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Article

Aesth(ethics) in Ludonarrative Experiences: 11Bit's Frostpunk

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Abstract

This article addresses the way *Frostpunk*'s saga highlights the semiotic nature of video games by establishing an aesthetic and ethical link in its ludonarrative mechanics and storytelling, which, in turn, may engage with the player in a debate where the identarian discourses of both the fictional entities encoded within the game and the player (that is, of both functional and fictional agents) are put into question and thus may be reconfigured. To understand this connection between aesthetics, ethics, and identity, affection is central: through affect, players establish empathic links towards the encoded agents (including, but not limited to, the encoded citizens, the encoded setting, and the encoded avatar of the player within the game world), which in turn allows them to interact with them as if being real, at least while the playthrough is active. To achieve this, this article will first offer a theoretical review of the terms mentioned above, and then will apply them to 11Bit's saga, *Frostpunk*. Finally, some conclusions regarding the semiotic nature of the video game and the universality of these analyses will appear.

Keywords: ludonarratology; Choices Matter; ethics; aesthetics; video games; semiotics

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1. Introduction

The year is 1886. After troughing through the cold deserts of the North Pole, several families of survivors from the Great Frost that ended life as was known until then reach the Captain's colony, marveled by the gigantic spider-like automatons that help gathering resources, in search of the coal Generator's warmth, shelter and food. Some of these survivors also seek help to find some children that disappeared a few days ago. Normally, this would not be a problem, but both food and housing space is scarcer than ever, and it would not be the first time that some people from the colony must starve for a few days. Would the Captain abandon the children for the sake of the colony? Or, rather, would they try to save them and try to reunite these broken families?

This is the ludonarrative position in which 11Bit's *Frostpunk* puts players: as leaders of a colony in a crude world, the game asks players what is the limit when it comes to survival. In so doing, the game delves into ethics as the means through which players should overcome the challenges that the game poses. Allowing both taking the direst decision and the most moderate one, *Frostpunk* aims to answer the conflict of individuals fighting for survival in a world that has no shelter.

Frostpunk 2 takes the ethical discussion to a more sophisticated level (if ever as cruel as the first game): are New London's citizens mere pawns in a game of influence in which the goal is not persevering anymore, but rather peace and stability? This turn, thus, forces players to reflect on ideology, principles, and development: while the first game offered decisions that can be more easily ranked as good or evil, *Frostpunk 2* offers players with more complex ethical dilemmas. For instance, while the first game offers players the choice of having children study or become workers, the second game shifts the debate to what sort of education children should have, now that they are not essential for the survival of the colony. As Purchese argues, "The question is not whether you can survive but how. It's zoomed out. Day to day survival is a given, more or less - the cold *is* still a fundamental terror - and you'll control cities that are incomparably larger than the ones you finished the first game with." (2024).

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It is precisely this "how" that Purchese mentions that this article is concerned about. This article argues that, in the *Frostpunk* saga, aesthetics, or the way in which video games attempt to convey a particular meaning to players, is deeply entangled with ethics, in a Wittgenstenian understanding of both, through affection, which might affect identarian discourses of both the player (or the functional agents) and the characters within the gameworld (or the fictional agents). As such, this article must first establish a definition of what is here referred to as aesthetics, ethics, affection, and identity, to then establish an analysis of such within the saga. Finally, some conclusions will appear in regard to the scope of this article: given both the semiotic and the affective nature of video games, an analysis of these dimensions should be taken as a reading that can only explore the superficial layers of the ludonarratology experience, but requires players to experience it, wholly understand it while playing it, and losing part of that understanding after finishing it.

2. Theoretical Framework

Defining a narrative situation and throwing into it a player (or a group of players) is not enough to define how video games (and, in fact, almost any cultural work) produce meaning. It is through the relationship between the source and its receiver that the production acquires meaning, and thus it is important to understand the language a particular cultural production uses to evoke, as well as the processes through which an audience makes the product meaningful. For instance, video games are as interactive as a novel is, but the language they use to establish the relationship between their audience and the product is different: as Fizek argues: "video games have never been interactive … A game … is a truly transformative and transforming phenomenon, a 'mutual constitution of entangled agencies'" (2022, pp. 70, 81). The latter is central to the way video games differ from other products, since, for instance, novels are not programmed to react to, in terms of Aarseth (1997), extranoematic efforts. As Tosca states, "Computer games are (also) semiotic machines, but unlike traditional art forms, they afford more than immersive interpretation, letting us both play and perform" (2023, p. 55). Thus, Fizek's consideration of the game not being interactive is complemented by Tosca's consideration of games as semiotic machines, and therefore systems of input-offering and output-receiving from both ends: the game presents a situation to the player, who, in turn, reacts, which produces a change in the particular playthrough that is occurring.

Accepting that the video game does not fully exist but in the moment in which it is played, and that every iteration of the video game is very different from the previous one changes the way in which these ludonarrative experiences (or, for what is worth, any cultural production as long as it is understood from a non-cartesian perspective) should be addressed. As such, any produced analysis is not about *Frostpunk* itself, but rather from an experience and understanding of *Frostpunk*. An analysis of this sort may emulate the experience, and can provide examples about how the experience is lived and interpreted, but the epistemological knowledge that a "theory approach" (as Carnevali, 2016, argues) towards a cultural production, if not diminished in its quality, it so does in its universality: by offering specific knowledge of a particular topic, and reading about said topic, the experience is conditioned, but does not offer a more complete understanding of itself.

Said mutual, entangled agencies go from the most superficial to the deepest levels of ludonarratology. Navarro Remesal argues that "Players, thus, take the game's rules and act according to their will, but they previously choose the system depending on their preferences and expectations. The player pacts with the videogame that allows them to do whatever they want" (2016, p. 314, my translation). This would be the first acknowledgment of mutual agencies: by submitting to the game's rules, players *choose* which ludonarrative experience they are not only willing to undertake but also develop. He further deepens the connection between players and the video game by establishing two other types of agency: Functional and Fictional.

The concept of functional agency is quite clear by itself: the capacity of the player to act within the video game system, to interact and modify game states. Fictional Agency, on the other hand, belongs to the other side of the avatar, the fictional one. Together they create the representation, or dual embodiment of the player. (p. 266)

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This is important to understand why games can be, as Sicart (2012) argues, ethical constructs. Ethics requires agency, or an assessment of so. In *Ethics*, Dewey and Tufts argue that "to study *choice* as affected by the rights of *others* and to judge it as right or wrong by this standard is ethics" (2012, p. 3, my emphases). Thus, since Ethics requires choice, the role of agency is clear: players must be able to make choices in order to be ethical. These choices must have a meaning, of course, not only narratologically but also for the player itself. In the words of Mitchel and Van Vught, "what makes the work meaningful is the result of the connections that the player has found between their aesthetic experience of the work and their lived experience outside of the work" (2023, p. 107), thus further reinforcing the connection that appears in Navarro Remesal's consideration of Representation. Players, performing a dual role while traversing through the ludonarrative experience, must be in tune both with their referential world, and with the world the video game presents. Therefore, both functional and fictional agencies can be regarded from an ethical perspective, but only if Dewey and Tufts's "others" are considered as such. In that sense, in order to be regarded an ethical construct, a video game must successfully establish an empathic relationship between players in the referential world and avatars in the fictional one, so that players can accept that their choices are meaningful, and that the other agents are, at least while within "The Magic Circle" (Linser, Lindstad, and Vold, 2008).

To establish these empathic relationships, Anable argues that "videogames are affective systems" (2018, p. xii), and therefore, they seek to "engage and entangle us in a circuit of feeling between their computational systems and the broader systems with which they interface: ideology, narrative, aesthetics, and flesh" (p. xii). If the player makes a ludonarrative pact with the game, the affective relationship that is established between the video game – the feeling-inducer entity – and the player – the feeling-induced entity – may produce either sympathetic, empathic, or compassionate links in the player, all affective systems that produce feelings, and, in the case of the latter, motivate action (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, and Howat, 2014). Regardless of which links are precisely produced within the player, evoking feelings through the aesthetical dimension of the video game helps connecting both of Navarro Remesal's agencies: whether by disgust, pleasure, or absolute indifference, what connects functional and fictional agency is the player's affective response to the video game. As Dolkemeyer argues "the dynamics of action [players playing the game] and subjectification [players acknowledging data as empathic entities] only become meaningful in their reciprocal relation to the specific fictions a game produces" (2020, p. 70). This reciprocity is produced by the game system and the player, which interact with each other to produce a meaningful gaming experience.

To understand this reciprocity, affect becomes central, since it does not lie uniquely in the player's side: "Identifying a video game as an affective system means resisting locating properties like texture, tone, and feelings in a purely subjective experience of reception or as the exclusive property of a text, and instead locating them in the slippery and intellectually fraught place in between" (Anable, 2018, p. xiv). It is precisely in Anable's in-between where aesthetics plays its affective role, and, as Cerezo Vivas mentions, "only the player is capable of completely analyzing the game while choosing within the parameters of the video game. These choices capture players within the fictitious situation in which they are 'entangled', since only the game is regarded as such as long as players accept its rules and submerge within 'The Magic Circle'" (Cerezo Vivas, 2020, p. 174, my translation). In other words, understanding video games requires understanding the semiotic relationship between both players and the code. It is only in the playthrough that video games not only acquire meaning but epistemologically exist. Understanding that dimension is central in understanding the shared power that both the experience creators and the experiencers have in authoring the playthrough.

If ludonarrative meaning making is semiotic, identity, both from the video game's reception and from the video game's ludonarrative construction, requires further analysis. Identity, as Zima (2015) argues, is a semiotic, relational product: to understand identity, "[i]t seems important to abandon the idealist notion of subjectivity as static identity in order to imagine a subject whose individuality as

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socialized nature and whose subjectivity as culture can only be understood as processes or dynamic units" (p, 28). In other words, since identity is "an object constructed by the subject" (p. 17), a particular discourse created by a subject and established through dialogical relations between the self and others, the subject creates (much like other meaning-making processes) several identity discourses throughout their lives that are deconstructed and reconstructed when interacting and conflicting against other identities. As such, video games are not only, as Venegas Ramos argues, "an inexcusable reference to those interested in identity formation" (2020, p. 39), but also worth exploring in the impact that these products have in the player's identity. My argument here is that, as long as players accept the ludonarrative rules and get engaged in the video game, the player's identity may engage in said conflicts and reconfigure their own identity discourse. Not necessarily deeply enough to completely overhaul their previous identarian discourse but rather accepting the theoretical-when-outside position in which they have been placed and reflecting on what they are doing within this fictional environment. In other words, the simulation that video games propose may help reconfiguring the players' identarian discourse if they are affected by the ludonarrative experience, that is, affect mediates said reconstruction.

This is where aesthetics emerges as a relevant term. Aesthetics, a term that comprises several definitions, refers both to the audiovisual stimuli that the video game offers and to the philosophical understanding of what is desirable. In both senses, aesthetics can be considered the language that the video game uses to induce meaning, as hinted previously by Mitchel and Van Vught when addressing that meaning is obtained from referential-world epistemological knowledge and the "aesthetic experience of the work" (2023, p. 107). In the words of Fernández-Vara,

Aesthetics refers to the experience of the player while playing the game, which is the result of the interactions of the player with the system. The implication is that the experience of the player can be shaped by the game design, as a result of the rules set in motion and understood by the player, who interacts with the game (2009, p. 6)

In other words, it is the video game aesthetics that induces players with meaningful choices, and it is from an aesthetical conceptualization of the game where the different mechanics encoded in the video game emerge. Furthermore, in the words of Anable "Aesthetics are always a negotiation between that which is seen and that which is felt, and this necessarily has effects on the mediation of identities and subjectivities" (2018, p. 121). If, as Wittgenstein states, "Ethics and Aesthetics are one" (n.d., 6.421), the conceptualization that has to be done is that Ethics is also the language through which players interact with the video game. If so, every aesthetic "device" (Mitchel and Van Vught, 2023) implies an ethical "device" behind.

3. Aesth(ethics) in Frostpunk

For now, this paper will focus on the connection between aesthetics and ethics, the way in which both terms are merged within the video game saga. The first element of analysis will be the setting, followed by the actual situation that the video game offers, to finally offer an analysis of the different mechanics that provide the Aesth(ethic) understanding of the video game that underlies within 11Bit's ludonarrative proposal. The very name of the saga, Frostpunk, suggests a turn from Solarpunk, as an anti-aesthetics, that is, "an aesthetics of opposition" (Myers, 2005). As such, in order to clarify the main points of the Frostpunk aesthetic, Solarpunk must be analyzed.

Solarpunk is, as Springett states, a movement in speculative fiction, art, fashion and activism that seeks to answer and embody the question "what does a sustainable civilization look like, and how can we get there?" The aesthetics of Solarpunk merge the practical with the beautiful, the well-designed with the green and wild, the bright and colorful with the earthy and solid. Solarpunk can be utopian, just optimistic, or concerned with the struggles en route to a better world — but never dystopian. (2018)

This contrasts with Frostpunk not on, in Adorno's terms, "the fact of art" —that is, the question itself—, but the "how" (1997, p. 338): where Solarpunk is practical and beautiful, Frostpunk is as-efficient as possible and gritty; where well-designed mixes with green and wild, Frostpunk offers

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often flawed (but not too much) designs and cold and nothingness; bright and colorful with the emptiness of a white storm (a "whiteout" as the second game calls them); and earthy and solid with vertical Victorian-like designs. Frostpunk, finally, is essentially dystopian, and the best players can hope for is decent odds of survival.

However, the question remains unchanged. The aim of any Frostpunk playthrough is to be stable. Contrary to other video games of the sort, expansion must be controlled, lest the colony be unable to manage its growth. At the same time, the Captain must keep both measuring bars of Hope and Discontent at decent levels if they want to continue being in charge (if not, the experience ends and the Captain is expelled). Similarly, in *Frostpunk 2*, the Steward must keep tension low and pass a vote of confidence to be still head of the city's government.

The latter further connects Frostpunk and Solarpunk: "Whatever Solarpunk is, it is **deeply** political. Politics is the practice of determining the arrangements through which we distribute resources and otherwise relate to each other" (Hudson, 2015, emphasis in the original). As will be seen later, *Frostpunk* offers a ludonarrative that perfectly fits this definition: as leaders of a colony, players must distribute resources and, through pleas or through the democratic process, relate to their citizens.

One final trait connects Solarpunk with Frostpunk, the, as Owens states, "dealing with conflicts from the remnants of the old world as well as *the unique problems which are sure to arise in a very different social scene*" (2016, my emphasis). Although in Solarpunk, the remnants of the old world are, quite often, the undesirable, unaesthetic aspects, in Frostpunk the past was in fact the happier time. *The Last Autumn*'s DLC stresses precisely this, when players are asked to support either workers (and potentially establish the dictatorship of the proletariat) or engineers (and offering players the chance of building a fascist panopticon). Both outcomes, questioned by the game – "was this price just"? (2018) – suggest that, had the conditions not worsened, had the past remained stable, players could have not taken the "boiling frog" (Fijak and Stokalski, 2019, p. 251) decisions that lead towards institutionalizing either fascism or the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Frostpunk then, is not the opposite to Solarpunk. It is not a pessimistic perception of the world, but rather a complementary understanding of this type of -punk aesthetic. It is not about showing how bleak the world is, and how bad people behave, but rather it is a crude realization: that the world will not get better by itself, that the crudeness of today will bring a brighter future. That there is a revolution that is needed so that society can live in harmony and peace. As with all -punk aesthetics, Frostpunk is essentially political, dialogic, and inherently mutable.

Nevertheless, the game also seems to convey the message that all revolutions have an ethical barrier that should not be surpassed. This, of course, stems from the same aesthetic understanding that has been mentioned before: for something to be sustainable, it must not be too leaning on one side of the scale. *Frostpunk* and *Frostpunk 2* (more the latter than the former) address this by using ideological groups that the Captain/Steward has to convince to live together or reach some sort of entente.

Once the setting has been described, the narrative situation gets clearer for an analysis. The *Frostpunk* saga, often labeled within the *Choices Matter* sub-genre of video games, is, essentially, a city- builder/city-manager saga: in both games, players assume the role of leaders of a colony. Like many city-building video games, they must address the concerns of their citizens, provide food, shelter, and, most importantly, warmth to their citizens. In the first installment of the saga (2018), the Captain leads eighty survivors (number that, depending on the different decisions that players take, can be increased or decreased) through the forty days that they have to prepare for the Great Storm, a Storm that decreases temperatures to very low levels (-150ºC) for a week. After that, temperatures rise again to more acceptable levels (-30ºC), and the game ends, evaluating the player's performance, and reviewing the decisions they made while, in the background, a blurred, fast-forwarded version of their playthrough is played, so that players can see their progress throughout the experience.

This extremely brief summary serves as a presentation of a framework within which players take many different decisions aimed at achieving the intended ending (that is, that the colony

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survives). Among these decisions, players can choose to build different facilities (housing, greenhouses, or factories, for instance), develop different technologies (improving heating and isolation or training more efficient scouts, among others), or implement different norms that are permanent for the playthrough. Should the player require (or want) the assistance of children in the coal mines, they can pass a law that forces child labor. Similarly, players have the choice of extending the working shifts, enacting double rations, allowing the distribution and distillment of alcohol, implementing amputation as a medical procedure, creating cemeteries, using organs from the dead to save ill patients, or even allowing citizens to solve their disputes through often deadly duels. At some point in the narrative, the Book of Laws offers a second law tree, which, depending on how the ludonarrative experience evolves, may be labeled as Order or as Faith. These two branches offer new sets of laws that help managing citizens, either through guards and propaganda or through religion and zealots, which, should the players so choose, can lead to the metaphorical "boiling frog" (Fijak and Stokalski, 2019, p. 251). In other words, these two branches can lead from more innocent laws (houses of prayer, for instance) to a deification of the Captain/Player, whose word becomes absolute, and heretics are (literally) burnt in the generator. Similarly, from the more innocent Neighbourhood Watch, whose first action is to help a kid that has been stuck in the coal generator, players can organize what the game calls a "New Order" (2018), a Frostpunk recreation of fascism, where dissidents are punished, tortured, and/or publicly executed.

As Gerhardsen mentions, "Frostpunk's persuasive goal and manifestation of ethics remains static within the game's algorithm" (20), and, while the Book of Laws is neither exclusive nor the sole mechanic that the video game uses to convey the ethical dilemmas that its aesthetics suggests, it is perhaps the most evident of them. It is that so that, out of the seven scenarios – "A New Home" (2018), "The Arks" (2018), "Endless" (2018), "On The Edge" (2020), "The Fall of Winterhome" (2018), "The Last Autumn" (2020), and "The Refugees" (2018) –, the default Book of Laws (that is, the one that appears in "A New Home") only appears, without modifications, in the main scenario and in "Endless" and "The Refugees": "The Arks" has no Purpose (Order/Faith) Laws, in "On The Edge" the Captain is, at the beginning, stripped of the privilege of enacting new laws, in "The Fall of Winterhome" several laws have been already approved, and "The Last Autumn" has a completely different book of laws for a different, warmer, setting. It is precisely this last scenario when compared to the default one that suggests the most the connection between the Frostpunk aesthetic and ethics in this first video game, since, especially the Purpose equivalent laws, here called "Labour Laws" (2020), are completely contingent to the setting in which they appear, here the laws leaning more towards a class struggle than in the default book, more concerned with reorganizing society after its fall. While the mechanic is essentially the same, and in fact offers two possible final, extreme solutions – either a fascistic panopticon should the Boss/Player side with the engineers, or enact the dictatorship of the proletariat, should the player side with the workers –, the fact that the Book of Laws changes this much suggests an engaging with the ludonarrative situation that goes beyond superficial changes. Rather, the game takes the Book of Laws as a central pillar of (almost) each scenario so that players realize how contingent their decisions are to the semiotic relationship that has been established in the playthrough. Even in the scenarios where the Book of Laws is not as important, the game makes players consider what laws to enact (or to ask to be enacted in "On The Edge") so that their playthrough is successful, insofar as the main objective, survival, is obtained.

Frostpunk 2 (2024) presents a completely different take on how laws are enacted, and how players interact with their citizens. Set a few years after the events of the first video game, *Frostpunk 2* puts players as Stewards in democratic command of New London (that is, the city that players built in the first game). Now that survival has been (more or less) obtained, players must learn to navigate the way in which the different factions interact with each other, and learn how to be political, while still providing shelter, food, and energy, to their citizens. The scale is different, as players now rule over thousands of New Londoners (where no more than a few hundreds could have survived the Great Frost). Additionally, the time scale also increases, going from forty days to fourteen years.

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In this learning to be political, players must gather the support of the four different factions (that vary depending on the decisions that players have chosen), so that these laws are passed in the Council Hall. Should a particular faction not be in favor of the law, players can sway their vote by promising that a law that said group pursues will be proposed next time, offering money, or promising punishment to their rivals. In other words, players must learn how to balance the different faction's wishes so that they keep agreeing with the Steward being in charge and not starting a civil war or, if there was to start one (as is scripted in the last chapter of the experience), that it can be suppressed as easily as possible, be it by exiling one of the warring factions, assuming absolute power and proclaiming themselves as the new Captain, or, the hardest, achieving peace between factions through concessions.

This change of pace and scope reflects upon the aesthetics of the video game, and how players should address the situation in which *Frostpunk 2* puts them: While the first game is more concerned with survival, the second game is much more concerned with maintaining oneself in power and keeping peace. This was also part of *Frostpunk*'s mechanics, as mentioned before: should the colony's discontent rise too high or hope fall too low, the Captain would be exiled, and, theoretically, the colony would survive without them. Yet, the continuous environmental threat, the constant fighting with external forces (cold, mainly), and the scarcity of survivors made the first game much more concerned with survival than the second, in which New London has citizens by the thousands and heating systems are more modernized and simpler to manage.

The connective tissue between these two goals is what Anable named the "Aesthetics of Failure" (2018, p. 128). In her words, this aesthetics asks players not to celebrate failure but to flail with it for a while and learn its contours … The aesthetics of failure … create different affective conditions and trajectories for failure in a culture that keeps raising the bar of success while simultaneously pulling the rug out from under all but the most privileged. (129).

This is mechanically performed differently in both games: while the first game forces players to restart the experience should they fail (or fail to save in the best cases), the second game separates the story into five different but connected chapters from which players can re-start the experience should they need (or want) to. In this sense, the saga also mechanically speaks about the harshness and cruelty of the environment that has been more or less tamed in the second installment: *Frostpunk* present players with an exploration of the ethical boundaries that players are ready to break to survive, whereas *Frostpunk 2* focuses on a less precarious situation, and therefore offers more tools to players so that they can traverse the ludonarrative experience successfully.

This is not the only way in which the aesthetics of failure are encoded within the experience. Both games aim to reflect upon the player's failures in achieving a perfect goal: In many scenarios, *Frostpunk* forces an end of completing goals to players by establishing a timetable that cannot be prolonged. If players have finished some of them by then, the colony will have a better chance of survival. Additionally, in some scenarios, such as "The Fall of Winterhome", players are allowed to finish early to save as many people as possible. *Frostpunk 2* includes an event that triggers a civil war between factions. Players, thus, can only aim to be as prepared as possible so that its effects are as minimal as possible.

It is perhaps in the final cutscene of each scenario where the aesthetics of failure play a more prominent role. At the end of each scenario of the first video game, as hinted earlier, players see a sped-up, blurred review of their playthrough. In this review, several of the decisions of the player appear as part of the cutscene. Consider the following, taken from "The Last Autumn":

Every bold endeavor demands sacrifice. And so, we did. Constant oversight, round ups, penal colonies, armed overseers. Can one life be worth more than another? Liverpool needed a chance. I forced us to give it. 3 dead workers, 14 dead engineers, 90 dead convicts. But… *was this price just*? Site 113, New Liverpool. Support capacity: 800 citizens. Chances of survival: *acceptable*. (VGS – Video Game Sophistry, 2020, min 37:58, my emphases)

The video game asking the player whether it was worthy or not to have taken the decisions they have made suggests an interest of the ludonarrative experience to get into the ethical consequences

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of the players' actions. This connects with the Frostpunk aesthetic as defined early: is the goal of the Captain enough to disregard human life? Is the players' willingness to complete the experience enough to dismiss all fictional identities and consider these fictional people as mere data? *Frostpunk* asks players, and not their avatar, whether their decisions were ethically adequate given the situation. In his study on different *Frostpunk* playthroughs, Moreno Azqueta argues that

Quite often the conflict with citizens also becomes a personal problem, even a show of disrespect on their part. *Frostpunk* is a relatively more intense game in emotional terms, and players feel true anger or indignation regarding its political community. At some point, the citizens' incapability of proposing measures or the impossibility of convincing them of the need of sacrifice resulted in a problematic communicative void … Facing this situation, players see themselves forced to take a more authoritative position (2024, 165-166, my translation)

And yet, the ludonarrative experience seems to punish players who assume this authoritative position. In other words, while players feel that they require to, for instance, deify themselves so that a low Hope does not make citizens to exile the Captain (so that they can lead the colony through the Great Frost), later the game narratively punishes them for that, asking whether crossing the line was worth it, whether survival should be achieved at all costs, and inviting them to replay the whole scenario so that they can obtain a better ending, one in which the line has not been crossed. Consider now the comparison between these two endings, both from the main scenario of *Frostpunk 2*. The first occurs when the player is voted as the new Captain, assuming absolute power of New London.

You took matters into your hands. The Captain lives again. Bickering factions finally contained. Maybe you wanted everyone to get along? Supported the Faithkeepers in their vision of the future. Maybe you tried your very best? 2,320 students performed successful surgeries. 2,039 thought-corrected criminals. Maybe you grew impatient with the bickering? Winterhome settled. It was the right choice. Maybe you had to do it or the City would fall? 305 bystanders dead in civil war. 4 districts damaged. 2,351 Faithkeepers and 3,940 Evolvers contained. 3,455 radicals from all sides imprisoned. Radical ideologies outlawed. New London is finally at peace. All hail the Captain. It does not matter. Lily May, 14, acolyte. Contained with her mother. Smuggles food into the district. Constantly thinks about the welfare of her people and how to destroy the walls of the enclave. Maybe one day she will succeed? The only doubt… How long will it last when you are gone, Captain? (VSG – Video Game Sophistry, 2024, 27:54).

When the player is given command of New London as a Steward in the first chapter, Lily May is presented to the player as a baby briefly. Her ending being affected by the player makes her a human representation of the player's choices. Compare the previous paragraph with the following:

In the darkest hour, you strived for peace. Hope persists, a flicker in the wind. Maybe you wanted everyone to get along? Supported the Faithkeepers in their vision of the future. Maybe you tried your very best? 5, 132 machine assistants maimed, 931 people forced into loveless marriages. Maybe you always looked for a middle path? Winterhome salvaged. Something had to be done. Maybe you never gave up, even at the brink? 271 bystanders dead in civil war. 3 districts damaged. The peace vote (sic) passess, 70 in favour. Hostilities cease. New London finds peace. For now… Even so… Lily May, 14, scout trainee. Learns a new trade. Mother lost during civil war. Reveres the Steward for keeping the city together. And even as life is harsh, her head is full of dreams. The path of peace is narrow. And, as long as we roam this still, cold world, it has no end. (8:32)

This is considered one of the best endings possible, as the city survives and peace prevails, at least, as the game states, for now. And yet, the narrative highlights the players' errors (dead people, damaged districts, people forced to live an unhappy life, maimed people…), or, rather, suggests a reading of the playthrough in which, even with the player's best efforts, the results are not perfect (or, in some cases, even good)[1].

The aesthetic of Frostpunk and the aesthetics of failure are intertwined, thus, and embedded in the ludonarrative construction: even at the best of efforts, players receive a focus on their errors, the game inviting them to re-play the experience and try to obtain a better ending. And, doing their best efforts, players receive a bleak answer: even when doing as much as possible (in terms of intended

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gameplay, that is, not crossing the line and avoiding as much as possible deaths/injuries), players' efforts slightly change the world for the better. Note that this consideration of what is better implies an ethical positioning towards the experience, as the game renders some paths too much, while moderation and focusing on saving the dual people/code integrated in the game are regarded as the ideal aesth(ethic)[2].

4. Conclusions

In this analysis, the semiotic nature of the video game is especially important, as the *Frostpunk* saga not only simulates multiple endings, which already makes each playthrough different in a patent manner, but rather, in this understanding of the videogame as a relational system, the relationship between players and videogame, a completely theoretical approach becomes meaningless. This article's analysis of identity, aesthetics, and ethics, would not be lessened in quality. However, this understanding reconfigures the analysis as a superficial approach to *Frostpunk* that allows for an individual experience of video games. In short, I want to emphasize that it is not the saga what speaks about the analysis above, but that the cultural production, the algorithmic/mathematical code, exposes specifically some elements that may lead players to think on these particular topics. The fact that *Frostpunk* offers ludonarrative choices to players does not make it more interactive than choosing to keep reading a novel. Instead, the technological product offers one part of the ludonarrative experience that is epistemologically incomplete, that requires players to be whole. It is not that players give meaning to external stimuli, but that players are part of the ludonarratological construction of a text. As Fizek argues, "not only … we play with computers but also … they play with us" (101), since "agency and action [are] qualities distributed between humans, AI, and hardware" (2022, p. 103).

With that perspective in mind, *Frostpunk*'s code focuses on attempting to captivate players with ethical choices and their outcomes. As the designers state, they aimed to create "emotional, cultural loops … [and a] Visceral layer (action-feedback loops) What does crossing the line mean? Crossing the line vs. keeping to your morals Extortion vs. balance Compassion vs. efficiency Good of one vs. good of the many" (Fijak and Stokalski, 2019, P. 241). With that idea in mind, and remembering that "video game aesthetic rests on the fluid relationship between the human and the technological" (Fizek, 2022, p. 104), *Frostpunk* offers a ludonarrative experience focused on the intersection between aesthetics and ethics, an experience in which, should players accept the rules of the game and the existence, while playing, of the people that accept their rule (either begrudgingly or happily), their identity in terms of core beliefs (survival at all costs or taking a more moderate approach) can be challenged, and help in reconfiguring their self-discourse, perhaps in search of a better understanding of how to get into the narrow, evasive, peaceful road towards a better world.

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Notes

1. It is interesting to note that the second game's endings do not have a sped-up review of the playthrough behind all these words, given that, in this game, focused on stability and peacemaking, many of the changes that players do in their city are not as visual as in the first one, focused on the expansion of the colony.
2. It is that so, that, as the Polish *Game Developer's Guide to the Chinese market* states that Frostpunk's final question sparked controversy among Chinese players: "on the one hand, they mostly consider video games a form of entertainment and are not used to games questioning their moral decisions, on the other hand, many of them believe that all means are justified as long as they ensure the survival of the society as a whole. Therefore, their experience from playing the game was completely different than that of Western players" (2023, p. 11).

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