people, signs, etc. all come together to become the street, but it is the connections between them that makes it an assemblage or a place." (Dovey 2010: 16)

Such is also the case for Estées 'place on the roof'. It becomes 'this place' through her practice of running away from and then shooting police officers. It is in its connections, the difficulty of getting access, its altitude, the line of sight which it brings, etc. that it becomes affectively interacted as 'this place' through Estée's gameplay. Her very identity here as a 'killer' or her act of 'killing' depends on the temporary construction of a 'place for killing'. It must be stressed that this place is not primordial, not some '*ur-killing-place*,' but that it serves as such a place through an aleatory functioning, depending on its connections with other places. Her 'place' sweeps up the rooftop on which she stands, the stairways leading up to it from the ground below, the firescape scaling upwards, the streets below, and the airspace where helicopters flutter into one assemblage of slaughter. And the assemblage passes into others with either her escape or her death, where it will no longer be 'this place', but other places.

Estée says that she has never played online games, but mostly played games with her sister. She identifies as a woman, and has noticed during the past few years how she has felt less confident when playing with men. She remembers one instance in particular where they had invited a male friend to play *The Last of Us*, a dystopian survival game with zombies. Their friend had chosen a more difficult setting than they usually played on, and she noticed how this setting altered the gameplay, as they now had to sneak around their enemies rather than killing them since that was too difficult. As was noted from the results by Ratan et al. (2014), players

who identify as male tend to play more hours than those who identify as female, and they are also more likely to over-estimate their own competence, resulting in things such as choosing difficulty levels over their own competence. Estée explained her own sense of competence by saying: "I'm not that … super-skilled which you may become if you've played more", because even though she has played for seventeen years or so, she does it sporadically. Estée's explanation is in line with the study by Ratan et al. (2014) where the results indicated that the most important variable for competence was the amount of hours played, and the intensity of play. But how are these accounts to be understood as gendered? As Jenson and de Castell (2010) have argued, one of the most common ways to perform masculinity is to display technological competence, whereas the performance of femininity involves the display of unfamiliarity with technology. In this sense, the very choice of difficulty setting can be seen as gender performative, where the effects on competence serve to naturalize a hierarchization that values masculinity and de-values femininity.

5.3 Estée: gameplay of *XCOM*

When we began with Estées gameplay sessions, I asked her to go through some of the settings of the game, such as mouse sensitivity, soldier's speech (activated or not), and subtitles (activated or not). For her, the mouse sensitivity (the correspondence between hand-movements and in-game movements of the characters or the cursor) was not that important, and she said that she usually only changes this setting in case she were to feel distracted by it being too slow or too fast. Ash (2013), when discussing how players of *Call of Duty* become "attuned" to the game on the XBOX 360[11], argues that one of the key factors for "somatic attunement" is done through the thumbstick sensitivity. He continues by saying that experienced players who have become more competent at the game use a higher sensitivity than beginners as this allows them to perform faster movements in the game. As such, competence at playing the game here becomes related through a somatic skill-set developed by the player. If simply transferring Ash's (2013) arguments to the gameplay of Estée, this would entail that she does not display competence at the game through not valuing the importance of mouse sensitivity. Yet how is it then that Estée's gameplay later shows competence in factors such as not having any soldiers killed, that she is able to gather all resources, and simultaneously wins each map at relative speed? What I consider important to reflect upon when writing about gameplay and judgements of competence is something which Ash (2013: 27) himself brings up, namely that "different games require very specific sets of skills and knowledges in order for users to be successful." The reason for this is something which I have brought up earlier in my section of theory, namely that the affects of each game differ from one another. And so too, then, the skills nee-

[11] A popular gaming console. One of the main differences between console games and computer games lie in the input device, where a hand-controller is used for consoles and most often a computer mouse and keyboard for computer games.

ded to tap into these affects. Yet another reason is that the skill-set developed depends on the goals of the gameplay, which I have indicated are not fixed solely by the way the game has been designed, but is also influenced by socio-cultural factors, such as through the practice of "metagaming" (Jensen 2013). To understand the competence displayed by a player, then, it becomes important to understand why they are playing, and which goals they set for themselves. To do otherwise, I argue, is another way in which research may start off from an androcentric bias, since what has counted as 'gameplay' in research has largely been focused on practices of gameplay by cis-men.

Estée says that what she enjoys most about playing digital games is the ability for her to construct her own story, and as such she focused on settings that allowed her to alter sources of information related by the game through subtitles and soldier's speech. If the goal is to construct and follow a story that is being shaped through gameplay, is her choice of settings not then a display of competence? It is in this sense that I consider it important for researchers to investigate how gender is "in play" by asking themselves, not only how play is being defined by the person 'doing' it, but also how they themselves 'do' it in their practice of writing.

Her practice of playing, it being story focused, also influenced her choice of difficulty setting. She chose the setting 'Normal', it being described as "For players familiar with tactical games. Challenging, but fair." in the game menu. When I asked her about her choice, she said that it sounded like what she wanted from the gameplay and would suit her the best. Normally, she says that she does not attempt more difficult settings, because then she has felt that the story of the game has 'lagged on', and that she has gotten 'stuck'. At this point, it is also important to reflect on the affects of the game, and how they differ from one another. In Ash's (2013: 28) account, he describes the spaces of multiplayer maps in *Call of Duty* and argues how they had been designed for contingency, calling them "intense spaces" which produce "captivated subjects". He argues that "attuning oneself to the game involves a self-management of the affective and emotional state of being of the user in an attempt to minimize negative affects such as frustration and vulnerability." (Ash 2013: 28). Self-management to minimize frustration and vulnerability may here refer to choosing a suitable difficult level. There's one major difference between the difficulty level present in the gameplay of the multiplayer mode of *Call of Duty* and the single player mode of *XCOM* however, that I here consider important to analyze in relation to how players attune themselves to a game. In *Call of Duty*, as with most multiplayer games[12], the difficulty level the player experiences is based on their own skill level in relation to other players. All players start at the same level, or 'rank' and only encounter players of the same 'rank'. They then have to 'work themselves up' through what is known as a 'ladder system' within gaming communities by winning games. In this sense, the way attunement works as a

[12] See for instance *Hearthstone, League of Legends,* or the 'Arena' system i *World of Warcraft*.

process within such multiplayer games is different from single-player games because it is dynamic, based on the skill level of the player in relation to other players, rather than being a choice in which the player must attempt to identify their own skill level to get challenging gameplay.[13] Thus, whilst players of *Call of Duty* in Ash's (2013) study, according to his account, 'attuned' themselves to the affects of the game, I think it is more in line to say that in order to do so, they also had to attune themselves to the gameplay of other players in accordance with the metagame of the given moment. Players of *XCOM*, on the other hand, have to attune themselves to the gameplay in accord with the difficulty level of their own choosing, a practice argued to be gendered. In this sense, the way gender is "in" play, such as gendered practices of difficulty settings, form a relationship with how gender is "at" play during actual gameplay because of the relationship between difficulty settings and the affects of gameplay.

When Estée played the first map, she found herself on a tutorial mission where her squadron had been sent to rescue a contingent of German soldiers that had first contact with the aliens. The soldiers in her squadron had been randomized by the game, and she was mildly disappointed that the squadron consisted of three male soldiers, and one female. She said that it would have felt more 'fun' if there had been at least an equal distribution of male and female soldiers. This lead to us discussing her relationship to the in-game characters, where I asked her if she had any preference when it came to in-characters gender(s). She then said that, even though she prefers an equal distribution between male and female characters in games, she herself prefers to play as male characters. So I asked her:

> Martin: "Why is that do you think?"
>
> Estée: "I'm not quite sure why, I sometimes feel that if I could choose I'd want to be a man *laughter* So I think it's that you get to be that a little … I like that you can choose who you want to be, and that you can be like a little tougher … It's not that I can't be tougher when I play as a girl, but … I don't know really."

As has been argued by Messinger et al. (2008), people feel less restrained by normative inhibitions when they are playing as characters in a game. Meaning that for Estée the ability to play as a male character in-game afforded her to perform a tougher persona than she feels allowed to in real life due to gender norms and the gender binary, which holds 'male' and 'female' as essentialized categories which are binary opposites (Lykke 2009). Such affordances of gendered characters in relation to behavior has also been discussed by Martey et al. (2014), who noti-

[13] An interesting tension between these two modes of the relation between a players perceived skill level and actual skill level can be found in the phenomenon known as 'being stuck in Elo hell' ("The Elo rating system is a method for calculating the relative skill level of players…" (http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/Elo_rating_system)) in *League of Legends,* where some players complain that the matchmaking system does not work, and they are forced to play with less-skilled players than themselves, but unable to achieve a higher rank. In reference to the point by Ratan et al. (2015) that male players often over-estimate their own skill level, it is interesting that the player base of *League of Legends* is approximately 96% male. (Ratan et al. 2015: 447)

ced how male players in *World of Warcraft* behaved differently when they were playing as female characters rather than male characters. This included behavior such as a higher frequency of jumping and emoting. As such it is important to keep in mind Butler's insistence on how the performance of gender does not point towards natural categories of 'male/female'. Such that male characters are tougher and female characters are more emotive. The point is rather that in the acts of 'doing' gender in a way which corresponds to hegemonic accounts serves to naturalize such an order and dichotomy. What gender performances "at" play affords, however, are instances of rupture wherein such an order is destabilized by players through the affects of gameplay, such as players identifying as female being afforded the expression of a tougher persona. Even though it may also be re-inscribed by those very affects through affective interaction, as by performing toughness through a male character. As such, there is a constant tension between gender performances and gameplay through the inclusion of gendered characters.

Estée noted one affect in particular as important for her to feel a 'connection' with an in-game character, that being speech. As I have already noted, her gameplay was story-focused, and in the settings, she had chosen to maximize speech from characters. At this point in our interview, I asked her how she conceptualized herself in relation to the in-game characters:

> Martin: "How do you identify yourself in *XCOM* when you're playing?"
>
> Estée: "Who I am then, or what?"
>
> Martin: "Yeah, like when you're playing, do you see 'yourself' as 'someone' in the game?"
>
> Estée: "I think I'm everyone, a little. You know, the soldiers, and then you're the 'commander' or whatever it's called … in the base. But I don't think I've really identified myself as that 'commander' … it's more like I'm this god who controls everyone."

Althusser (2008) speaks of interpellation primarily in a linguistic fashion, wherein someone calls out to 'you' whereby the subject comes to recognize themselves as the person which 'you' refers to. However, Estée does not see herself as 'someone', or as one person within the game, but as many. This is in turn supported by the affects of the game, wherein the player must switch between the soldiers at their command every 'turn' during gameplay. For Estée, the process by which the game attempts to interpellate her as the 'commander' by naming her fails. The interpellation fails, I argue, because the naming does not correspond directly to an action which she can carry out in the game. Thus, the interpellation bears no relation to the way in which she affectively interacts space. Rather, by not receiving any cues which correspond to a possible action, she becomes disembodied and floats between different subject positions. She is not 'grounded' other than in moments where a character speaks up or calls out in the game demanding her attention, which are also the instances which she enjoys the most. At one moment

in particular, she reacts to the guttural voice of one the German soldiers who calls out "Hilfe…" This cry for help, its source first unknown, interpellates her as a 'helper', and so she moves her right hand holding the computer mouse in a circular motion in order to locate a visual cue which corresponds to the voice who calls out. In so doing, I argue, she engages in haptic interaction wherein sight, sound, movement and touch work together to affectively interact space. It is through the movements of her hand and computer mouse that the very space in which 'helping someone' becomes a possibility, because she must first delimit this space, "… to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited center." (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 362). The German voice and the visual representation of the wounded German soldier becomes centered through her hand movements, wherein the possibility space is affectively interacted. Upon locating the source, she deftly maneuvers the soldier closest to it to intercept and hopefully save the one in need of help. But it is too late, the German soldier fades away. However, she 'connects' with the soldier who she commanded to investigate, and in that moment aligns her own subject position of the 'commander' with that of the soldier through the act of 'helping'. It is during these vocal cues that she feels connected, both to the game and to the characters. Otherwise they are merely puppets at her control. This affects her gameplay, I argue, as when she plays the second map, she keeps those characters she has 'connected with' safe from harm by positioning them farther from skirmishes, behind cover.

She begins the map by skirting around the edges of her field of vision with the mouse cursor to get an overview of what she can see of the map, the rest being clouded by *fog of war*.[14] Through this practice, Estée also affectively interacts the possibility space of the game, drawing a boundary between the space which she can analytically ascertain and the space she has no knowledge of. This is the process which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as "territorialization" by which the territory, or place, becomes through expression: "The territory is in fact an act that affects milieus and rhythms, that 'territorializes' them." (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 366). That is, the place must first be expressed by Estée for her to be able to take action in it. As was argued by Ash (2013), affects are interdependent with cognition in gameplay through the process of "attunement," and Estée's practice of drawing a boundary around the possibility space, I argue, displays such an interdependence. This because she must affect the space in order to become cognizant of it. Her cognition of the space, in turn, influences her affective interaction of space, most notably through her positioning of the soldiers.

This is primarily done by effectuating 'safe places' for the soldiers which she cares for, placing them behind cover in the form of cars, rocks, or other types of debris. But it is also done

[14] A common design pattern in strategy games is the inclusion of 'fog of war', which denotes areas of the map which are darkened so that players are not granted vision of them until they have move closer with their soldiers. In this sense the way space 'unfolds' in the game is entirely dependent on the movement of the in-game soldiers, and therefore also, the hand gestures of the player.

through creating distance between her soldiers, and between the soldiers and the alien enemies. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, there is a close relation between distance and territories:

> "The territory is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species: Mark your distance. What is mine is first of all my distance; I possess only distances. Don't anybody touch me, I growl if anyone enters my territory, I put up placards. Critical distance is a relation based on matters of expression. It is a question of keeping at a distance the forces of chaos knocking at the door." (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 372)

Estée risks the lives of soldiers she has made no connection with in favor of those she likes, and effectuates a "binary segmentation" between them in the construction of these 'safe places' which are bounded through the positioning of less-liked soldiers. These soldiers function precisely as 'placards', as intermediaries, which serve as setting up a boundary for the 'safe places'. That is, there is a constant tension between the affects of gameplay and how space is being shaped by her gameplay. This based on what she is able to do with her characters (such as take cover behind debris, or position them closer to her enemies) and feel for them (to be connected or not) and how this informs her cognitive decision making in attempts to minimize her 'losses'. These connections are not, however, 'ready-made', but are rather formed through gameplay, specifically based on vocal cues which afford her to affectively interact space.

5.4 Kim: background with digital games

Kim is also a university student in their twenties, and was the second to agree on participating in a gameplay session for this study. The session took place at a local public library, where I would instruct Kim as I had done for Estée. There was a variance in these instructions, however. Estée played her first map as a tutorial, whereas this step was skipped for Kim. The reason for this was for me to see if this resulted in any variance in gameplay, and how both players made sense of place in their gameplay.

Kim says that they probably play more than most people, and are quite experienced with digital games, having played them for about twelve years, although not of the same type as *XCOM*. Mostly they play RP (role-playing) games with some sort of science fiction or fantasy theme. Their favorite game series are *Dragon Age* (BioWare 2009-2014), a series of RP fantasy games, and *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007-2012), a series of RP sci-fi games. I asked Kim what they liked most about these series, where they answered that:

> Kim: "They're very focused on immersion, that you're able to enter a character … what I think is most important is the social interaction … that you have this freedom of choosing different types of characters is very important for me, because for me it's not super-important that the character I'm playing reminds me of myself, but I like trying different types of characters."

Both the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series feature gameplay where the player is identified as one character in the game, and can interact with other characters through dialogue options. As such, the affects of gameplay in these games differ from *XCOM* as *XCOM* offers no such alternatives of interaction or characterization through dialogue.

Kim identifies as non-binary, or gender queer, and has mostly played single-player games, not really having been engaged in wider online gaming communities. I ask Kim if they've ever reflected on or felt their gender identity in relation to gaming.

> Kim: "For my queer identity it has been important to be able to experiment with different 'roles', you know … just to see … you know, try out different roles and see what changes … but in some sense it's also a form of identity formation, you know like, is there a possibility for me to play as queer? Then I usually do that."
>
> Martin: "mmmm, go on."
>
> Kim: "It gives me like a greater sense of identification, even though it's not important that the characters themselves identify as queer or are like me."
>
> Martin: "Is part of your practice then to queer your characters?"
>
> Kim: "Yeah, I think that's important. I also have a tendency to, overall, choose these, it's a question of representation really, these things which you usually don't see in games. Like playing as characters who are black for example when there's a possibility to do that."

To 'queer' something, such as a character, means to engage in a practice that questions and problematizes regulatory norms such as ethnicity, gender, or sexuality (Bromseth & Darj 2010; Ambjörnsson 2006). For Kim, this practice is important for their gameplay also in the sense that it becomes an identificatory practice. Unlike what was postulated by Messinger et al. (2008), Kim's mode of identifying with in-game characters is not so much about creating a correspondence between themselves and the character, but rather driven by political motives of addressing and destabilizing hegemonic regulatory ideals. In this sense, gender can be considered to be "at play" differently for Kim than it was for Estée, as Estée's practice was centered on being afforded to display behavior which she otherwise feels as not having access to. Whereas for Kim, their practice is centered a more overtly political agenda which criticizes the very formation of such norms. They are, however, also similar in that they both constitute acts of resistance against regulatory norms in regard to gender. Gender was also "in play" for Kim in the sense that in-game characters were gendered, and thus formed a complex web of relations and tensions with how gender came to be "at play" through their practice of 'queering' these gendered characters through their interaction. As Jenson & de Castell (2010) have pointed out, one of the reasons why it is important for researchers to formulate questions around gender as per-

formance rather than biological differences is that non-stereotypical modes of interaction otherwise run the risk of falling to the wayside in the analysis. Such accounts are much in need, I would argue, to break with androcentric and heteronormative accounts of what constitutes gameplay, and which also may serve to bring into focus the multitude of ways in which gender is "in" play. These forms of interaction, wherein gender norms are destabilized, also bear on the tensions between "paidic" and "ludic" aspects of gameplay (Jensen 2013). This, I argue, because the ways in which gender is "at" play for both Kim and Estée make up a "paidic" aspect of gameplay, which in turn pivots towards the "ludic" aspect by virtue of being adopted and reformulated as an explicit goal of their gameplay (such as 'queering' characters or playing male characters as 'tough'). As such, I argue that it is not possible to make any clear distinctions between the ways in which gender is "in" play or "at" play, as they reinforce each other through processes of destabilization and stabilization. However, I argue that it is still important to maintain them as analytical levels for the purpose of analyzing movements and tensions between them, and to not fall into a position wherein the technologies through which gameplay is afforded are conceptualized as somehow unaffected by genderings. To keep them as distinct analytical levels, I also argue, upholds Landström's (2007) insistence on granting an analytical symmetry between gender and technology and how they are coproduced through interaction.

5.5 Kim: gameplay of *XCOM*

Before Kim and me started reviewing their gameplay, they commented that they had felt slightly at a loss whilst playing because they didn't know the controls. As Ash (2013) has discussed, "attunement" is a central concept for analyzing how players learn the games which they play. Not only in the sense that they are aware of the basic mechanics, but also in how they develop an intuitive knowledge of the game, and come to embody the game mechanics themselves. As for the case of Kim's gameplay, since they were not attuned to the game (such processes take time and effort), they felt themselves making many mistakes during their gameplay which resulted in the death of some of their soldiers. What this furnished me with was an empirical basis on which to propel an argument that I have intuited from my experience of gameplay, namely that the process of "interpellation" as formulated by Althusser is entwined with that of attunement. As I would argue, they are co-dependent because the player becomes 'named' not solely, or even most effectively, by instances where someone or something in the game 'names' them, such as the player of *XCOM* attempts to interpellate the player as the 'commander'. Rather, the process of interpellation works through a shaping which affects the very bodily capacities of the players themselves. For instance, how a player develops a "tacit knowledge," or bodily memory of the games mechanics (Ash 2013). As a teenager I played roughly 5000 hours of *World of Warcraft* in a span of three years. What is peculiar about this is that I still remember, as if in my fingers, all the various hotkeys for my different characters. That is, I 'was' these cha-

racters by virtue of literally embodying them in my hands and fingers. Kirkpatrick (2009) is the only academic in whose writings I have encountered an account of gameplay which gives centre stage to the technologies with which players are able to perform the interaction with computers. He argues that much of the reason why researchers have fallen into a dichotomy between virtuality and reality is based on their negligence of analyzing the means through which digital worlds are realized. Kirkpatrick (2009: 135) argues that:

> "[i]t is in the silencing of the controller that we construct the boundary between ordinary experience and the illusion we enter when we relate to screen imagery and other game feedback "as if" they constituted an environment of immersive world for play."

The point he is here making, which can be worked through by Ash's (2013) formulation of "attunement," is that there is no clear separation between the 'digital' and the 'real' world, simply because the space of the digital world is effectuated through bodily gestures (as I also argued previously based on Estée's gameplay). Rather, what gives rise to such an illusion lies in the processes by which players attune themselves to the gameplay, and how they come to 'infold' the game mechanics in their own bodies by using the computer mouse and keyboard as extension of themselves. That is, players are 'hailed' not primarily through linguistic means, but by attuning themselves to the gameplay, wherein the distinction between themselves and their in-game characters is collapsed.

But even though Kim was not attuned to *XCOM* and struggled with some of the game's mechanics, they were still interpellated, only through other means. By feeling at a loss with the game's mechanics, Kim felt themselves far more responsible for their soldiers than did Estée, and placed a certain blame on themselves whenever a soldier died at the hands of the aliens. This also influenced how space through their gameplay was affectively interacted. Due to the responsibility which Kim felt for their soldiers, they decided to move them around the map in groups of two, and so hopefully minimize losses. At work in this strategy are the types of "segmentation" discussed by Dovey (2010). Kim effectuates a "binary segmentarity" in forming groups of two which are to stand against the alien enemies, creating a distance between them. Estée's gameplay and how she affectively interacted space, as has been noted, was also a process of creating distance. But in her case it was about keeping some soldiers safe at the cost of others, whereas for Kim it was in an attempt to keep everyone equally safe. In Estée's gameplay, key to her success in each skirmish was to effectuate a "binary segmentarity" between her soldiers and the aliens through the use of cover, a tactic she learned from the tutorial. This type of binary segmentation was however missing from Kim's gameplay, which I argue demonstrates the importance of how a game is able to teach players its own ludic aspects, whereby goals (killing aliens) are not only divested, but also the means to achieve them.

These groupings also effectuated a “circular segmentarity” in that the two soldiers in each group came to ‘resonate’ with one another, one being on the offensive and the other on the defensive. They also resonated between groups, being able to switch gears at a moments notice in case of contact with the aliens to serve as back-up for one another. Kim felt, however, that they were not clear on the objectives of the mission, as that had not been expressed in such a way that they had taken part of them. Such information is related in a loading screen depicting the squadron of soldiers on an airship before each map, in quite an inconspicuous way I must add, as the informational text melds with the backdrop of the airships interior. As such, by not being attuned to the game’s way of relating important information, Kim’s affective interaction of the game space was not linearized in accord with a “linear segmentarity,” wherein there is a clear sense of progression. Instead, Kim had to rely on their knowledge of other turn-based strategy games, and guess what the goals were and how best to achieve them. Such a deployment of tactics displays, I argue, one instance wherein there is a tension between the “ludic” and the “paidic" aspects of gameplay. Jensen (2013: 69) argues that “[b]ecause of the transformative influences of culture, play, and a practice that has been referred to as ‘metagaming,’ paidia inevitably transforms into ludus.” This phenomenon I argue is visible in Kim’s gameplay, wherein the “ludic” aspects of gameplay in other games came to influence Kim’s decision-making in *XCOM,* only re-introduced as “paidic”. That is, what had been explicit goals in other games known to Kim were reformulated and tried out in *XCOM* as implicit, socio-cultural goals where they improvised tactics in order to achieve these goals. By the process of trying out such tactics, they were then again reformulated as “ludic” by virtue of being successful, or leading to a “winning situation” (Jensen 2013: 70).

What also became obvious when reviewing Kim’s gameplay was Ash’s (2013) argument that affects and cognition in gameplay are interdependent. Because by not being attuned to the gameplay, Kim was not cognizant of the affects of *XCOM*. They did not at first know how to shoot in the game, but had to figure it out by a process of elimination, a process which costed them at least the life on one soldier. Yet after they had this figured out, they quickly dispatched their enemies with no further losses when playing their first map. In this way, I argue that Kim’s gameplay and learning experience demonstrated Ash’s (2013: 29) postulate that “[p]rocesses of cognition can shape affective capacities and affects themselves can work to rewire the relationship between thought and action.” That is, Kim had first to become aware of the ‘affective capacities’ of *XCOM* (such as shooting, or taking cover) in order to perform then, and after having learned their affective capacities, they altered their gameplay and used different tactics to kill their enemies.

6

Results & Concluding Discussion

6.1 Summary of the Results

The gameplay of Estée and Kim, it was indicated through my analysis, displayed an interdependence between cognition and affects in how they were able to affectively interact the game space. In Estée's case, game space was affectively interacted primarily through vocal cues, such as how dialogue and voice-acting from the in-game characters demanded an appropriate action from her in the form of hand-mouse movements, which made her feel connected to them. These affective connections, in turn, influenced the decision making in her gameplay, affecting space through creating boundary lines and distance between her soldiers in order to keep some safe at the risk of others. Estée preferred playing as male characters in-game because she felt that this afforded her to display 'toughness', a trait she otherwise could not display due to gender norms. It was in this sense, that for Estée, gender was "at" play. It was also indicated that gender was "in" play primarily through the ways in which difficulty levels become gendered through the performance of competence. How gender was "in" play, in this case, was also noted to form a complex relationship with how gender was "at" play, in that the difficulty level influences how a player "attunes" themselves to the game, and also, how they come to affectively interact game space.

Kim, on the other hand, affectively interacted game space primarily through the affect of 'care', feeling responsible for their soldiers, and thus attempted to keep them all equally safe by grouping them two and two. In this case, it became more clear how the relationship between cognition and affect became 'wired' through gameplay, wherein Kim's gameplay displayed how a player first must become cognizant of the affects of a game in order to actually affect them. Once they had learned these affects, and thus "attuned" themselves in a sense, their conscious decision-making itself was altered, leading to Kim deploying a different set of tactics. This 'rewiring' also influenced how space was affectively interacted through their gameplay as they began directing their soldiers in a different fashion from before. Gender was noted to be "at" play for Kim in their practice of 'queering' in-game characters, and in their preference for playing as characters who are otherwise marginalized in digital games. As such, they conceptualized their practice of identifying with in-game characters as mainly political, whereby they attempted to destabilize hegemonic accounts of gender. How gender was "at play" for Kim was also connected to how gender was "in play", as the way characters were already gendered

through the game's design afforded Kim to effectively 'quuer' them. As I argued, it is not possible to make any clear distinctions between the ways in which gender is "in" play or "at" play, as they reinforce each other through processes of destabilization and stabilization. But I also argued that they should be maintained as separate analytical levels. This as such a divide allows for the analysis of affordances and constraints between the affects of gameplay and how they are gendered (for instance if different affects are made available based on in-game characters gender), and how game space is then affectively interacted through the performance of gender. It also grants an analytical position wherein the technologies of gameplay are not taken for granted as value- and/or gender-neutral, but rather asks the question of how technology and gender are coproduced through interaction.

6.2 Concluding Remarks & Discussion

The main focus in this essay has been on developing and exploring the possibilities of a theoretical framework for analyzing the tensions and relations between the shaping of gender and space in digital gameplay. This has lead to a slight asymmetry between theory and the empirical material produced through my method, wherein I have favored the theoretical aspects. This I consider to be the essays greatest contribution, as well as its largest flaw. To counter what I consider to be flawed in the essay, I have decided to devote this section to point towards how more empirically based research can be conducted that takes into consideration the possibilities offered by the theoretical framework here developed.

One such enterprise would be mindful of the huge gains of employing a greater variety of participants for a better understanding of non-stereotypical engagements between users and technology and the complex relations and tensions between the shaping of gender, space, and technology through interaction. Such accounts are much in need, as I have already argued, to break with earlier androcentric and heteronormative accounts of gameplay wherein gendered differences are re-inscribed through research.

Another important point for further research is to be mindful of the lessons divested by Landström (2007) and Jenson and de Castell (2010) who all have argued that it is not simply gendered identities which shape technology in interaction, but that technology is equally important for understanding how gender is being shaped through interaction. I would also point towards the importance of including more intersectional approaches to better represent the dynamics between the coproduction of technology and social identity.

It would also be of need, I consider, to conduct research with a longitudinal design, wherein the process by which players attune themselves to games of various kinds can be represented in more detail, and offering yet another way of pointing towards the constant movements between stabilizations and destabilizations of how gender and space is made sense of during gameplay. Another possibility, which I regretfully had to abandon due to time constraints,

would be to develop the method here presented to focus more overtly and transparently on a spatial analysis of users gameplay. Such as the production of images that represent the maps interacted through a users gameplay, wherein each in-game characters movements on the map are depicted as flowing lines or dots of different colors. What such an addition would contribute, I argue, is a better understanding of the minute ways in which space becomes affectively interacted through in-game characters movements, as well as the gendered dynamics of this interaction.

What I also consider important for more empirically oriented research, based on the findings of this essay, are analyses of the connection between bodily gestures from players, such as hand-mouse movements, and the process of interpellation. Such analyses could provide a stronger empirical basis for Kirkpatrick's (2009) postulate that the separation between the 'virtual' space of digital games and the 'real' space in which play takes place is based on an illusion wherein the technologies through which interaction takes place are left out of the analysis. Particularly useful for developing such accounts, beyond what has been sketched here, I consider the field of 'somatechnics' (Sullivan & Murray 2009) which considers the body to be always-already engaged in technologies. What the project of somatechnics thus offers researchers are the tools for better analyzing the affects of identity formation and the shaping of space in digital gameplay.

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