



Whether computer games are seen as a political issue, as an entertainment medium or even as art, depends at present on the context. Every game positions itself within a society and thus makes society one of its themes. We therefore can postulate a political relevance for all computer games, even and especially when they seem to elude all political action (that is, collectively binding decisions). Even for these games it applies that the players issue regulations, but also must in turn play according to the rules of the game in order to play at all. At the other end of this spectrum are games that are deliberately used for the goals of political education or propaganda with a view to reaching otherwise hard-to-reach target groups.

The touring exhibition GAMES AND POLITICS examines how computer games unfold their political potential. With the aid of obviously politically ambitious computer games of the past twelve years, it explores the scope and limits of the genre, constructing a counter-position within the entertainment industry.

This counter-position can be formulated, on the one hand, by playing through the contingencies of political decision-making itself (DEMOCRACY III) or, on the other hand, by the explicitly critical highlighting of social conditions and injustices that unites all the exhibited games. The games address precarious labour conditions (SUNSET) and gender issues (PERFECT WOMAN), the surveillance state (TOUCHTONE), the consequences of armed conflicts (THIS WAR OF MINE), the treatment of refugees (ESCAPE FROM WOOMERA) and revolutions against totalitarian systems (YELLOW UMBRELLA).

By adopting the perspectives of more or less marginalized people such as those of a border official (PAPERS, PLEASE!), a housekeeper (SUNSET), a drone pilot (KILLBOX) or a war survivor (THIS WAR OF MINE), the players are restricted to an extremely limited scope of maneuvering, which they move through with a feeling of powerlessness and constantly threatening negative sanctions. The empowering of game characters or the formulation of viable alternatives are a rarity. The exhibited games reflect rather the superior power of others. They subjugate the players doubly to power – at the level of the video game character and at that of the video game player.

The question is whether the game thus already takes itself as a theme, for this form of reflection reveals a further political dimension. The game can construct a counter-position to its own medium by laying bare, in the process of play itself, its manner of operation, its stereotypes, dependencies and conditions – for example, the steady liaison between the defense industry and the video game industry (in the game UNMANNED), the image of women in computer games, the use of violence in games or the player's (purported) freedom of choice.

Moreover, we should not forget the level of game development and use, the politics of games. Almost all the exhibited games operate in a market apart from the major entertainment game industry. In her games Anna Anthropy promotes a democratization of game development by the use of freely accessible tools for amateurs. More and more first-person shooter games are now played pacifistically and have a growing fan base. In addition to subversive techniques of play, likewise demonstrated by Joseph De Lappe's performance DEAD-IN-IRAQ, there are also subversive practices of game design such as that of modding. This appropriation practice makes use, among others, of the game 1378KM, which has been vehemently criticized by victims' associations and denounced by the press

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as an “affront against human dignity”. Only insistence on the assessment of the game as an object of art quelled the storm of indignation. Can the game, placed within the context of the art institution “museum”, still represent a political issue? And is the computer game a suitable medium with which to treat complex political questions?

GAMES AND POLITICS wants to present examples of all these levels of the political sphere in games that can for the most part be played at the exhibition itself. The exhibition curators have also asked both experts in media and cultural studies and game developers about the political potential of computer games. Their answers will be presented in mini-documentaries, a film introducing the exhibition and the exhibition catalogue.

CATEGORIES

Making Opinions: Computer Games as Commentary on Actual Political Events

The Cat and the Coup – Madrid – Yellow Umbrella

Military Matters: Computer Games as Reflexions of the Alliance between War and Entertainment Industries

Killbox – Unmanned – This War of Mine

Multiperspectivability: Computer Games as a Questioning of Stereotypical Gender Roles

Perfect Woman – Dys4ia – Coming Out Simulator

Media Critique: Computer Games as Instruments of Self-Reflexion

Phone Story – TouchTone – Orwell

Migration Stories: Computer Games that Cross Borders

Papers, Please – 1378km – Escape from Woomera

Mapping Power: Computer Games as Observers of Self-efficacy and Powerlessness

Sunset – Democracy – The Westport Independent

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EXHIBITS IN THE EXHIBITION

List of playable games (16)

PC:	Papers, Please Unmanned Coming Out Simulator This War of Mine	Perfect Woman The Cat and the Coup Sunset Dys4sia	Killbox Madrid Democracy3 Orwell
Tablet:	Yellow Umbrella	The Westport Independent	TouchTone
iPod:	Phone Story		

Let's Plays (18)

all playable games plus 1378km and Escape from Woomera

Mini-documentaries

Joseph DeLappe - Dead-in-iraq/America's Army

Antikriegsspiele (Anti-War Games) - author: Christian Schiffer

Diversität in Spielen [i.e. Diversity in Games] - author: Christian Schiffer

Intro-film - Author: Jeannette Neustadt

TEAM

Curatos:	Jeannette Neustadt (GI) Stephan Schwingeler (ZKM)
Curatorial Assistant:	Sophie Rau (GI)
Administration and Tour Management:	Kirsten Rackwitz (GI)
Exhibition Architecture:	Kooperative für Darstellungspolitik / Jesko Fezer, Anita Kaspar
Graphic Design Concept:	Matthias Görlich
Technical Director:	Steffen Reichelt
Technical Support:	Museum and Exhibition Technical Services ZKM

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