Introduction

'Hey!' a masked guard yells, pointing at Lara Croft, who has been surreptitiously moving through an enemy bunker. 'Oh shit', Sarazar, the player controlling Lara, utters. Just as the guard begins to shoot, Lara dispatches him with an arrow from her compound bow. It's too late though. 'Our cover's been blown . . . ', Sarazar concedes, as throngs of computer-controlled enemies open fire. He notices a fuel drum nearby and with a 'Come on!' coaxes one of Lara's arrows towards the target, causing a loud explosion that sends a guard flying back. 'Bam!' Sarazar exclaims. Now the battle is in full swing. Lara takes cover from Molotov cocktails and launches an arrow into an adversary's stomach. 'How do you like that?!' Sarazar cries, taunting the dying enemy before ducking under a hail of bullets. 'You bastards!' he intones earnestly as Lara Croft picks off several more enemies in quick succession, earning an additional skill point. But just then, a Molotov cocktail strikes her and explodes. Splatters of blood appear on the edges of the screen and Lara groans in pain. Sarazar seems to suffer vicariously. 'Oww!' The enemies pick up their attacks. Sarazar swaps Lara's bow for a shotgun loaded with incendiary shells. 'Bam!' Sarazar cries out, as one approaching enemy is thrown backwards, engulfed in flames, and another falls to ground. 'How's that feel? Scumbag!' For every enemy killed another seems to take his place and Sarazar becomes nervous. 'Oh god, how many are there?' He decides to retreat, nimbly steering Lara through the falling debris. From the rear position she takes down enemies one by one. In the absence of a direct kill, targeted immobilisation will do. 'Nut shot!' When the last enemy falls after being struck by a climbing axe in hand-to-hand combat, Sarazar is hungry for more. 'Was that it?' he asks, while Lara elegantly slides down a rope into the courtyard below. He notices that one enemy soldier, large and heavily armoured, is still alive. The opponent rises up and yells, 'You will die!' 'We'll see about that, big boy', Sarazar responds. Neither sword nor shotgun shell can penetrate the opponent's full-length shield. Lara elegantly sidesteps a strike and, with the enemy's flank now exposed, fires a blast into his body, causing him to collapse and burst into flame. Sarazar lets out a satisfied 'Ha!' He proceeds to collect items from several dead soldiers, including parts for more powerful weapons. 'Come on, hand over your stuff', he says, and then sums up his impression of the level so far: 'That was a crazy battle! What a way to start the episode'.

The action I have just described is from a Let's Play video of the 2013 video game *Tomb Raide*r.[1] Let's Play videos, in which gamers document the

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[1] Sarazar (30 March 2013). Let's Play Tomb Raider #029 – Gefecht in der Ruine [Full-HD] [German]. Online video clip. 1:17–4:50. www.youtube.com/embed/LKqkrCEwuXE?start=77&end=290

playthrough of video games, have been an extremely popular YouTube genre for some time, and Sarazar is one of the scene's biggest stars in Germany. With over 120,000 views, the episode is about average for his videos. The clip I describe above illustrates a key observation of this Element: violence in video games – inflecting it, the effects produced by it, the experience of one's own ability, the feeling of domination, the rewards in the form of points, the threat and tension, the stress and 'pain' – can be a source of great pleasure for gamers, and not just a few. Millions of players around the world play violent video games every day.

The pleasure they feel is by no means new. Since the beginning of the 1980s, when video games migrated from arcades into living rooms, action games have been a popular genre in the gaming world. As graphics evolved over the next three decades, players moved from shooting at abstract pixels to increasingly detailed representations of human bodies. The realistic depictions of violence made possible by new graphics technology set off heated public debates around the world, with many attributing mass shootings to experience with violent first-person shooter games. A plethora of scholarly articles and books have since emerged purporting to show the deleterious effects of video game violence. While a comprehensive review of those works lies beyond the scope of this Element, it suffices to point out that precious few of their authors have thought to ask what makes violent video games so pleasurable for their millions of fans. In this Element, I provide answers to that question and in doing so help close a conspicuous gap in the literature.

At first blush, the question *why* so many people take pleasure in video game violence seems nearly impossible to answer: the biological dispositions of players are too complex, their socio-cultural surroundings, too heterogeneous, and their tastes, too individual to allow anything like a universal explanation. Yet the fact that millions of people play violent video games suggests a clear link between violence and pleasure. Instead of asking *why* so many people take pleasure in virtual violence, my work focuses on *how*, specifically: How do players emotionally experience video game violence?

To answer this question, the study does not enter the well-trodden territory of media psychology. Nor does it offer an extensive review of game theory scholarship. Readers interested in these aspects might consult Gareth Schott's *Violent Games* (2016), which considers violence in video games through the prism of both game theory and media psychology. While the book provides many interesting insights, Rune Klevjer observes in his review that Schott's analysis uses 'theory as a blank check to be able to universally proclaim that violence in games is not an issue, and that anyone concerned with its impact in society and culture, whether parents or regulators, are led astray by a total

misconception' (2018). Klevjer rejects Schott's underlying assumption, arguing that 'violence *is* important to the DNA of gaming' (2018).

I could not agree Klevjer more. Indeed, my main objective is to show that an ethnography of emotions can help us understand everyday gaming practices while shedding light on how violence comes to be a key factor in the popularity of video games. I neither defend nor condemn the pleasure players take in video game violence. I observe how people experience virtual violence and how they articulate their emotions in the process. From these observations, I then draw conclusions regarding the characteristics of the emotional experiences. Like most ethnographers, I eschew reductions of complex phenomena in favour of nuanced examinations of people's actual emotional experiences. In this regard, the study is less representative than explorative, considering the many facets of pleasure in video game violence through an ethnographic lens.

The research for this study took place primarily in Germany, where debates about violent video games have been especially heated given the country's history and its strong response to anything that might seem to celebrate violence. This makes Germany somewhat unique, but also a unique opportunity to explore the questions posed here.

The majority of the interviews, videos, and texts cited in this study are originally in German. The English translation has attempted to render the colloquial style of the gamers' language and jargon. Some of the references and cited literature are available only in German and have been translated to make them accessible for international audiences.[2] Unlike my *Gewalt im Computerspiel* (2016), which dwells at length on previous scholarship and empirical examples, this work focuses on core insights, inviting readers to dive into the video game experience more or less directly. Those interested in delving into the literature on emotions in gaming or on the ethnography of video games more generally should refer to my *Gewalt im Computerspiel*.

This Element draws extensively on materials that are freely accessible online, most notably articles from video game magazines (1983–2014) and Let's Play videos on YouTube. Readers of the digital text can use the hyperlinks in the footnotes to access these resources. The 'recommended example' links feature videos that exemplify the phenomena under discussion. Although the videos are all in German, they nevertheless offer a rich audio-visual impression of gaming behaviours.

The Element begins with Section 1 on key concepts and theories before turning to questions of methodology in Section 2. Sections 3 to 6 explore the

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[2] All translations are my responsibility and were made in collaboration with Wesley Merkes, Philip Saunders and Dominic Bonfliglio, who translated and edited parts of my *Gewalt im Computerspiel* (2016).

different emotional experiences with virtual violence of video games. The final
Section situates the preceding analysis in a broader academic and societal
context.

1 Emotional Practices, Popular Pleasures, and Virtual Violence

John Fiske, in his influential work *Understanding Popular Culture*, writes,
'Popular pleasure exists only in its practices, contexts, and moments of produc-
tion' (Fiske 1989, 50). Fiske's view paved the way for later ethnographic studies
that approached pleasure as a product not of passive consumption but of active
practice (Maase 2019, 90–5). I share Fisk's perspective, but I also go beyond it.
I understand the practices that give rise to pleasure to be *emotional practices*
that produce pleasurable emotions. The specific idea of emotional practices has
grown out of the work of cultural anthropologist Monique Scheer (2012, 2016,
forthcoming) who argues that emotions are not passive and internal but woven
into everyday cultural practices that shape and produce them:

> Though emotions may sometimes be experienced as if they happen to us, they
> are always something our bodies do, and do them according to patterns
> structured by factors such as language, social order, and local styles, and
> they are embedded in larger sets of cultural practices. Understanding emo-
> tions as actions of mind and body means that they are not epiphenomena of
> people's activities but linked with other doings and sayings involving certain
> spaces, objects, sounds, and other people. It is useful to think about emotions
> with practice theory, I believe, since it provides a concept of action, of
> 'doing', that can encompass intentional, deliberate action, but includes, and
> indeed stresses, habituated behavior executed without much cognitive atten-
> tion paid. (forthcoming)

It is important to distinguish here between 'emotions-as-practices' and 'emo-
tional practices'. On the one hand, emotions-as-practices are practices that
bodies do; on the other, emotions are embedded in larger culturally determined
emotional practices for handling feelings in everyday life. The latter mobilise,
articulate, name, and regulate emotions-as-practices. Scheer (2016) identifies
different types of emotional practices, including religious practices, such as
prayer; social practices, such as wooing romantic partners; and pop-culture
practices, such as playing video games. Her theory does not aim to dismiss
other concepts of emotion or affect but to give ethnographers a new way of
understanding particular social phenomena. 'If we think of emotions not as
something we have, but as something we do', Scheer writes, 'then we can
examine them the same way we examine any other sort of culturally shaped
behaviour that serves the purpose of communicating, interacting, relating to
other people and things' (Scheer forthcoming).

What Scheer says about emotions also applies to pleasure. The intercon-
nected web of practices that constitute pleasure is composed largely of emo-
tional practices that mobilise, shape, and articulate feelings. And all emotional
practices are built on practical – which is to say, embodied – knowledge. Pierre
Bourdieu's practice theory – alluded to in the block quote from Scheer – is
central here, particularly his notion of habitus, which, for all the criticism it has
received, usefully describes the idea of an 'embodied knowledge' that guides,
and is permanently shaped by, everyday practices (Scheer 2012, 199–209). In
the same sense, emotional practices shape, and are guided by, embodied know-
ledge that evokes, refuses, or enables particular ways of feeling.

Because emotional practices articulate embodied knowledge, they provide
a good starting point for the ethnographic examination of pleasure.
A particularly rich example of this is everyday language. The investigation of
linguistic representations has been a central pillar of the ethnographic study of
emotion ever since Catherine Lutz's (1988) *Unnatural Emotions* and *Language
and the Politics of Emotion*, which she co-edited with Lila Abu-Lughod
(1990b). Lutz and Abu-Lughod understand language as an emotional practice:
'Emotion can be said to be created in, rather than shaped by, speech in the sense
that it is postulated as an entity in language where its meaning to social actors is
also elaborated' (Abu-Lughod & Lutz 1990a, 12). Donald Brenneis, in his
article for the same volume, echoes the idea: 'Language is about something,
does something, and is something itself; the content and conduct of emotional
communication are integrally related' (Brenneis 1990, 114). William Reddy
elucidates the idea in his work on the history of emotions (1997; 2001, 96–110).
He argues that linguistic utterances do not merely describe emotions but
actively shape and intensify them. Borrowing from performance theory, he
terms such speech acts 'emotives' (Reddy 2001, 105). Emotives make up
a crucial part of the emotional practices I examine in this Element.

An ongoing question in work on emotional practices is whether individual
emotions are analytically distinguishable. Most ethnographic approaches in the
study of emotion reject the idea of reducing certain practices to discrete basic
emotions like those identified by Paul Ekman (1972). However, the question
whether individual emotions can be differentiated at all remains unsettled
among ethnographers. For the study of pleasure, at least, the approach of the
philosopher Robert C. Solomon (2007) offers some help. Showing certain
parallels to the theory of emotional practices (see Scheer 2012, 194),
Solomon introduces the idea of 'emotional experience', which he defines as
'a complex of many experiences; sensations; various ways of being aware of the
world, our own bodies, and intentions; and also thoughts and reflections on our
emotions, all melded together in what is typically encountered as a single more

or less unified experience' (2007, 244). Thinking of emotions as part of rich
emotional experiences allows a more nuanced analysis of pleasure, one that,
instead of attempting to create an exhaustive categorisation of the emotions that
constitute pleasure, seeks to understand their diversity, complexity, relational-
ity, and individual significance.

Experiences, in this sense, can neither be reduced to acquired knowledge
nor to accumulated sensory perceptions. Rather, as John Dewey argued in *Art
as Experience* (1980(1934)), they are active processes that interweave per-
ceptions, interpretations, and actions (Maase 2019, 83–6). 'Experience',
Dewey (1980) writes, 'is the result, the sign, and the reward of that inter-
action of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is
a transformation of interaction into participation and communication' (p. 22).
From the perspective of practice theory one can go further and argue that
experience does not exist outside of practice. German idiom already
expresses this idea: one 'makes' an experience (*Erfahrung machen*) rather
than 'having' one. To convey in English the constructedness of experience,
I have borrowed from practice theory and speak of *enacting* emotional
experiences.

Playful Virtual Violence

This Element looks at practices of emotional experiences with regard to
a phenomenon that I call 'playful virtual violence'. Aside from a few notable
exceptions, virtual violence and video game violence are rarely discussed
explicitly in the literature. Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Arne Schröder (2010)
offer a useful starting point with their concept of 'ludic violence', which they
argue has a 'similarity relationship' to physical violence (p. 133). While this
partly gets at what I mean by playful virtual violence, my concept requires
additional unpacking. It makes sense to start from the end and work backwards.
'Violence' can mean very different things. It can be physical, psychic, struc-
tural, symbolic, cultural, political, direct, personal, individual, or collective.
I use 'violence' explicitly in the sense of physical violence, which Merriam-
Webster defines as 'the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or
destroy'. Using 'violence' strictly in this sense has a number of advantages.
First, physical violence, as Randall Collins (2008) notes, 'has a clear core
referent, which we can study using micro-situational observations' (p. 24).
This means that, in contrast to other forms of violence, such as symbolic or
structural violence, physical violence is easily recognisable and empirically
observable, though the intent to harm is not always apparent. Second, its
observability enables analytical and ethnographic understanding without

resorting to normative judgements. This is especially critical when approaching a topic as controversial as video game violence.

Of course, physical violence in video games is different from actual physical violence, for the violence it depicts is virtual. In his influential ethnographic study *Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff (2018) argued that the 'virtual' should not be thought of in opposition to the 'real' but rather in relation to the 'actual':

> The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'virtual' as a reference to something that exists in essence or effect, although not formally or actually. Virtuality can thus be understood in terms of potentiality; it can be said to exist whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and 'the actual'. This is now the most important meaning of 'virtual' with regards to virtual worlds; 'virtual' connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*. (p. 19)

The philosopher Philip Brey (2014) goes one further and distinguishes between 'digital objects' and 'virtual objects'. Digital objects are the bits and bytes calculated by the computer. Though digital objects lack identifiable mass and an explicit location in physical space, Brey maintains that they are nevertheless persistent, uniform, and stable structures with specifiable relations to the hardware, and hence can claim the status of objects. By contrast, virtual objects are generated on top of digital objects, as it were. They are 'digital objects that appear to us as physical objects and that we interact with in a manner similar to physical objects' (Brey 2014, 44). Crucially, virtual objects appear not identical but similar to physical objects. For a digital object to become a virtual object, a human agent must recognise the virtual object's similarity to an actual object and then do something with it. In his seminal work *Umgang mit Technik* ('Interacting with technology'), the cultural anthropologist Stefan Beck (1997) argues that only when human agents use a technology to some end does it become a socioculturally relevant *Tat-Sache*, a play on words emphasising the interdependency of fact (*Tatsache*), action (*Tat*), and thing (*Sache*) (p. 353). From an ethnographic perspective, what technology is matters less than how it is put into practice. Rather than regarding the virtual as a self-contained ontological state, it makes more sense to think of the virtual as a set of practices that enact similarities between virtual entities (e.g., objects, spaces, bodies, sounds, movements) and their physical counterparts.

The final term to unpack is 'playful'. Like violence, play admits a multitude of meanings, and a variety of very different concepts exist in video-game scholarship. My understanding of play is bound up with its relationship to seriousness and draws on the work of Gregory Bateson (2006), who examined the relationship in his 1954 lecture 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy'. For Bateson, play belongs to a theory of communication involving different levels of

abstraction when signalling messages. He famously came up with the idea while observing monkeys at the San Francisco Zoo. In the primate house, he noticed two monkeys engaged in play fighting, going through the motions of a real physical altercation but without using serious force. In their playful wrangling, Bateson believed he saw a form of metacommunication with a specific message: 'This is play', which is to say, 'These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote'. 'The playful nip denotes the bite', Bateson explains, 'but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite' (p. 317). The metacommunicative message 'this is play' is a paradoxical message, for play signifies a handling of particular meanings distinct from non-play yet necessarily constituted by it. Though play is not serious, it is only possible in reference to the serious. Bateson elucidates the relationship by way of an analogy. Just as maps are systems of reference to a territory, games are a network of references to non-playful meanings (p. 317). For Bateson, the relationship between map and territory, or between playful reference to a non-playful signal and the non-playful signal itself, are neither clearly the same nor clearly distinct. Rather, 'in play, they are both equated and discriminated' (Bateson 2006, 321). Britta Neitzel succinctly summarises Bateson's argument: 'A playful action denotes, and at the same time it does not denote, the "real" action to which it refers' (Neitzel 2008, 281).

The relationship between play and non-play gives rise to the distinctive function of play as a process of emotional experience. The experience of pleasure fits well into the model, though Bateson touches on the subject only in passing. Understanding pleasure as a playful activity means focusing on how those at play enact enjoyable emotional experiences through playful reference to non-playful actions. Playful violence is reference by means of verbal and non-verbal signals to actual physical violence within a process framed through metacommunication as *play*. In this sense, Bateson's fighting monkeys are engaging in playful violence, as are children playing cops and robbers. In video games, the practice is inflected by digital technology to become playful *virtual* violence. Through the similarity between actual physical violence and its digital representations, gamers generate a rich tapestry of emotional experiences. The task of this Element is to explore those experiences in all their variety.

2 Studying Emotional Practices in Video Games

What is the best way to study emotional practices and the emotional experiences they enact in video games? I settled on four main methods: (1) participant observation online and offline, (2) qualitative interviews, (3) the analysis of

Let's Play videos, and (4) the analysis of video gaming magazine articles from 1983 to 2014.

Throughout the study, I triangulate the data to arrive at different perspectives for each area of investigation. In employing a variety of research methods, I was able to collect different kinds of data, which, instead of treating discretely, I set in relation to allow for a richer understanding and offset possible blind spots with individual approaches. This is crucial because emotional experiences, by their very nature, escape precise definition and measurement. Accordingly, I do not aim to codify specific emotions but to circle around multiple forms of practice and the spheres of experience associated with them.

My main method was participant observation, which generates insights through interactive presence in the research field (Boellstorff et al. 2012). I focused my efforts on the emotional practices and experiences of individuals who regularly played online multiplayer games. I observed and noted what players did within a game and what they said over audio channels. I also followed participants as they interacted with online gamer groups via headset, a very common practice. The emotional practices central to this study were composed of verbal (and occasionally written) statements about events in the game. Players provided running commentary on the gameplay – rejoicing, showing annoyance or anger, bragging, laughing, praising their friends, describing their experiences, and so on. Hence, my observation encompassed not only the actions of the players in the games but also their communication and the relationship between the two.

I recorded my observations in a digital field journal that I ran on a second laptop next to the gaming PC. The groups studied were predominantly male and mostly composed of players between the ages of sixteen and forty. Observation time totalled around 1,200 hours and was spread across the online shooters *DayZ*, *Counter-Strike*, and *Battlefield* (each in different versions), the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *The Elder Scrolls Online*, and a number of other games. At the time of the study, all the games were in the mainstream of online multiplayer games, each with hundreds of thousands of regular users.

I supplemented the online participant observation by visiting two local area network (LAN) parties. LAN parties are events where large number of players – the ones I saw had between 300 and 600 attendees – come together for several days in order to take part in competitive video gaming. These offered a productive field for observing the competitive dimensions of playful virtual violence.

I interviewed thirty-seven players, some individually and some in groups, about their everyday gaming life. I conducted a total of sixteen interviews with an average length of 83 minutes (around 33 hours in total). All interviews were conducted via online voice chat in order to offer participants a certain degree of anonymity given the sensitive nature of the topic. (I never asked the interviewees for their real names.) The purpose was to better understand the players' emotional experiences while playing video games. I did not seek to describe the interior experiences of the participants or look for 'authentic emotions'. Rather, I used the interviews to contextualise the emotional practices observed in the field. In selecting the participants, I refrained from applying a predetermined criterion such as age or sex. More important was that they were open to having frank discussions about their gaming experiences. Thirty-three of the participants were male and between the ages of sixteen and thirty-seven, with an average age of twenty-four. The four female participants were between the ages of sixteen and thirty-nine, with an average age of twenty-nine.

The explorative approach of the study also extended to single-player games. I decided to focus on Let's Play videos, a format that became popular several years ago on platforms like YouTube. The idea of Let's Play videos, known as LPs by their devotees, is simple: one or more people play a video game while recording the content with screen capture software and providing live, often humorous commentary. Let's Players, as they are called, upload episodes usually between 15–30 minutes long until they have completed the game. Others can then watch the playthrough and hear the commentary. More recently, Let's Players have started making live recordings of their faces during playthrough. (This is especially popular with horror games.) The 'facecam' view appears in a corner of the video.

In Germany, LP videos grew enormously popular between 2010 and 2013. Stars of the scene now have large fanbases and play full-time. The channel of the most popular German player, Gronkh, has over 4.8 million subscribers and features new videos daily. Following Gronkh is his long-time friend Sarazar, with around 1.9 million subscribers, and the gamer group PietSmiet, with around 2.3 million subscribers (all counts as of 2020). The numbers are even higher in the English-speaking world. The most popular of the international Let's Players receive many hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of views per episode.

LP videos are a valuable source in this study because Let's Players, in their efforts to create entertaining videos, continually narrate their emotional experiences. From an ethnographic standpoint, of course, Let's Players do not necessarily articulate 'authentic' emotional experiences with playful virtual violence. Though Let's Players present themselves as normal people