

## Chapter 2

# Learning to Love Your Stone: The Aesthetics and Experience of Computer Games

In old Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a king who behaved dishonourably in various ways: lying, murdering guests, abusing power and cheating the gods, including Death himself. Finally, Zeus punished him by condemning him to rolling a huge boulder up a hill in Hades. As soon as he reached the top, the rock would roll all the way down so that he had to start rolling it up again. The myth can be interpreted in various ways, such as the impossibility of avoiding death, the dangers of crossing the gods or the importance of never giving up, in more modern, positive psychology versions. It has, however, mostly become a popular way to describe meaningless tasks that are impossible to complete. Does this ring a bell? If you are a player, maybe you can already see how computer games could be a digital version of the Sisyphus hill.<sup>1</sup>

One of the first computer games I ever played was *Space Invaders*, sometime in the late 1980s. The neighbourhood bar had acquired a second-hand cabinet, which was shoved into a corner behind the table football and among the litter of paper napkins on the floor. The sceptical clientele, mostly pensioners, did not touch it, preferring their dominoes or a game of cards. A friend dragged me there after school one day to look at ‘the machine’, a big box with a blue control panel with yellow flying saucers and Chewbacca-like alien shapes around the screen. I remember hesitating. Arcades (far away at the centre of town) were forbidden territory, since our parents feared that they were slot machines in disguise. However, we reasoned, there was only one innocent cabinet here, with no protruding arms, flashing lights or suspicious fruits. Surely the owner, who was also

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<sup>1</sup>There is actually a literal game version of Sisyphus’ struggle, made by designer Pippin Barr as part of his ‘Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment Series’. There is no way of winning the game; you can only escape by closing the application (<https://pippinbarr.com/lets-play-ancient-greek-punishment/info/>).



our neighbour, would not instal something that could get us in trouble? There was no harm in giving it a try. We agreed that I would go first.

I inserted a coin as instructed by the screen text and waited. The black screen then changed to a scene with four house-shaped blocks at the bottom, under which a little cannon could be moved from left to right using two buttons in the control panel. There was also a 'fire' button, so you needed both your hands active at the same time. On the top part of the screen, five rows of aliens hovered over what we understood were my defenses, and immediately started moving from side to side while shooting down at me. The cartoony noise of the shots was inscribed into a background four-note rhythm loop that I found chilling, an ominous bass that gave me an unexplainable sense of urgency.

The first time, I did not live long. I was overwhelmed by the difficulty of both guarding myself from the alien fire and shooting at them effectively to avoid their breaching my defenses. A minute later, my friend suffered a similar fate, and just like that, our two coins were spent. We would return the next day, and the next, sacrificing a big part of our pocket money to this altar of coolness. There was something really important about saving the world from the alien menace, and we certainly put in the hours and got much better, reaching scores high enough to sometimes inscribe our name in the list of glory. Even today, the four-note loop gets my pulse racing, my survival instincts activated.

*Space Invaders* (in Spain unceremoniously called 'matamarcianos'/'martian killer') had no actual story, no edifying moral and nobody really missed it. We had no desire to know who the aliens were, why they were attacking or where our base was situated. The important thing was that it was our task to stop them. Like *Star Wars*, *Gatchaman* or *The War of the Worlds*, the game managed to tap into the zone of our imagination that had to do with spaceships, heroes, flying battles, laser sounds and the fear of the black, black void.

To me, the most frustrating (and at the same time alluring) part of the game was that the aliens just kept on coming, wave after wave, undeterred. No matter how many I had already killed, there were always more, and always faster. The beat would accelerate and I, regardless of how feverishly I punched the buttons, would be overrun. It was a last stand, a hill to climb up over and over, like Sisyphus'.<sup>2</sup>

If you have never played computer games, you might be thinking now that it sounds like a drab entertainment prospect to submit yourself to a monotonous act that can only end in defeat. Actually, when the gods want to chastise someone, they choose repetitive tortures, like in the case of Sisyphus, Tantalus or Prometheus.<sup>3</sup> Why would players show a perverted penchant towards a pointless and even self-destructive act? Jesper Juul notes that games are a paradoxical art

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<sup>2</sup>In the arcade age, most games were about delaying defeat for as long as possible.

<sup>3</sup>I became aware of this coincidence by reading Terrasa Torres (2021, p. 91).

form (like tragedy), where we willingly seek what would otherwise seem an unpleasant experience. Failure motivates us to improve our skills and is a source of different kinds of pleasure<sup>4</sup>, that do not necessarily need to be about positive emotions.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, there was something entrancing about trying to take yet another alien before the inevitable disaster, about lasting longer with every game, my fingers growing one with the buttons, moving without me having to think. This strong allure certainly goes against the modernist roots of our understanding of what an aesthetic experience should offer, with its focus on the special, the sublime, the out-of-this world. Instead of being bored or alienated by the repetitive activity, I was entranced, like many players before and after me. As we will see in this chapter, entrancement is key to the aesthetic experience of playing computer games, which is made possible by different kinds of repetition. So much so that I would argue that computer games are essentially a repetitive art form, as several game researchers have noticed in relation to such central topics as game mechanics, replayability or ritual.

But why does intense repetition generate positive affect instead of leading to desperation or even madness? How can we thrive in such monotony? We can turn again to Sisyphus, whose story is also well known through Albert Camus' 1942 existentialist retelling, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where the struggle in the hill becomes the scope of human life, reduced to the ultimate absurdity. According to Camus, human life is characterised by suffering and irrationality. Most of the things we do at our factories or office desks are meaningless. We just repeat the same kind of futile actions without reflecting upon them, even though nothing can ever be finished, or achieved. We live on, hoping for a better future that only can bring us death, which is final, since there is no god. The universe is silent. Indeed, if human existence is so bleak and futile, the only coherent answer would seem to be to kill ourselves. But even though Camus frames his essay around this dilemma, he ends up arguing against suicide. He rather wants to show how it is possible to choose to live anyway, and through this choice actually create a meaning which life does not possess by itself. According to Camus, it is possible to live if we become lucid, that is, refuse self-deception and look absurdity in the face. Yes, our actions do not have a transcendental meaning, but we can still live and be masters of our own destiny. In other words, the rather dark story ends up in a hopeful note:

I leave Sisyphus at the bottom of the mountain! We always find our own burden again. But Sisyphus can show us the higher fidelity that negates the gods and elevates rocks. He too considers that all is well. This universe henceforth without a

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<sup>4</sup>See Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure* (2013).

<sup>5</sup>In fact, negative emotions are also a catalisator for game pleasure, as Mateo Terrasa Torres carefully unfolds in his PhD thesis *El alma Oscura del Juego: Teoría y Motivos Recurrentes de la Dificultad como Estética Ludoficcional* (2021). Repetition turns out to be a crucial factor to explain different kinds of frustrating experiences related to games.

master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each grain of that stone, each mineral flake of that mountain full of night, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.<sup>6</sup>

Liberated from the crippling need to find transcendence, Sisyphus here has accepted absurdity and can therefore enjoy the content of his days. I interpret the mineral flake that 'in itself forms a world' as whatever activity a human being decides to dedicate themselves to, a light in the meaningless universe full of night. This activity can be digging, writing, sweeping, serving food, gardening, mothering or gaming; anything that is done being lucid and present.

Perhaps one can question the idoneity of discussing computer games through existentialism.<sup>7</sup> What would Camus have made out of the act of playing computer games? He might have seen them as one of the false illusions with which human beings fill their lives, as anaesthetic entertainment. Or he might see them as something in between illusion and lucidity, since playing computer games, like making art, is a futile endeavour that is deliberately chosen, and can therefore cultivate our awareness of the absurd condition of life.<sup>8</sup> When we decide to spend our time shooting alien spaceships instead of toiling away at whatever productive role we have in society (as students, as workers, as parents. . .), we could interpret it as a small revolution, a refusal to blindly comply with an alienating system where some activities are artificially considered more transcendent than others. By choosing an activity that is explicitly marked as intranscendent, we are (maybe) able to look at our condition in the face. There is a whole world in the stone we choose and a lucidity in learning to grip it in the best possible way, roll it up the hill and see it fall. Again. And again.

This might be wishful thinking though. An attempt to claim a higher form of consciousness for gamers that somehow redeems an otherwise suspect hobby. Maybe we need to look more closely at the medium of video games and its dependence on repetition before we can make any such claims. It is certainly good

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<sup>6</sup>This is my own translation from the French original (Camus, 1942) in Gallimard's edition from 1993, page 168.

<sup>7</sup>Although that is exactly what Gualeni and Vella do in their book *Virtual Existentialism* where they examine how we experience our existence within virtual environments, of which games are one kind. McKenzie Wark also turns to Camus' Sisyphus when discussing the game *Katamari Damacy* in his book *Gamer Theory* (2007). In this game, the player has to literally roll a ball to collect different kinds of objects. Here, Sisyphus is part of an argument about the topographic versus the topologic, where the logic of the digital subordinates that of the analog (pp. 79–85).

<sup>8</sup>I am on purpose ignoring debates about magic circles, playing games seriously or games having consequences in real life. I am aware of this scholarship but the point here is to foreground the existential quality of the gaming activity.

style to present some evidence before asking a reader to accept a conclusion. If this was a crime novel, we could cry out: ‘cherchez la femme’,<sup>9</sup> or even ‘The Butler did it!’,<sup>10</sup> and look for either women or butlers (even better, a female butler), in order to get to the bottom of the matter. The matter being computer games, we could start with a formalistic approach: what is repeated in computer games? However, I would like to not only talk about game mechanics but also include the players’ experience.<sup>11</sup> I am inspired by Walther and Larsen and their work on the phenomenology of game feel, where the body of players is the site of rhythmic interaction, a point I will return to later.<sup>12</sup>

## There and Back Again

Repetition in games is a cyclical affair at many levels. Indeed, like any skill-based activity, games work upon the logic of trial and error. If you think back to the first few times you tried to ride the bicycle of the first chapter, they were probably rather clumsy, maybe even resulting in a fall, until your senses and the right muscles learnt to collaborate. Most computer games require motor skill mastery, which takes time and effort to acquire, as well as multiple fails. Trial and error also works at higher levels of abstraction in this media form. Let us illustrate this by using an example from the *Super Mario* game series, the legendary platform game which many people will have encountered in one version or another.<sup>13</sup> In *Super Mario Bros*, the protagonist plumber has to rescue Princess Peach from her kidnapper, Bowser, overcoming a series of obstacles in the form of different levels. The player controls Mario in order to jump, run, collect coins and power-ups and defeat enemies in a rapid pace movement forward, which sometimes follows a fixed path and in other games allows for exploration of a world-like map. Each level represents a closed world that has to be ‘cleared’, typically with a boss fight at the end. Mario has a number of helpers (like his brother Luigi) that also can be

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<sup>9</sup>A sentence that is repeated several times in *Les Mohicans de Paris* (Alexandre Dumas, 1854), and which has become a cliché of women being the root of all evil in pulp detective novels.

<sup>10</sup>A popular cliché of detective novels, associated with Mary Rinehart’s novel *The Door* (1930).

<sup>11</sup>The academic study of computer games can be said to have started with a radical interest in form, which came to be known as *ludology*, even though its proponents were not an organised movement in any way. From its beginning shrouded in controversy, ludology aims to establish games as a separate medium worth of study in its own terms, and not through the standards of older art forms like narrative. Espen Aarseth’s manifesto-like editorial in the first issue of the journal *Gamestudies* is certainly a foundational text for this current (Aarseth, 2001).

<sup>12</sup>Walther and Larsen (2020).

<sup>13</sup>The games are part of the *Mario* franchise (Nintendo), the best-selling video game franchise of all time with dozens of versions of the *Super Mario* games since the first one appeared in 1985. There are also other media, like films anime or comics, spinoff games and all sorts of merchandise.

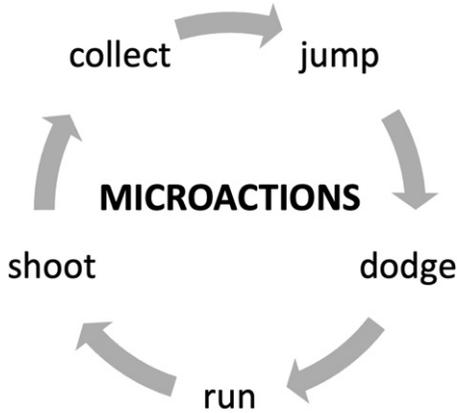


Fig. 1. Example of Microactions.

player characters in many of the games, as well as different kinds of enemies that reappear across levels and games.

In any game, there is a micro level of short actions, most often solved with one click of a button (or combination of buttons, like in the case of a specific fight combo) to be mastered in what Grodal calls ‘repetitive rehearsal’<sup>14</sup> and Walther and Larsen call ‘the dance’.<sup>15</sup> This happens very much at the motor skill level. These actions are the elementary blocks of gameplay, things like walking, running, shooting, jumping, or even looking (Fig. 1). This is a very anthropomorphic list that applies to the mostly humanoid avatars controlled by the player. However, simple actions can also be about manipulating more abstract objects, like moving our spaceship from left to right in the *Space Invaders* example that opened this chapter.

These *microactions* are usually the subject of game tutorials, either elaborate or in the form of a few instruction screenshots. In *Super Mario Bros*, the basics are not too hard to learn, but it takes some time to internalise them so the player does not need to think about them constantly. It is easy to run forward and jump, but it takes a bit of practice to jump at the right moment to avoid a moving enemy, or to fall precisely on top of a pipe in order to get down into it. Experienced players have a seamless style of movement with no hesitation, while new ones stop and restart in robotic ways that often end in failure, here represented as falling or getting caught by an enemy, which results in the loss of one’s life and the need to start again. While interacting through microactions, repetition is key to attain

<sup>14</sup>Grodal (2003, p. 148).

<sup>15</sup>Walther and Larsen (2020, p. 16). They describe three levels of game feel also divided into micro, meso and macro like I propose here (called *dance*, *learn* and *inhabit*), but their focus is on how players use the controllers to attain the different levels of the game feel, not on repetition. In their model, *dance* is based on temporality, *learn* on spatiality and *inhabit* synthetics both.

proficiency. Once we master these basic gameplay building blocks, they become subconscious operations allowing us to turn our awareness to a higher level type of action. In musical and rhythmic games, like *Guitar Hero* or *Taiko no Tatsujin*, this level is all-important; we need to become one with the music and the image prompts if we are ever going to complete a level without fail.

In relation to games, I suggest we call the next level *mesoactions*, defined as those that involve sequences of microactions and allow for engaging in some form of strategy play. Depending on the game genre, these mesoactions can take the form of a level to be traversed like in *Super Mario*, a round in a multiplayer shooter like *Counter-Strike* or a specific quest in a roleplaying game like *World of Warcraft*. Mesoactions are characterised by being more stretched in time than microactions. The player will typically have an opportunity to pause, often to save, so that the whole trajectory of the game becomes manageable, divided up into sizeable chunks that can be completed separately.<sup>16</sup> Unlike microactions, mesoactions can be carried out in different ways (Fig. 2). This is especially obvious in games with a strategic component, like any battle simulator or the aforementioned *Counter-Strike*, because the presence of other people to play against automatically heightens the indeterminacy factor of any kind of game outcome. But this is even true (if less crucial) of a rigid platform game like *Super Mario Bros*, where you can clear your levels in different ways. You can decide if you want to risk taking all the coins or not, if you want to avoid enemies or attempt to kill them, or even if you want to prioritise speed over safety. Even if you avoid taking a conscious decision, no two traversals of a level will be the same because you will not jump the exact amount of times at the exact same place. That is, mesoactions allow for variation; new combinations of microaction sequences that can be attempted in the case of failure, even if the mission always stays the same: get to the end of the level. In the Walther and Larsen game feel system, this level is called *Learn* which they exemplify by dissecting the camping strategy in *Counter-Strike Global Offensive* and showing how it disturbs the rhythm of the game.

Finally, at a macrolevel, the whole game comes together through the aggregated repetitions of the previous levels, which Walther and Larsen call *Inhabit*: ‘The periodic riffs of controller handling, the rhythmic acting of tools, engagements and strategies all merge into a punctuated half note . . . the rhythm of play is both a reflection of strategies and (a kind of) music made from moment to moment responses to game situations . . . Finally, “Inhabit” offered a synthesis of the former two levels holding a two-folded inscription where tools, actions, and strategies carve into the player’s Body-Subject the same way the player’s actions and strategies carve into the game and its ecology’.<sup>17</sup>

A further repetitive macro-dimension is the fact that the game can be replayed. Again, this varies a lot in relation to different genres. Multiplayer games with a

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<sup>16</sup>Although many game genres operate with time pressure or a play structure of intensive rhythm, where decisions have to be taken on the fly, like, for instance, in versus fighting games *Mortal Kombat* style.

<sup>17</sup>Walther and Larsen (2020, p. 23).

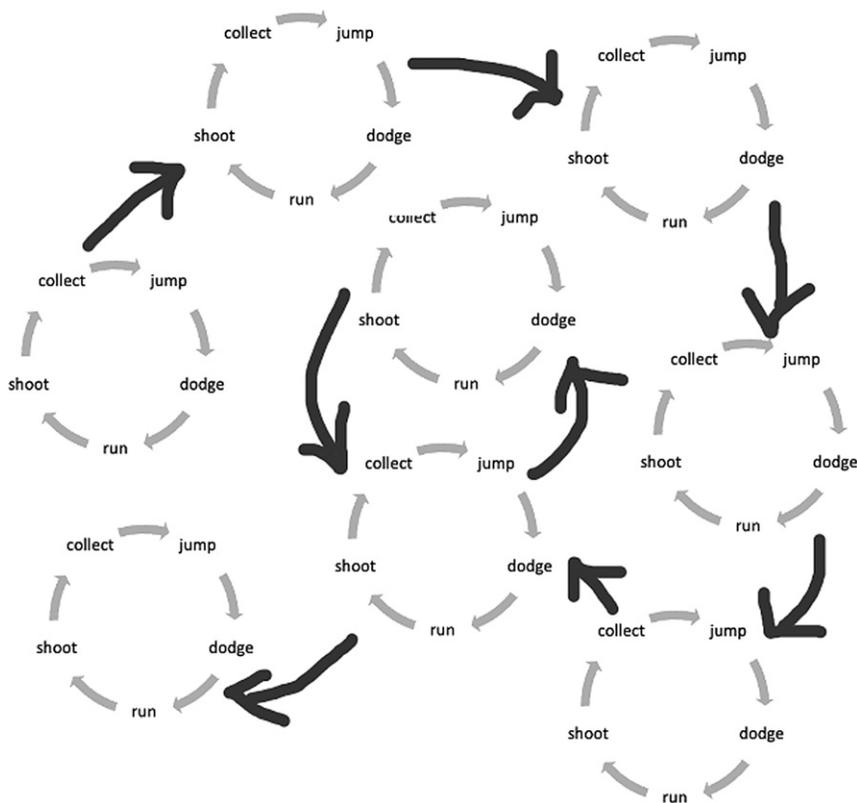


Fig. 2. Example of Mesoactions: Strategic Movement Through a Level.

high strategic component, like the aforementioned *Counter-Strike* can, like chess or many other board games, be replayed infinitely, for every game presents a unique challenge depending on the skill of the participants. For more linear progression games, replayability for pleasure alone is less straightforward.<sup>18</sup> Considering the significant amount of time that it takes to play through a typical

<sup>18</sup>Jesper Juul proposed the concept of progression games for those games where challenges are serially introduced, and the player needs to complete them in a (more or less) linear way. Progression games often have walkthroughs (Juul, 2002).

game (*Super Mario* players report 22 hours on average), a replay is a much heavier commitment than deciding to see a favourite film one more time.<sup>19</sup>

To make replayability more attractive, many progression games incorporate rewards, that is, design features understood as extra incentives that are unlocked upon completion in order to encourage players to play the game again. In several titles of the *Super Mario* series, an endgame reward is to be able to play as other characters or the opportunity to explore new worlds and levels. In *Super Mario Kart*, the game lets you improve your previous levels, appealing to some players' desire for perfection.<sup>20</sup> A very common way to create replay value noted by Hanson is to unlock a multiplayer mode, thus incorporating a hugely variable element: other players, like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, where players will be able to unlock rewards for the multiplayer game if they play through the story campaign.

There is also a specific genre of video games built around repetition that we could call time loop games, following Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán.<sup>21</sup> Games like 'Save the Date' and 'Force Code' force the player to 'repeat, explore and analyse past events', memorising and learning from them, 'focusing on the possible differences caused by different actions as well as the constants, obsessively running through the same scene again and again to unravel its mysteries'.<sup>22</sup> Here, it is the whole story that changes according to the player's decisions, and in fact, the games need to be replayed several times to investigate all the possible effects of one's actions and find the best resolution. This makes them closer to narrative experiences like time loop movies or visual novels, which we discuss in Chapter 4.

I hope it has become clear how the repetition of short or long sequences is an essential part of the design and the experience of playing video games in ways that make no sense in other art forms. Most aesthetic or formal approaches to video games criticism take for granted that repetition is a necessary design feature and a cornerstone of the act of playing itself. However, it is more rare that repetition is signalled out as a specific aesthetic category to be looked at closely. Perhaps it seems too obvious, although there is a small body of literature I will be drawing from in the following discussion.<sup>23</sup>

Upon closing this formal section, I want to again stress that the enormous variety of computer game genres make it hard to make assumptions that are valid for the whole spectrum of what can qualify as a computer game. It is not my objective to be exhaustive in such a manner, but to point to a series of ways in which a closer scrutiny of repetition as a concept can illuminate our

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<sup>19</sup>The 22 hours average is calculated according to a survey amongst 151 GameFaqs users who had played *Super Mario Bros. Deluxe for Switch* (<https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/switch/248068-new-super-mario-bros-u-deluxe/answers/1-how-long-does-it-take-to-beat-this-game>).

<sup>20</sup>Hanson (2014, p. 208).

<sup>21</sup>Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán (2015).

<sup>22</sup>Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán (2015, p. 207).

<sup>23</sup>Nonetheless, it has been the object of attention in Grodal (2003), Gazzard and Peacock (2011), Hanson (2014), and Remesal, V. N. and García-Catalán, S. (2015).

understanding of this particular cultural form and of contemporary media aesthetics in general.

### **Game Over. Do You Want to Reload From the Last Save Point?**

After the previous section, centred on form, it is appropriate to move on to meaning, and ask ourselves what the semantic function of the different repetitions can be, as well as what kinds of experiences emerge for a player. As explained above, the only way of getting through a game is to repeat a number of actions at different levels. The interesting thing about engaging with games is that every time we start a new one, we need to figure out what our interaction possibilities are. In other words, it is not obvious what can be done and how. A game like *Super Mario 3D World* exploits this beautifully, by introducing the player to new mechanics at every stage, and then moving on organically. In other media forms, we are never in doubt as to the interaction pattern: every book that I read is going to have pages that I turn, even if the content is unique. However, every new game will have me scrambling for reference points to get started: how do I walk?, can I shoot?, how much of the map can I see?, what happens if I press this button? So much is always new in games, despite some genre conventions being repeated across similar games (like, for example, using the WASD keys for movement). As Kristine Jørgensen argues, game interfaces are not transparent at all, and every game must communicate the conditions for its own gameplay through visual (and other) cues.<sup>24</sup> This requires every player to go through a learning process that should be facilitated by a design that allows for initial fumbling or even directly thematises this process through guides, tutorials, test-levels and other design features. The necessity of repetition as stepping stones of the learning process makes both Grodal and Hanson remark that games are based on an aesthetics of repetition. Grodal identifies a series of stages for this learning process, ranging from unfamiliarity and challenge, to mastery to automation.<sup>25</sup>

However, in accordance with the nuances presented in the previous section, I would rather argue that automation is only relevant for microactions, while it is crucial that meso- and macroactions can present a cognitive challenge to the player. Consider chess, at the microlevel; it is important to internalise the movement of the pieces, while at the mesolevel of a specific opening or even whole game of chess, it is absolutely crucial that the interaction remains non-automatic, to present a strategic challenge. This is very much related to the role of repetition in learning processes, as explained in Chapter 1.

For Hanson, the centrality of repetition in games is linked to their nature as a highly temporal art form. He builds upon Jesper Juul to affirm that games are state machines where the player's input forces a change that the machine has to respond to, causing another change of state and so on, in a series of concatenated loops. This temporal perspective allows Hanson to convincingly tackle the topic

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<sup>24</sup>Jørgensen (2013, p. 8).

<sup>25</sup>Grodal (2013, p. 148).

of predictability, which could be said to be about repetition seen from the system's side. If the player is to optimise their actions, they need to be able to guess how they will affect the game system status in the future. For instance, the carnivorous plants in *Super Mario* hide and emerge at regular intervals, which the player learns (maybe by being eaten a couple of times, in trial and error) in order to traverse the level safely.

The convention of a player having several 'lives' in video games is also a way for the system to acknowledge that the player is always learning, or trying, a process that needs failure as fuel. Instead of being expelled from a game, there is always a new opportunity in which 'a player is given more time to learn the mechanics of play'.<sup>26</sup> Hanson explains this as the game resetting to an earlier state, most likely a lesser difficulty level than the point where the player lost their life. This segmentation of games into repeatable actions that can be tackled separately is made possible by the feature of 'saving', where the progress of the player is recorded at intervals. Death sends the player to the previous save point, and not the beginning of the game. Some games keep track of this automatically, others make players seek out (and activate) save points themselves, thus establishing temporal rhythms that make the game palatable as a series of (more or less reasonably long) fragments. You need to keep on playing until you get to the next save point. This is also one of the features that indicates the difficulty level of a game. Some like it extremely hard, like the lovers of the legendary *Rogue* game from the 1980s,<sup>27</sup> where players would lose all progress if they were killed at any point of the long dungeon exploration, having to start from scratch with a new character. But even without going to extremes, survival modes that the player can opt into are popular, like in *Fallout 4*, where the exploration of its bleak world becomes much more difficult when you have a limited amount of supplies and can only sleep when you find an actual bed. Even in mainstream games like *Minecraft*, there is a play mode where you cannot respawn if dead, here called 'hardcore'.<sup>28</sup> The mercy of respawning comes sometimes together with the punishment of losing all your gear or having to recover your own body, trekking alone to the very same perilous spot where you lost your life.

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<sup>26</sup>Hanson (2014, p. 207).

<sup>27</sup>*Rogue* was released by Epyx in 1980 and inspired many other roguelike-games.

<sup>28</sup>In *Minecraft*, there are two more game modes apart from hardcore. The default game mode is called 'survival', where you have to find resources and kill monsters, but can respawn if killed. In 'creative' mode resources are unlimited and you cannot be killed.

The very idea of respawning evokes religious imagery, and even Buddhist reincarnation. In connection with repetition, it is specially evocative of Mircea Eliade's concept of the eternal return, which resonates with computer games at several levels.<sup>29</sup> Eliade has been widely criticised for conflating too many disparate myths together and for overgeneralising, as his idea of sacred time is not as widely applicable as he would have us think. However, in the context of this chapter, empirical accuracy matters less, since he can be helpful to point to the cyclical ways in which games fuel our imagination.

Eliade argues that most ancient civilisations think that the state of the universe follows a cosmic cycle, ending in destruction and then restarting. Even though monotheistic religions introduce the idea of a definite ending of the world, this does not entirely do away with the cyclical return from other mythologies.<sup>30</sup> There is still a certain nostalgia for the mythical time of the beginning of things, even in our desecralised world. Eliade explains how in the archaic world, there are no 'profane' activities, 'every act which has a definite meaning – hunting, fishing, agriculture; games, conflicts, sexuality, in some way participates in the sacred'.<sup>31</sup> Everything matters. This is also true of the simplified world of computer games, where the complexity of the real world becomes reduced to a limited set of actions that need to be performed again and again to get to the end of the cycle, and that is restarted with every death.

Computer games are to an exaggerated degree keen on tales of conquest and colonisation, which Eliade explains as 'the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of Creation', referring to the Viking colonisation<sup>32</sup> of Iceland. There are countless games that start with a chaotic universe to be organised, terrain to be conquered, land to be cultivated, civilisations expanded and made bigger. All ancient societies have archetypal models of conflict that are reenacted in different ways. One of them is the archetype of war or the duel, which is a driving force behind a lot of games, the repetition of armed conflict as the ultimate act. In Eliade's paradigm, these examples reveal the 'primitive' ontological conception: an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is 'meaningless', understood as lacking reality, a Platonic echo that might be too convenient.<sup>33</sup> However, the important point here is that the act of repetition of paradigmatic gestures erases time, since it allows us to connect directly to the primordial mythical moment.

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<sup>29</sup>Other researchers have seen a connection of Mircea Eliade to video games. Most notably, R.W. Guyker's PhD about video games as the contemporary expression of myth, part of the 'media that keeps myth timely, while myth keeps media engaged with the timeless' (Guyker, 2016, p. 405). The connection of Eliade to video games has also been briefly noted by researchers discussing their status as mythic narratives (Wagner, 2014a; Weight, 2008) or their connection to sacred spaces (Wagner, 2014b).

<sup>30</sup>Eliade (1959, p. 129).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>32</sup>See fx Mukherjee (2017, p. 10).

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

People go about their profane lives without meaning (to return to Camus), and once in a while connect to this sacred time, ‘the modality of the gods’. Could this also be one of the functions of games as repetition machines? I do not in any way want to suggest that games have a religious or sacred function, but that the kind of actions and available struggles become transcendent in their very necessity, connecting to an ‘epic’ past. The game means more than whatever is represented on screen, even though players themselves do not actually agree on which kinds of toil are meaningful or not.

## Grind

As a simple internet search can reveal, opinions differ as to which degree of repetition in games is the best. Some are looking for the hardest possible challenge, a world where mistakes are harshly punished, but where completion gives a strong sense of achievement. Others are keen on becoming better at playing, but don’t want to halt their progress every time they miss a hard jump combo or cannot shoot an elusive enemy. An immense existing variety of game genres and subgenres caters to any kind of preference along the difficulty spectrum, so every person finds the amount of necessary repetition that is best for them. I am not referring to skill here, since repeated exposure to any game or genre will make any player become better at certain actions, but to the fact that repetition has an affective dimension that cannot be objectively explained. Let me illustrate it with another example.

The 20-year-old game *The Sims* invites players to manage the life of regular people in a cartoony suburban universe not unlike the one depicted in the film *The Truman Show*. Like virtual pets, sims have to be regularly managed, their bodily needs covered. Will Wright’s idea of creating a simulation where the player has to think strategically about everyday life was met with scepticism by his company, who could not see why players would want to deal with mundane issues when other games offered them the possibility of impersonating heroes in exciting fictional universes. But Wright pushed on and the game was eventually released to big success.

I was at the time sympathetic to the idea of the game, specially because it is favoured by female players of all ages. I also found its design pleasant to the senses, with its bright colours, close perspective and the lively gibberish of Simlish.<sup>34</sup> However, despite my best intentions, I never really got into it. In order to keep my sims alive and well functioning, I had to constantly manage resources, schedule maintenance and acquire objects. I seemed to spend all my time cleaning bathrooms, maintaining personal hygiene and making sure that I owned enough things so that someone would want to be my friend. Except for this last

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<sup>34</sup>The fictional language that the characters speak in the game.

consumerist issue, the game resonated suspiciously with my own real-world situation, which had just changed a lot around the same couple of months in which I played the game. I had gone from a relatively careless existence as a seemingly eternal student to a new life of adult responsibilities: a demanding career job, a mortgage and a live-in partner whom I had to negotiate housework with. Why would I want to unclog toilets or go to work *also* in a game? Not only that, why would I want to do it over and over again? It was a nightmare of reproductive labour in digital version, a series of domestic chores that never ends, because it is reset everyday at dawn, a stone you can never stop rolling.<sup>35</sup>

To be fair, these tasks were not any worse than the grinding I was used to from my main game of choice at the time, *Everquest*, where I, like everyone else, had had to level up by fighting easy mobs and had strategised to maximise the obtention of experience points (XPs). However, the fact that the grinding in *The Sims* was thematised as housework made the game unbearable to play for me then. Maybe because I all my life had purposefully attempted to escape the housewife fate expected of women from my background.<sup>36</sup> For many others, domesticity did not seem to be a problem. *The Sims* has sold millions of units through its many expansions, and it still has a big player base. The game has also changed since its launch, now supporting various formats of sandbox play and allowing fans to build all sorts of creative storytelling around it, turning it into a kind of possibility engine. I got stuck at micro-management, while other players thrived and were able to carve creative paths for themselves.<sup>37</sup>

This anecdote serves to illustrate the fact that repetition in games is not just a mechanics, a structural feature to be interpreted and enjoyed in the same way by all players. While the actions of shooting aliens in *Space Invaders* and maintaining a hygiene standard in *The Sims* are equally tedious per se, I perceived the first as the smallest part of a rhythmic performance in a highly addictive experience, and the second as aggravating. *The Sims* fans and I would not agree on what to call 'grind'.

Grinding, understood as 'performing repetitive and tedious tasks',<sup>38</sup> is a well-known gameplay mechanism, that Zagal et al. have even identified as a dark design pattern, meaning that players are forced to spend unreasonable amounts of time on an activity that offers little challenge or reward.<sup>39</sup> Grinding has become an accepted design feature of certain genres, while at the same time it is looked down upon because it favours time invested over skill.<sup>40</sup> This is an ambiguous criticism. Some grind in games is just that, an activity that takes time but doesn't require any particular ability, so in theory anybody can do it, and do it well. It is

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<sup>35</sup>The concept of reproductive labour was introduced by feminist scholar Mariarosa Dalla Costa in her book *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (co-authored with Selma James). It refers to the unpaid housework necessary for capitalism to function.

<sup>36</sup>As the eldest daughter of a working-class catholic family in Spain.

<sup>37</sup>The franchise is very much alive. *The Sims 5* has been announced to launch soon, this time in multiplayer mode.

<sup>38</sup>Nakamura (2009).

<sup>39</sup>In their article 'Dark Patterns in the Design of Games', from 2012.

<sup>40</sup>Particularly multiplayer online roleplaying games.

impossible to get better at grinding, it is just something to get over with as quickly as possible. On the other hand, this attitude could also be a sort of elitism of the talented, for activities that anyone can do are surely not very worthwhile? Game designers would of course disagree, for you can sell more games that can be played by as many people as possible.

Moreover, players can sometimes pay or even cheat their way out of grinding by hacking the games to automatise certain routines. But even taking the long way through it, can we learn to love the grind? Can we, like Camus' Sisyphus, look at our stone and think ourselves happy? Aren't our video game toils a kind of masochism in disguise? Maybe we can. In any case, I have had players of *Minecraft Realms* happily tell me how they had to 'grind all their way up again' after they had lost all their gear and their forts had been wiped out by their own friends when their game had turned to total war. This was incredibly boring, they said with a smile on their faces, but well deserved, since they hadn't respected the rules they had agreed on. Wasn't it terrible? Nah, they answered, we just were together in Discord hearing music and chatting while we hacked and built for several days.

Actually, games might not be an entirely pleasurable affair, as Torill Mortensen and Víctor Navarro-Remesal have argued. 'Playing does not create a continuous state of joy; rather, players endure longer stretches of frustration, struggle, and even physical pain, broken by glorious moments of getting it right, of sudden relief from struggle'.<sup>41</sup> This is no doubt a controversial statement in Game Studies, overwhelmingly focused on theorising the gratification of overcoming challenges. Nonetheless, their concept of purposeful suffering does complement other 'negative' approaches such as the already mentioned idea of games as machines of failure proposed by Juul, and Costikyan's observation of games needing a degree of uncertainty to fight against. In fact, games would put the player in such stress that they do not offer 'consolation but relief through both victory and confrontation'.<sup>42</sup> This sounds very extreme, but Navarro-Remesal and Mortensen have a compelling argument where they relate the frustrations of playing games to Roger Caillois idea of *ilinx*, which is about purposefully losing our balance and experiencing vertigo, as it happens, for instance, in a roller coaster. Caillois had been invoked in relation to games mostly in relation to his concept of *ludus*, referring to rule-bound play, but his *ilinx* brings the body into the equation in a way that resonates with more phenomenological approaches to the experience of playing video games.

So by willingly choosing to play video games, we agree to enter a state of what Remesal and Bergillos call 'ludic suffering', which they relate to the Buddhist concept of Dukkha. While playing, there is always something missing, something waiting to be achieved, as we strive to make things different than they are. Ludic suffering is a vital part of the act of play.<sup>43</sup> What I like about their argument is that it acknowledges suffering as an essential part of human life, understood as

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<sup>41</sup>Mortensen and Navarro Remesal (2019, p. 28).

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>43</sup>Remesal and Bergillos (2021, p. 103).

lack and striving. We tend to otherwise understand suffering in terms of something painful, impossible to bear or even related to existential tragedy. This other kind of everyday suffering is not the huge rock up the huge hill as punishment for insulting the Gods. For us, the common mortals, a smaller rock in a smaller hill is not only more relatable, but it also opens for an understanding of pleasure that can include this compulsion to create change.

Indeed, playing is wanting, having a stake in what is unfolding. Katherine Isbister links the responsibility that we take when we make choices in games to the emotions that they can generate.<sup>44</sup> Good decisions and good performances will lead to feelings of pride, while defeat might make us angry, or desperate. This range of emotions is not accessible through engagement with interpretive-only media forms, but is directly related to the constant need for (repeated) interactions that characterise games. Isbister, like many other game theorists before her, turns to the theory of flow put forward by Csikszentmihalyi to explain the highly satisfying psychological state of players immersed in play.<sup>45</sup>

## Flow, Interrupted

*Flow*, or the feeling of optimal experience, refers to the state of concentration that we experience when fully engaged in an activity that we enjoy very much. It can be any activity that occupies our awareness, requires skill, has clear goals and where we are required to exert some kind of action. It has to be challenging enough so that having control is not just a given, it would make it boring, but not so hard that we cannot keep up. We need to be so concentrated that we momentarily forget about everything else, also losing self-consciousness and maybe even experiencing a distorted passing of time, either very quickly or very slowly.<sup>46</sup> It could be any kind of activity, from playing an instrument or a sport, to gardening or climbing.

It is easy to see how the games where we can choose a level of difficulty that adapts to the degree of our ability can be excellent flow machines. Many games will also have a difficulty progression incorporated in their design, where the first few levels are easy and the difficulty gradually rises so that the player can learn the ropes. Flow theory goes well with the kind of ‘continuous’ way of playing characteristic of the platform games I have used as examples in this chapter, like *Super Mario* or even *Space Invaders*. A continuous loop of engagement in a series of quick repetitive actions is the natural way of interaction in the platform and action genres, where time pressure is usually a factor. It does translate less appropriately to other kinds of gameplay, like strategy games, adventure games or role-playing games (RPGs), where ‘breaks’ are worked into the gameplay so that we can think before acting. Here, the flow would be more in the change

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<sup>44</sup>Isbister (2017, p. 3).

<sup>45</sup>The use of the theory of flow in video game theory and design has been criticised among others by Soderman (2021) who points to the pernicious ideological consequences of privileging flow. Here it is still useful because of its emphasis on repetitive action.

<sup>46</sup>Csikszentmihalyi (1990, pp. 46–67).

between acting and waiting for our turn, in calculating the expected outcomes of our actions before we take a final decision, in choosing and then watching the consequences unfold. In strategic games, all play is replay, as we play out the scenarios in our head before executing them.

States of flow can be exploited for aesthetic effect on their own or in contrast to other kinds of action. Isbister reflects upon the game *Train*, which at the surface is about filling boxcars with passengers and moving them overcoming obstacles and challenges.<sup>47</sup> The players can immerse themselves on the flow of the mechanical actions. However, ‘Only at the end of the game do they learn the train’s destination: Auschwitz. Some players realize what’s happening midgame and turn their attention to saving as many passengers as they can. Almost all players feel strong emotions after they have experienced the endgame, whether or not they realized what was going on in the midst of play’.<sup>48</sup> Here, the historical context in which the mechanic actions take place makes for a horrific discovery.

The idea of flow resonates especially well with playing musical instruments, pun intended. And music has also been a useful referential framework to understand the phenomenological involvement with computer games. In *Aesthetic Theory and the Videogame*, Kirkpatrick looks at examples of action games that engage players in a flow-like state of action and reaction that he compares to a dance. The game is the musical script and the player is the performer, engaging in a choreography that is not mechanical, but has to be creatively interpreted.<sup>49</sup> This sort of creative tension, also of the body, is more productive to describe the act of playing computer games than using the metaphor of immersion, I would argue. Immersion has connotations of inactivity, and even of drowning, while dancing is just as involved, but more active. Phenomenological approaches to the act of playing, like that advocated by Brendan Keogh insist on not forgetting the body, on seeing the playing experience ‘as the coming together of the player and the videogame in a cybernetic circuit of embodied pleasures’.<sup>50</sup>

Repetitive video game actions are of course the foundational element of any sense of rhythm, as Brigid Costello has noted in her study of repetitive rhythms in the games *Minecraft* and *Don’t Starve*. Her conclusion, reinforcing Kirkpatrick’s emphasis on the creativity of the player is that the playing experience is more rhythmically expressive if it is the player herself who exerts agency. Chopping wood in *Minecraft* feels therefore much more satisfying than in the case of *Don’t Starve*, where it is the game that provokes a specific response which the player does not control. Triggered rhythms do not involve us as much as performed rhythms. This study is interesting because it can help illuminate some of the paradoxes of grinding sketched above, how it can be both mind-numbingly boring and oddly satisfying. It also ties back to the point about suffering; the small, repeated motions make us aware: ‘Rhythmic expressivity can be valuable for enhancing repetitive tasks (...) physically performing the action rhythms as taps

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<sup>47</sup>Exhibited by Brenda Brathwaite Romero in 2009 at IndieCade, USA.

<sup>48</sup>Isbister (2017, p. 10).

<sup>49</sup>Kirkpatrick (2011, p. 137).

<sup>50</sup>Keogh (2015, p. 1).

proved useful for revealing patterns of tension and release not consciously felt when immersed in gameplay'.<sup>51</sup> Maybe this is the whole point? Let us flow, each little blow of the pickaxe chopping away at the suffering. Boring, but good. A game like *Walden* turns this into a design feature, as you play performing mundane tasks over and over again: taking care of your garden, fishing, conversing... ending each day with a reflective diary entry.

The key might be in the satisfying combination of flow with interruptions, or as Keogh puts it, inspired by Lefebvre, the interdependency of linear and cyclical rhythms. The linear rhythms refer to the progression forward, the passing of levels, improvement of skills, towards the final victory. The cyclical ones are the ones brought by 'failure, death and the stop-start repetition of practice and dressage'.<sup>52</sup> This last concept comes from Lefebvre, who has, more than anyone, tried to use the idea of rhythm as a tool to comprehend human action.

### **The Banal Rhythms of Game Rituals**

My treatment of repetition in games is filled with apparent contradictions, or at least with what would be contradictions in other art forms. So it would seem once more with the title of this section, which brings the ritual in connection with the everyday. Ritual is special, transformative and performative. Everyday life is banal, monotonous and filled with automatic actions. Here, I move beyond the games per se, and into a reflection of how they fit into our everyday life, where media consumption is also organised around different kinds of repetition, both transcendental and intrascendental.

An integral part of ritual is repetition: of movements, of words and of actions. But, of course, not all repetition is ritualistic. Gazzard and Peacock have proposed that some aspects of games are ritualistic in nature. Both ritual and game are ludic forms, bound to location, separate from the regular world, performed, requiring an initiation and a transformation.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, they consider that certain actions are 'ritual-like', such as collecting the pills in *Pac Man* to move to the next level, because they are the necessary conditions to traverse a threshold. In their view, ritual logic in games can be traced to actions that signal some kind of 'rite of passage' like checkpoints or 'save stations', or collecting objects. Their approach reveals a conflation of meaning and mechanics, for in truth, everything you do in a game is transformative, insofar as it improves your conditions for victory, or your point score, or makes it possible for you to advance. And what about the players' self-chosen thresholds? I can play *Super Mario Bros* with the self-imposed goal of collecting all the stars, or none, or have the intention of getting better at *Counter-Strike* until I reach a specific league. It might be an important rite of passage for me, but it would be a stretch to talk about ritual here because these goals and practices lack a collective dimension. In fact, I do not

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<sup>51</sup>Costello (2018, p. 821).

<sup>52</sup>Keogh (2015 p. 200).

<sup>53</sup>Although the magic circle theory has been amply challenged in Game Studies.

think that the ritualistic aspect of games is so much related to the actual narrative of the game, but more about the liminal quality of the act of playing.<sup>54</sup>

Playing a game can become a ritual if imbued with a more transcendental meaning that gets repeated and sustained by a community. In regular language, people talk about ‘rituals’ like getting a cup of coffee as soon as they get to work, or playing a round of domino every time they visit their grandparents. These rituals of everyday life also have a threshold/transformational function. They signal that the workday is starting for all the employees of this company (even if this occurrence happens every day) or link the present to the past by reproducing an action we have shared with our grandparents many times before, that maybe started when we were children.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, playing games was a popular way to kill time for the people in lockdown all over the world. For many, deprived of other social contact, games also became a daily ritual of community. In our family, we chose a few different games that we would play online with different people. One of the most enjoyable turned out to be *Among Us*, the multiplayer crime/social deduction game where one (or two) players are randomly designed as ‘imposters’ and have to secretly assassinate all the others one by one before they are discovered. The setting is a spaceship, and all the participants are rounded humanoid figures with different-coloured spacesuits. Me and my family would log into the game together with my brother’s family, nine people in total, and while we played on each our phone, we would have an open Discord channel at the same time to be able to talk as a group. Our *Among Us* sessions were ritualistic in different ways:

- They were marked as a special time outside the monotony of the lockdown daily tasks, a special time that would return cyclically every other day, following a fixed plan
- They had an explicit (and agreed-upon) transformational intention: to connect with the family we could not be together with, cheering each other up in difficult times
- We adopted special roles in order to participate, randomly assigned by the game every time (as crew members or imposters, all with different colour spacesuits and strange decorations in our head)
- We submitted ourselves to a restaging of murder, the oldest human act. We are actually also family, like Cain and Abel, which added spice to the transgression.
- We used a special language while playing, something that the uninitiated might not be able to follow: ‘That was kind of sus’, ‘Where?’ ‘Electrical’, ‘Vent’, ‘Red is faking the tasks’

The act of playing the game is ritualistic in itself, like a Mass. We first went into a waiting room, where we could choose the colour of our spacesuit, talk

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<sup>54</sup>Turner (1969).

(using Discord) about who was who or how our day had gone. Someone would beg the others not to cheat, not to let each other know who the impostor was. Then there would be a characteristic noise, signalling the start of the game, and there we would go, running around in the cartoonish corridors of the spaceship, doing our tasks or pretending to do them, killing others or trying to survive. When a body was found, someone would hit the emergency button, producing another characteristic sound. Then the conversation where all participants try to clear themselves of suspicion, sending the ball around, and always the same sentences: Where was the body? Where was everybody? What did they see? Who found the body? Who can vouch for *X*? Who did the task? before voting on who got ejected. Every game resolution became a small catharsis, a brief satisfaction for the victors and disappointment for the losers. But there was no time to dwell on this, for the game would start all over again, with new roles and the same steps through the script.

Of course, this kind of collective ritualising could have happened with another activity. For instance, Danish national television had a programme during lockdown where a musician played well-known songs at a piano and people would sing along, each from their homes, also describing this repetitive event as healing in the middle of the difficult times.<sup>55</sup> They were not directly communicating with each other like the *Among Us* players, but they felt a sense of community that was highly valued. However, I would argue that the sense of belonging, the transformation which is the point of the ritual, is stronger in the game example because we were both directly participating, we were intimately connected to each other *and* everyone's actions could change the outcome of the experience.

This is not to say that playing games is always ritualistic. In our *Among Us* sessions, there was an added significance, collectively negotiated and determined by a very specific external cause. Most often, playing games is integrated in the banal rhythms of everyday life, resurfacing again and again in much less transcendent configurations. We might place our game playing during the long commute, using our telephones as game machines to evade ourselves from the dullness of the train traversing a grey landscape. Or we might play at night, when everybody else is gone to bed, savouring the moments alone with the console in a luminous corner of the otherwise dark house. Games are here a cyclically returning leisure element that punctuates the linear rhythms of the 'productive' day: work, study and household chores. Games contribute to us achieving *eurhythmia*, the smooth combination of rhythms that ensure our body is healthy and our mind in sync. They can of course also make us imbalanced, destroy the *isorhythmia*, if we, for instance, lose sleep to all-night playing sessions. Being sleep deprived for the whole day makes it harder just to go through the usual motions, as we are weighed down by *arrhythmia*.

The previous paragraph loosely applies Henri Lefebvre's vocabulary of rhythmic analysis to attempt a description of the ways in which repetitive

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<sup>55</sup>Sørensen et al. (2021).



Fig. 3. Sisyphus, Re-interpreted by DALL-E and Me.

activities shape our everyday life, which he thought was punctuated by a tension between work, rest and play.<sup>56</sup> Incorporating games in our daily routine might even be considered a form of intervention against *dressage*, or ‘the process through which the state and capital impose disciplined rhythms of work, rest and play upon workers, as a domestic animal might be trained to comply with its owner’s demands. Crucially, such gestures are incorporated into the body, shaping its unreflexive habits and typically rendering it docile’.<sup>57</sup> Games are only one example among other restful/playful activities, but this is not the only reason why they have been connected to Lefebvre before.<sup>58</sup> There is also the understanding that the repetitive nature of the aesthetic experience of playing games makes them also specially suited to illustrating *dressage*, which here is understood as a rhythmic aesthetic experience, not devoid of pleasure, but also not only about freedom. If we adopt a phenomenological instance like Lefebvre wanted, the player’s body can indeed be seen as a metronome, tuning itself to the game system to once more stage a cycle of rise and fall, birth and death, beginning and end. Like Sisyphus (Fig. 3).

<sup>56</sup>Systematised by Lyon (2019, p. 24). Lefebvre does not propose a systematic methodology in his book (1992).

<sup>57</sup>Edensor and Larsen (2018, p. 732).

<sup>58</sup>See mostly Wade (2008), Apperley (2010), Keogh (2015), and Walther and Larsen (2020).

There is a 2-minute animated film by Marcel Jankovics retelling the myth of Sisyphus in a single, unbroken shot made of a black line upon a white background.<sup>59</sup> We see Sisyphus roll his stone up the mountainside, making noises of excruciating effort. When he gets to the top, the camera pans out and we realise that the hill is made of piled-up stones. They are actually rather similar to skulls battered by an unforgiving sun. When he finally gets to the top, Sisyphus collapses for a moment, but then we see his figure prancing down the hill, springing from stone to stone with a happy gait. Whatever we think of the religious background behind Mircea Eliade's idea that suffering is not a meaningless experience for traditional cultures because of its connection to the eternal return, I would argue that the lure of the archetype is still alive.<sup>60</sup> The medium of video games can provide a scenario to play the mythical drama in everyday life, where death is always followed by resurrection and 'every defeat is annulled and transcended by the final victory'.<sup>61</sup>

## Coda

I started this chapter by stating that computer games were the repetitive media form *par excellence*, where the essential experience consists of repeating actions at different levels, picking up the stone every time it rolls down the hill. The learning of a series of microactions allows players to internalise the mechanics of the game, so they can turn their attention to other pleasures, like those of strategy, setting their own goals or even the semiotics and ethics of the game in question. The concept of grinding showed the way to consider the uncertain ontology of suffering and pleasure, and how repetition can both be soothing and maddening at the same time. The affordance of repetition in connection to games is to immerse us in a game rhythm that is a mixture of linear progression intertwined with cyclical returns.

This makes for a very specific aesthetic experience that is not easily accepted as such. The constant change of pace and rhythm in gameplay seems to be off-putting to non-players, who, like critic Eugénie Shinkle, think that the 'temporal flow is hampered by constant interruption of the game narrative as the player attempts and reattempts particular tasks or levels' For her, computer games combine aesthetic awe (because of their often spectacular nature) with the boredom of the 'interruptions', so that it becomes appropriate to describe them using Sianne Ngai's notion of *stuplimity*, an amalgam of stupefying shock and boredom.<sup>62</sup> I bring her critical view up here because it represents the resistance to the medium of video games from the point of view of high art critics. The mention of 'interruptions' as problematic reveals that the critic favours a contemplative

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<sup>59</sup>The Oscar-nominated short animation can be seen here: <https://www.openculture.com/2015/11/the-myth-of-sisyphus-wonderfully-animated-in-an-oscar-nominated-short-film-1974.html>

<sup>60</sup>Eliade (1959, p. 96).

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>62</sup>Shinkle (2012, p. 100).

aesthetic experience conducive to sublime awe. The sublime, however, with its focus on the unique, the unrepeatable, the bigger-than-human, is a category that does not fit so well with a repetitive art form, which is then dismissed as 'an art of surface and meaninglessness'.

This kind of judgement makes the oft-repeated mistake of assessing an art form by the success parameters of another. Computer games are (also) semiotic machines, but unlike traditional art forms, they afford more than immersive interpretation, letting us both play and perform. In fact, repetition in games can be understood through the pendular cognitive moment that is present in interactive forms of art, as Katja Kwastek (inspired by Gadamer) has argued. In interactive art, the user is forced to operate some kind of system to generate the aesthetic experience. This active participation ruins traditional aesthetic distance and contemplative experiences like that of the sublime, which become impossible. However, it does not follow that interactive art forms are necessarily superficial, for, as Kwastek puts it, our own actions 'become available as an object of reflection'.<sup>63</sup> The game affords our learning to operate in loops, to stop and restart, to reconsider and strategise, to pursue long-term goals through short-term actions and to see ourselves from the outside, playing. Unlike the heavy platform instrumentalisation of deathscrolling on social media, we are in command of repetition cycles in games, we can stop and we can win.

Repetition is key to the reflexivity of computer game play, as the experience 'manifests itself in a process of oscillation between flow and reflection, between absorption in the interaction and distanced (self-)perception, and between cathartic transformation and cognitive judgement'.<sup>64</sup> The active pleasures of repetitive art forms are inextricably linked to our toiling away, our trial and error and our assimilation of the basic mechanics in order to be able to go from exploration to expressivity. In the case of computer games, and as Pippin Barr illustrates with his Sisyphus game, they show the pleasures of indefinitely extending suffering. In other words, of learning to love our stone.

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<sup>63</sup>Kwastek (2013, p. 163).

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 162.