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"Scavenge, Slay, Survive": The Zombie Apocalypse, Exploration, and Lived Experience in *DayZ*

The zombie is the twenty-first century monster of choice, a ubiquitous symbol of any kind of systemic failure, from zombie banks in economics to zombie categories in social theory.[1] Even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) use the science-fictional horror scenario of a zombie apocalypse rather than a natural disaster (such as Hurricane Katrina) to instruct US citizens on issues of "Preparedness 101" should the unthinkable occur and society break down. The CDC's assurances of preparation and control stand in stark contrast to contemporary cultural depictions of zombies, which expressly reveal "that societal structures and institutions, and the military, are ultimately ineffective in stopping the random disorder that occurs during a zombie outbreak or, very generally, in a global crisis" (Birch-Bayley 142). The zombie apocalypse is thus, as a science-fictional topos, both a poignant commentary on the anxieties of the present and an extrapolation of consequences for the future. Zombie apocalypses comment on current issues of systemic control in times of crisis and on anxieties about future sociopolitical realities. In short, they are cultural representations about how society imagines itself reacting to its own breakdown. Zombie apocalypses in literature and film are representations of an idealized version of this scenario, blueprints of how society is supposed to react (by setting an example and promoting either imitation or rejection of a specific behavior) and cannot offer the readers/viewers their individual exploration of this crisis situation. Video games, on the other hand, because they are created as simulations of systems rather than fixed narratives, offer a procedural extrapolation of a crisis as it plays out. The digital medium provides players with the option to explore their own behavior, make decisions, and react to the systemic breakdown.

In the following, I will concentrate on the video game *DayZ* as one specific adaptation of the trope of the zombie apocalypse, analyzing its medial specificity as digital sf. The game uses transgressive notions of storytelling to refute the sf commitment to providing a historically derived narrative account. Instead, *DayZ* favors a new form of open-world simulation that emphasizes not knowledge but lived experience.

DayZ was developed as a fan modification (mod) for the military action-game *ARMA II* (2009).[2] Instead of the realistically simulated military world of the first-person-shooter (FPS), *DayZ* places the player into an ongoing zombie apocalypse. In addition, the game shifts the emphasis of gameplay from a mission-oriented, narrative-driven shooter towards a non-scripted open-world survival game with very specific alterations to the mechanics that facilitate a new form of narrative construction. As Paweł Frelik notes, video-game genres

can be constructed in terms of theme, affect, or the "cognitive and haptic interactions required from the player" (228), making a clear-cut categorization of *DayZ* problematic as it exhibits the science-fiction theme of a post-apocalypse, the affect of horror towards its subject-matter of zombies, and the game mechanics of first-person shooters, open-world games, survival games, and massively multi-player online games (MMO). *DayZ* hybridizes these categories and can comfortably be argued to belong in all of them. Central to my argument here is its ancestry in the zombie-apocalypse narrative, which in itself combines the affective side of visceral, bodily horror present in the figure of the zombie and the science-fictional theme present in the sociopolitical dimension of a dystopian end of the human. Before analyzing the game itself, I therefore want to briefly explore the characteristics of the zombie apocalypse.

The Zombie Apocalypse, Video Games, and Science Fiction. Because of their focus on the sociopolitical dimension of failing systems, zombie apocalypses are ideal cultural representations of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls liquid modernity. For Bauman, contemporary society is defined by the evanescence of any and all forms of stabilizing social institutions, resulting in a triad of problems:

> the combined experience of insecurity (of position, entitlements and livelihood), of uncertainty (as to their continuation and future stability) and of unsafety (of one's body, one's self and their extensions: possessions, neighbourhood, community). (161)

All risk shifts from a societal to a private level, and without institutions to frame and shape our lives, issues of security, safety, and certainty become a matter of individual choice; such issues become the most prominent anxieties and fears in society. Zombies, as figures of systemic breakdown, literalize this dissolution of stability in that they emerge "to release chaos from within the logic of society itself" (McAlister 475). Anyone can become a zombie. There is no safety protocol to escape this fate. The viral and infectious nature of the zombie threatens established systems of control—the zombie defies ontological categories and is best described by Agamben's term of *homo sacer*: the abandoned human who lives outside the law and who can be killed without fear of consequence.

Recent sf scholarship, focusing on its cinematic form, has read the zombie apocalypse mostly as a representation of contemporary biopolitics, or as Sherryl Vint has argued, of "the thanato-politics of a biopolitical order that deems lives not worth living, and thus inhabited by a kind of living death" (Introduction 167). The distinction between human socially bound life, in the form of *bios*, and bare life, in the form of *zoe*, is explicitly negotiated by the zombie metaphor to showcase "the fragile quality of this distinction, how easily one can switch categories when the state of exception operates permanently" (Introduction 168). This reading of recent zombie films such as Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) and Zak Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the*

Dead (2004) as representations of thanato-politics follows a distinct tradition of conceptualizing science fiction as "social critique" that encourages readers to see the world from an alienated point of view and the science-fiction text as "a reflection *on* reality as well as *of* it" (Vint, *Science Fiction* 39). This concept of sf is clearly aligned with the tradition of utopia/dystopia as a narrative of human progress and the will to know (to make sense of) our world that ideologically shapes our reality.

Consequently, the zombie is "a sign and a symptom of an apocalyptic undoing of the social order" in the dystopian sense, whereas the survivors represent the utopian hope for an enclave of "relative, contingent and uneasy safety" (McAlister 474ff.). This ideological paradigm is entrenched in the narratives that inevitably follow a group of survivors negotiating the "estranged" terrain of their formerly known world in their quest to regain knowledge of this world and to look for a safe zone in which to rebuild social order. The films mentioned above further establish what Neeraja Sundaram calls the "discourse of the 'human' or 'ideal survivor'," which represents only certain bodies as part of a human ideal that is "coded in these films as heroic, individualistic, healthy and genteel" (150). The films' protagonists are those characters with whom the audience finds itself most intensely in "an act of imaginative identification," imagining not necessarily "being that other person, but rather imagining being in her situation" (Gaut, qtd. in Eder 600). Most zombie film-protagonists thus exhibit admirable character traits such as honesty, empathy, strength, endurance, a trust in scientific knowledge as a solution, a strong utopian faith in a better world, and an urge to help the needy and defend the weak.

But there is more than one way that sf transports meaning, especially when considering different media forms—and in fact, the revitalization of the zombie apocalypse trope after its near demise in the cinematic form in the 1990s was largely due to its shift from film to video game and the massive popularity and cultural impact of one game in particular—resulting in what Jamie Russell calls the "*Resident Evil* Effect" (171). Even though zombies appeared in earlier games, the inauguration of the "zombie simulation" (Weise, "Rules of Horror" 238)—meaning games that translate the experience of the zombie film into the medium of games—first came about in the genre of survival horror and its keystone text, Capcom's *Resident Evil* (1996).[3] According to Matthew Weise, *Resident Evil* needs to be credited with providing the prototype of a "procedural adaptation" ("Rules of Horror" 238) of the zombie apocalypse to videogames and establishing gameplay rules extrapolated from zombie behavior as presented in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Consequently, *Resident Evil* revolved around human protagonists struggling to escape hordes of slow, shambling, but relentlessly aggressive zombies. The game provided new challenges in gameplay by transgressing the generic boundaries of typical action games. It focused on the avoidance of direct combat and instead rewarded strategic planning (such as conservation of ammunition) in combination with strictly regulated movement and little control

over the environment (limited gamespace, fixed perspective). For Weise, this type of gameplay is strongly connected to a feeling of vulnerability and rejects the typical "power fantasies many games offered, which seem to be about giving players the thrill of killing weaker, less-skilled opponents" ("How the Zombie" 157). Early zombie simulations based their gameplay in the affective experience of horror and, instead of empowering players, concentrated on the opposite feeling by challenging players to face their fears, experience a loss of control, and deal with their own mortality. Ideologically speaking, this is in line with the countercultural critique that zombie films have presented, be it a critique of the inhumane Vietnam war, the inherent racism of society, or the loss of individuality in consumerism.

Yet with the new millennium and its liquid-modern realities came an evolution of the cultural representation imagined through zombie apocalypses that broadened their scope to encompass science-fictional visions of globalized anxieties. The slow-shuffling hordes of zombies became the fast-paced hives of the infected in the previously mentioned *28 Days Later* and Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead*: zombies "are pure contagion, spreading like a virus," manifesting our fears of "global pandemic" and terrorism (Keetley 4). A similar shift occurred in video gaming, Weise claims, with zombie simulations now tending towards action and shooting, fast-paced gameplay, and narratives that project a "general drift away from the anxiety of disempowerment towards the thrill of empowerment" ("How the Zombie" 165). Ideologically speaking, these games allow players to take charge in times of systemic failure and to devise individual solutions. Zombie simulations such as *Resident Evil* 5 (2009) or *Left 4 Dead* (2008) are in effect first-person-shooters, which focus on player agency and military (forceful) reestablishing of order after a temporary systemic breakdown. It is within this more action-oriented paradigm that *DayZ* positions itself as both a continuation and a transgression of the generic tradition.

Exploration and Narrative. As a procedural adaptation of the zombie apocalypse trope, *DayZ* is part of one specific sf "parabola," which as Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger suggest are "combinations of meaningful setting, character, and action that lend themselves to endless redefinition and jazzlike improvisation" (vii). Zombie apocalypses are part of the "Post-Holocaust Road Movie" (x) parabola, which—as the name suggests—deals with a breakdown of society, the loss of knowledge and history, and a desperate need for spatial movement. As Sundaram argues, contemporary zombie fictions focus on journeys (the "road movie") both mental and spatial, as characters come to realize the destruction of any former structures ("post-holocaust"). The "protagonists of these films are thus necessarily always on the move—escaping the infected and invading viruses who swarm all places of prior refuge" (140). Their journeys are thus trifold and reflect Bauman's liquid-modern risks for the individual: material unsafety, spiritual uncertainty, and cognitive insecurity. In order to survive, they need to find shelter, food, and safety, and zombie narratives mark their progress

"from a condition of despair to one of hope" (140). On the material level, their movement is spatial and oriented toward finding safety. On the spiritual level, they realize their status as survivors and need to find a utopian hope for a better world in order to regain certainty. Finally, on the cognitive level they are seeking knowledge of their surroundings and status and trying to find security by regaining control of the situation. In most narratives, this is facilitated by uncovering the history of events that led to the situation and by promising scientific knowledge as a means of control.

DayZ is similarly focused on a journey as "movement through space," but the cognitive and spiritual journeys become transformed in this new digital form. As Lev Manovich has pointed out, traversing a three-dimensional gamespace is the essential component of gameplay for most games:

> [They] present the user with a space to be traversed, to be mapped out by moving through it. [They] begin by dropping the player somewhere in this space. Before reaching the end of the game narrative, the player must visit most of it, uncovering its geometry and topology, learning its logic and secrets. (245)

DayZ, more than other games, highlights the interconnection of what Manovich calls "narrative action and exploration" (247), narrative action referring to necessary actions by the player to propel the narrative along, and exploration referring to self-sufficient movement in the game world without narrative purpose. In *DayZ* both actions become indistinguishable, as the game lacks any form of scripted narrative event that would usually prompt the movement across the game world, motivated for example by the gathering of knowledge or the hope of a better position.

DayZ takes place in Chernarus (a fictitious former Soviet-bloc country) after the outbreak of a deadly virus that has killed most of the population and transformed them into zombies. Players begin the game *in medias res* at the shore of Chernarus with only a flashlight and batteries in their possession.[4] They have to scavenge for food, water, medicine, and shelter, as well as deal with both zombies and human bandits in order to survive. Clearly this is a rudimentary narrative structure—but one necessarily constructed by the player, as the game itself does not provide an introduction, an explanation, a tutorial, or any other narrative guideline. Any information on setting, history, and main objectives is part of the paratext that players will get before installing the game, most likely by visiting the game's website. The main goal of the game is stated only there, never explicitly in the game: "[P]layers follow a single goal: to survive in the harsh post-apocalyptic landscape as long as they can" ("About"). Nothing is explained in-game, so that spatial exploration becomes the main driver of narrative action. Players roam the barren landscape and search houses for usable materials and equipment. Zombies and other humans are either avoided altogether, outrun, or fought off if weapons are available to the player. Since the game is predicated on multi-player gaming, most conflicts involve other players, who are faced with the same survival challenges and tend to be hostile.

The austerity of story elements and the minimalist narrative cues given within the game itself are in stark contrast to sf's traditional concern with narrative extrapolation, in the sense of providing stories that are concerned with the "extension from the known to the unknown" (Landon 25). This notion of seeking knowledge is already inherent in Brian Aldiss's definition of science fiction as "the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science)" (8). Sf has thus traditionally been concerned with the performance of knowledge, both in the sense of "extensions, developments, and applications of well-established knowledge" and the speculation on or "assumption of new—i.e., now unknown—principles" of knowledge (Schmidt, qtd. in Landon 26). Accordingly, much of sf has emphasized the will to know about and reflect on the human condition. Many sf video series (such as MASS EFFECT [2007-2012] and FALLOUT [1997-2010]) favor the construction of narratives of cognition (i.e., plot structures that rely on an active seeking out of knowledge about the world) in extensive imaginary worlds. Knowledge about the world or the human condition in *DayZ*, by contrast, remains inaccessible through narrative and must instead be experienced. There are no archives, records, or info files that can be studied and no recollections of witnesses or testimonies of those responsible for the sociopolitical realities of the game world. Players can never (re)gain the security of knowing their place, leaving them forever insecure in Bauman's sense of the word. In addition, utopian hope to alleviate liquid-modern uncertainty can also only be temporarily gained by joining forces with other players and by acting as "ideal survivor," an action full of risk and little reward, as discussed below.

Instead, the science-fictional open-world setting of the postholocaust emphasizes the players' need for spatial movement in order to foster understanding of the estranged world into which they are literally dropped —understanding in the sense not of knowledge but experience. As is typical of sf, players need to decipher the world as a text by traversing the world, encountering its inhabitants (zombies, animals, other humans), and interacting with them. But it is a will to survive that drives the traversal, not a will to know. Exploration only reveals—in Manovich's terms—the topography (literally, the map) as well as the mechanical logic of the world. Through trial and error (and the inevitable death that follows), the game implicitly allows players to discover how to use objects, how to avoid death, and where best to locate specific resources. Nonetheless, only the pure mechanics are "knowable," not the game's "secrets," such as the history of the zombie plague, the events that caused the ruin of the surroundings, or any potential attempts at coming to terms with the new realities. In contrast to other sf media employing the zombie-apocalypse trope, no archives can be found that explain how things came to be, and no utopian hope is held out that things might change. This kind of narrative of a historical past and its connection to a possible future remains hidden from the player. Instead, the game focuses the player's attention on the experience of living in the world's present.

This aspect is especially important because the game's present is precarious and continuously threatened, highlighting the player's position as *homo sacer* within the thanato-political order of the world, where his life is always inhabited by death. Further, the game emphasizes its lack of explicit rules as symbolic of the uncertainty of institutionalized order, for example forgoing any player address and providing almost no Head-Up Display (HUD) except for small status updates.[5] Any game mechanics, such as keeping nourished, avoiding poisoning through rotten food, bandaging injuries, countering blood loss, or tinkering with objects, have to be determined by the player through exploration. Players are forced to pay attention to the present moment and their situation, as the game world (weather, nourishment, zombies) intrudes and other players are a continuous threat. The game mechanics are based in simulating real-life survival: food and water have to be located and consumed on a regular basis, rain has to be avoided so as not to lower one's body temperature, and physical injuries need time to heal but do so only after the use of bandages and medicine. Deciphering which rules exist, which actions are possible in the game world, and when they are necessary for survival: these decisions provide a groundwork for the players' actions. Yet since no narrative action is pre-scripted, both exploration of space and concentration on the present are central. A sense of the present is further enhanced by *DayZ*'s identity system, which allows the development of characters over several sessions. Players will spend many hours of play to advance their character—not in skills (as in a role-playing game) but in terms of the amount and quality of the equipment at hand, which becomes the determining factor in survival. Yet as Carter, Gibbs, and Wadley note, "[u]nlike other FPS games, in which death is a minor 2-10 second setback before rematerialization, death in *DayZ* involves the permanent death of this character, and loss of all items and advancement" ("Death" 1). Once dead, all progress made on this specific character is lost and a new character needs to start a new journey. This game mechanic underscores the need to explore the environment, highlighting the spatiality of the digital text while at the same time flaunting the categorical transition from human to zombie characterized by the thanato-politics of the game world.

Aside from the player's "ludic" need to explore the world, another important aspect of spatiality should be noted of *DayZ*—that of the landscape, which encompasses a virtual 230 square kilometers (cf. "About"). In presenting an environment modeled on postapocalypse aesthetics and not restricting movement, *DayZ* allows players to freely explore the "graves of a failed civilization" (Christie and Lauro 2) and not just passively view a predetermined path taken by film characters. In the game, the player decides where to go and which ruins of contemporary society to explore—dilapidated villages, decrepit military bases, or rotting urban centers.

Science fiction traditionally highlights the possibility of a specific and relevant future by alluding to its historical construction—a formative aspect of the genre that Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. refers to as "future history" (6). In

his view, sf presents plausible "micromyths of the historical process," making use in its representation of "techniques of realism" and "the characteristic qualities of naturalistic narrative" to retain the "integral connection between present and the future" (6). But sf constructs these "future histories" as "weightless," as they "incur no obligation" to act: "SF lacks the gravity of history, because it lacks the gravity of lived experience" (83). The genre is playful and any responsibility or moral obligation felt is a "chosen responsibility," as "the cause-and-effect chain of human and natural events is emptied of the fatality of fact and experience" (83ff.). Because the events are imagined and not experienced, no obligation to act is drawn from them.

DayZ, on the other hand, re-inscribes its future history with exactly that moment of "lived experience," even though the life lived is virtual. No verisimilitude and naturalistic narrative are needed to verify the experience of a ruined landscape and the death and destruction of the zombie plague, as players clearly experience it themselves. As such, *DayZ* as digital sf does not need to enact "literary plot structures ... employing metahistories as their raw materials" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 84) but can instead create its own (individually performed) "history" in each virtually experienced moment. The persistence of the game world and of character identity further emphasize the players' responsibility for their actions as well as the authenticity of the experience. The game-world ruins may seem lifeless, but each open door or dark passage can prompt an attack by zombies or hostile players called bandits, resulting in injury or death. The game world is in a permanent state of exception and each exploration carries with it the categorical risk of turning from human into zombie. The precarious presence of the players in this world and the dangerous traversal of its bleak, hostile space force the reality of the dystopian future on them in a much more direct way than any filmic or literary adaptation. Moreover, as Krzywinska argues for any horror game in the first-person mode (such as *DayZ*), the subjective perspective that players inhabit offers an even more direct experience of threat: "there is increased visual proximity to what lurks within such shadowy places, heightening the sense of contact. This closer proximity to danger builds disquietude and tension" (210).[6]

Through its mechanics of necessary exploration of the gamespace and the lived experience of the science-fictional world, *DayZ* highlights the precarious position that humans face in a thanato-political reality in which no institutional security guarantees the players' status. This marks a departure from the traditional sf focus on narrative plot structure or the genre's emphasis on historical knowledge and processes of cognition. Instead of embedding the contemporary human condition in a historical past and representing it through "vividly detailed imaginary discourses" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 82), the game favors the players' immersion into and direct experience of their precarious condition. For example, focusing on the present and using decisive movements and speed to avoid threatening situations will make the player better at surviving and—given the lack of a measurable endgame—winning the game. Ideologically, this neatly reflects the reality in liquid modernity, where due to

the individual's need to stay "ahead of the game," as diagnosed by Bauman, "[s]peed of movement has today become ... the paramount factor of social stratification and the hierarchy of domination" (151). In contrast to most zombie films, *DayZ* offers no real reprieve from individual risks; and in order to become an "ideal survivor," a player will have to skillfully negotiate the given gamespace and adapt to any situation encountered.

Community of Storytellers. Exploration of gamespace is not the only goal of *DayZ*, as the website makes clear. As the site claims, the additional goal for survival is that "[p]layers can live through powerful events and emotions arising from the ever-evolving emergent gameplay" ("About"). This does suggest an underlying narrative mechanic to the game. And interestingly, though there is no single pre-scripted narrative thread that players can follow, *DayZ* is nonetheless one of the most story-generating games available for play. Yet it does not generate stories through the expression of one definitive game-text but rather in the form of a network of distributed and narrativized experiences across several other media platforms. The stories generated by the game are experienced and authored by the players—so that the burden of making sense of this world lies not with the authority of the game designers but on the shoulders of the individual players.

The individual experience, which is "infused" (as Frelik terms it) with a narrative, is different for each instance of play and does not follow the pre-scripted logic of many commercially produced games. As an open-world game, *DayZ* can be compared to games such as *Dead Island* (2011) or *Dying Light* (2015). These open-world (or free-roam) games normally function in the interplay between the dual event-structure of exploration and narrative action, providing the player with two different sets of tasks. On the one hand, these games feature a strong narrative arc (the main storyline) that provides the core motivation of play, the background and history of the protagonist, and the explanation of the state of the world. This is where the emotional affect for players is generated, when the zombie virus outbreak forces the protagonist to organize and keep alive a band of survivors and find a vaccine against the virus. But this main storyline is also where players find out about the conflicts among different survivor groups, the power struggle to control the vaccine and heal the infected or to weaponize it instead. On the other hand, these games also provide a large number of open-world events that contribute to the main narrative only insofar as they add to the development of the character (by providing money, experience points, skills, and equipment). These events are tasks set for the characters, of which a certain number need to be completed to progress in the story but which are otherwise interchangeable and placed around the game world only to foster its exploration.

As such, open-worlds—zombie, sf, or otherwise—provide game-events that are both scripted (specific events at specific locations) and semi-scripted (interchangeable events at specific locations). These games thus enact an authorial narrative, a traditional "future history" of predetermined events unfolding in the present, whereas the experience (the infused narrative) of the

game changes depending on the player's preferences for the order and location of the events. The narrative of *Dead Island* will be different for players only insofar as which tasks they perform for the various survivors, which supply runs they make, and how many zombies they kill on the way—the main story of finding the vaccine and getting off the island remains the same. *DayZ* challenges these ideas of authorial future histories by eliminating all scripted events. Instead the game places the story-engine (so to speak) into the hands of the community of players, who freely infuse their gameplay with any number of narrativizations, none of which can be foreseen or repeated, for they depend on the interaction of individual players.

The origin of *DayZ* as a mod already hints at the fan community's potential to determine authorship in narrativizing the game experience. Not only did creator Dean Hall (himself a player of *ARMA* II) strip the military structure (units, orders, and missions) from the original game, but he also eliminated linear narrative progression and teleology, creating a free-roam world for exploration. The game does not provide any prescribed actions and thus negates all authorial determination of one specific history, in a sense mirroring the evanescence of any institutional order. In keeping with its origin as a mod, the stand-alone does not reintroduce those elements back into play. What motivates narrative in the game is the interaction between players—which is an essential feature of the game, as some actions will force players into cooperation, while the scarcity of objects and the generally harsh environment mostly lead to competition.[7]

As has been mentioned, the setting is a postapocalyptic, zombie-infested world and the game mechanics simulate survival in such a world. But since no authorial narrative exists, players are free to experience any form of "infused narrative." Especially in the social encounters with other players, there is an immense variability of gameplay. The mechanics limit the number of actions available to players in terms of their usefulness for a (military-based) survival simulation. Nonetheless, the range of options is fairly flexible and complex. Responding to a utopian impulse, players can opt to behave as "ideal survivors" (heroic, honorable, etc.) and seek out temporary certainty by socially organizing in communities. Players have gathered in camps, helped each other, and even cooperated to build a helicopter (the game allows repair and tinkering). As with other zombie fictions, the zombie (as representative of *zoe*, bare life) in *DayZ* functions to stress the meaningfulness of *bios* (human life), which is volatile because of the constant threat of transformation. But in comparison to films, community and cooperation are not ideological ideals that the narrative upholds, but rather something that players need to actively choose and then work extremely hard to retain. The alternative behavior, negating such utopian order, is far more common and possibly more successful for survival: players have lured others into death matches, have killed and maimed for entertainment, and have abandoned others in desperate situations just to measure the scope of their reactions. The focus of each game experience is

determined by the individual actions of each player and refuses to adopt any ideological ideal.

Other sf narratives, and this includes open-world games, construct their fictional worlds in what Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., calls "an intensely epic activity," meaning that the "protagonists' subjective experiences and ideas are reactions to the prior conditions of the world, while these imaginary material things and institutions are, at a deeper level, the emanations and repositories of the imaginary world's conflicting and contradictory values" (82). In this he references György Lukács (who in turn makes use of Hegel's distinctions) when claiming the epic to mediate "the totality of life" within "a world of illusion which requires ... a very limited number of men and human destinies" (Lukács 92). Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. explains that the totality of life in sf is transported by interconnecting "megahistories of the human species" with the "personal histories of protagonists in a critical moment of that covering megahistory" (82). The genre thus favors the depiction of personal events in response to larger historical movements, the actions of the protagonists played out against the larger epic totality of events, as in the zombie films discussed earlier.

Once more, *DayZ* breaks with such traditions, foreclosing the possibility of representing the "totality of life" by separating the personal history of the player's character from any form of megahistory. The game does not enact the imaginary world's values and negates any grounding of action within a social or historical environment. If a character's actions usually reflect the imaginary value system and its continuous historical development from an imaginary present, the game's lack of grounding in history and the social environment of the imaginary world forces all meaning production into the present moment of playing the game and toward the players themselves. It is the players who reassemble their experience into an infused narrative, and it becomes their task to reflect the totality of life—including the creation of values and environments for their own imaginary worlds, as I will show below.

As stated, zombie narratives normally favor stories of ideal survivors with heroic values and humanist morals that reflect a megahistory of how those ideals have shaped our world and will need to be retained/restored even under the greatest external duress (that of a zombie onslaught). The position of the reader/viewer in these narratives allows these values to be safely tested against the thanato-political reality of the diegetic world: readers/viewers will witness (most) members of the survivor group switching categories, turning their human *bios* into the zombie's *zoe*. The critical potential of *DayZ* lies in its radical elimination of any safe distance from which to negotiate this transformation. Players experience the thanato-political threat of the zombie and its transformative nature only when they get killed and their *bios*-based experience ends. Zombie life is incomprehensible to human/player experience and cannot be simulated; the transformation cannot even be witnessed.

Returning to the idea of infused versus authorial narrative, because the game rejects the notion of a megahistory and its interconnection with personal

histories, players not only narrativize their experiences but assemble them into chronicles and histories in a variety of media, from video platforms to fan-based art, from forum discussions to personalized blogs written from the perspective of the character.[8] They can be understood as "spreadable media" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green), media formats that have made possible communities of practice that reframe and remix existing media content, spreading the production of content away from authorial agency and allowing counter-narratives to complement the original story. In *DayZ*, however, there is no original story aside from the short introduction on the website: storytelling is completely ceded to the player community. Whereas other sf media might allow alternative histories to emerge alongside the official, traditionally constructed variant, *DayZ* foregoes the official version. *DayZ* history is instead comprised of individual, fragmented, and sometimes conflicting accounts of personal, lived experiences. This is in keeping with liquid modernity and its drive towards individualization. Instead of official and political leaders setting an agenda of values and norms by policy, society looks toward the "example-authority" (Bauman 68) of individuals and to any account of personal experiences that might provide guidelines for behavior.

In providing a personal historical account of an idealized and heroic character, the traditional (sf or zombie) narrative "implicitly determines or defines the rest of human species-history" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 82). By rejecting such an authorial agency, *DayZ* offers an alternative reading of a future history. The individual history is not a representation of the totality but one of many possible actions within a given situation. *DayZ* offers a mosaic of perspectives, not a singular instance but a network of stories that connects into a large representation of a postapocalyptic society. Through its nature as played (and lived) experience, *DayZ*'s stories are anecdotal, not totalizing. In keeping with Bauman's concepts, institutional (authorial) ethical values are non-existent and instead the individual is left to decide what is right and what needs to be done. The mosaic of stories resulting from the game mechanics reflects a weariness in the game itself with authorial control. Consequently, *DayZ* does not offer a grand narrative of "how the world came to be" or "how to act," but instead a multi-faceted simulated experience of the postapocalypse, a network of autobiographies formed especially by its gray areas of ethical decisions. Instead of focusing on one limited viewpoint of institutional authority, the player-generated narratives of *DayZ* map out the reality of liquid modernity's individualization.

Ethics and the Simulation of Human Response. In this last part of the article I would like to examine the value system and social environment of *DayZ*. Important to this discussion is the game's nature as a simulation, which is, as Gonzalo Frasca reminds us, a "model of a (source) system … which maintains … some of the behaviors of the original system," meaning that the game mechanics react "according to a set of conditions" (223). In our case, *DayZ* models a physically realistic environment, human biology, and a fictitious zombie apocalypse.[9] The system modeled is as hostile towards the player as

surviving without the amenities of civilization would be in reality. Creator Dean Hall states that he wanted the game to display a social context defined by "a primal struggle to stay alive" (qtd. in Campbell). The main premise of the game forces players into moral decisions on the basis of scarcity, hostility, and biological survival.

Because of its social premise and its dystopian theme, the game is a "performative simulation that conveys a sense of malleability of the future" (Frelik 234), in this case the "what if" of a postapocalyptic world. Unlike other zombie-apocalypse media, however, *DayZ* does not provide a guideline for acceptable actions. Where the storyline of a game such as *Dead Island* sets certain moral standards by promoting a specific behavior (helping other survivors) and punishing others (bandits attack the player and for that behavior have to be killed to progress the story), *DayZ* offers no such base line. Because of the lack of an authorial account of history and social environment in *DayZ*, the protagonist's actions are not prescribed by moral values of the imaginary world. The game does not propose specific actions or goals and does not evaluate the actions of its players. It is purely a simulation of human interaction—an "anti-game" (Hall qtd. in Lathi) constructed so that it provokes the most emotional responses in the players, giving them the greatest freedom to explore moral choices. The set up of the gameplay—scarcity of resources, hostility of environment, no goal but survival, permanent death for characters—further intensifies these emotional reactions, turning the game into an "increasingly fascinating social experiment" (Kelly), in which to test player behavior "in controlled life-threatening situations" (Cristofari and Guitton).

Consequently, in order to render *DayZ* into a narrative of personal history, players are forced to assign moral value to their own character's and other players' actions. The moral values reflected in the (externally and medially separate) narratives are not representative of the imaginary world (or the authorial voice) but reflect the player's personal morality based in the material conditions of the simulation. While the gameplay allows players to cooperate, it does not allow the formation of typical multi-player communities ("guilds") that act cooperatively. Carter, Gibbs, and Wadley explain it concisely:

> While players can form ad-hoc groups to achieve goals, these groups are not recognized by the game software, and unlike in other online games, the members of a group are not prevented by the software from turning on each other. While there is motivation to form cooperative groups, there is also motivation to betray one's group-mates. Thus many interactions in *DayZ* appear to take the form of the Prisoner's Dilemma. ("Friendly" 1)

The consequences are important: without game mechanics structuring social interaction, the default for an encounter between two players is suspicion and caution, not the utopian impulse instilled by "ideal survivor" narratives. And it is a justified default, as many commentators have pointed out and the *DayZ* forum stories underline. As an example, Mike Pottenger sums up a few scenarios:

> Even seemingly friendly survivors can and will turn on you, and lots of survivors are there specifically to hunt other survivors.... Hop on a bus full of unarmed survivors, and you risk ending up forced at gunpoint to engage another unsuspecting victim in mortal combat. Accept a ride from a helicopter and you risk being dumped on an island to starve to death. The dangers in trusting others mean that even relatively stable groups can quickly turn on each other. Put simply, life in *DayZ* is nasty, brutish, and very, very short—the current average survivor lifetime is one hour and five minutes.

In combination with the permanent-death mechanic, which Carter, Gibbs, and Wadley have shown to result in an "increase in the perception of personal investment in their character" ("Death" 3), players will continuously find themselves confronted with moral dilemmas in which they have to choose to trust another human or act in self-interest. But at least in terms of their social and historical environment, these reactions will reflect not so much the moral values assigned by the game (which are neutral) but rather the players' moral decisions based in their personal histories and gameplay experiences so far. Instead of prescribing a set of values that determines the "ideal survivor" and a representative history that reflects the totality of life, the game allows open experimentation with actions and moral values. The option to test one's behavior and emotional reactions is the ultimate advantage of a simulation such as *DayZ* over the traditional forms of sf and zombie narratives. Reflecting on liquid-modern realities, the game does not provide an institutionally prescribed ideal of human behavior but instead allows for a full range of choices. The responsibility for action lies with the individual, as does carrying the emotional burden of any consequences.

DayZ reveals a powerful alternative media form of exploring the world and our condition within it. The game is an explorable space that offers its users the option to simulate a postapocalyptic world and experience the difficult moral decisions that are inherent to this kind of dystopian world. At the same time, the nature of this simulation allows not only the possibility of exploring emotional reactions to the world, "trying on" the different moral decisions, but also the freedom of experimenting with utopian moments. In its focus on the present and its refusal of simple representational history, the game provides an alternative reading of science fiction as lived experience, in which meaning is not fixed by an authorial narrative but rather needs to be understood as a mosaic of different autobiographies that reflect not the historically generated value system of the content but the interaction of that content with its users' personal histories. *DayZ* is an ideal example of how digital media can change our conceptions of sf, enhance our understanding of the genre, and add new perspectives.

NOTES

1. The term "zombie bank" has been used in debates of financial crises from the collapse of the Japanese economy in 1993 and continues to be used in academic and journalistic discourse, for example during the current Euro crisis (cf. Cowen). The term "zombie category" refers to "nationally fixed social categories of industrial

society … which have died yet live on" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 27); it describes aspects of the dissolution of nation-states in a globalized world.

2. *DayZ* was released in January 2012 and could only be played by players owning the original game. Within a few months, over a million players joined the mod created by freelance designer Dean Hall, prompting him to accept employment at *ARMA*'s studio, Bohemia Interactive, and start development of a stand-alone version of *DayZ*. The mod has since been turned over to the player community for development and play on the *ARMA* II servers. The stand-alone version was released as "early alpha" in December of 2013 and has since sold 2 million copies. It is available as a commercial download, but by May 2015 was still not a "finished" product. In the following, I will not distinguish between mod and game (unless explicitly marked), as my argument is broader in scope. I will not discuss detailed changes between versions. The general mechanics, ideology, and emotional reactions are basically the same with both mod and stand-alone.

3. For a discussion of the commercial, technological, and gameplay values that led to the development of zombie simulations after 1996, see Krzywinska, "Zombies." For a historical overview of survival horror as a genre, see Pruett. For a discussion of the specific mechanics and the generic boundaries of "horror, survival and ludic-gothic" (55), see Taylor; see also Weise ("Rules of Horror" 241).

4. The mod essentially does not have a character-creation screen, only the option to play male or female, and has had several problems with defaulting newly spawned avatars back to male even when players preferred their default female. Female avatars also tended to be "buggy," generating for example problems with certain armor and clothing that could not be equipped. The stand-alone game offers a little more choice in character creation (gender, skin color, clothing), but has a very limited range of customization, relying on a number of default models and several color-options for basic clothing.

5. The HUD differs between mod and game but is kept to a minimum in each. In the game, the HUD will report the physical state of the avatar—hunger, thirst, cold, injury—via text message and in minimal detail of amplitude determined by the color of the message (white—a state is registered, red—a state is urgent, green—a state has been cleared). In the mod, five icons accomplish a similar task by being full, half-full, or empty.

6. Actually, *DayZ* offers two modes: the player can switch at will between the first-person and the third-person mode. Gameplay videos (e.g., on YouTube) show that often players prefer the third-person for traveling in open country (as the perspective allows greater visibility of the surrounding area) while switching to first-person for exploration of buildings and especially gunfights, as the perspective enhances the control over movement.

7. One famous example is the transfusion of blood. Even if the weakened player has a blood packet, he cannot simply apply it himself but needs to rely on another player to do so. In-game this has led to forced transfusions under threat of life, bribery, and betrayal after the cooperation has ended.

8. See the diversity of YouTube channels (i.e., at *DayZ* TV.com) and forums that refer to their exploits as "*DayZ* Chronicles."

9. As a procedural adaptation, *DayZ* is indebted to post-apocalypse narratives such as Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) or its 2009 film version by John Hillcoat. In these, a man is faced with the horror and the ethics of survival after systemic breakdown and the resulting extreme scarcity of resources. These fictions

center on the depiction of the confrontation with other survivors and the character's willingness to do what it takes to survive. *DayZ*, as simulation, provides the systemic breakdown and the scarcity, but human interaction and its moral dimension are left to the players.

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that the video game *DayZ* is an engaging representation of the zombie apocalypse, moreso than any cinematic or literary forms, specifically because of its status as digital medium and interactive simulation. The simulated space of the game foregoes sf-typical centering on historic narrative progression and accumulation of knowledge about the diegetic world for an active exploration of space and the

accumulation of lived experience. By modeling a postapocalyptic world, the game forces players to make moral decisions regarding scarcity, survival, and social order. In adding the threat of a zombie attack, the game further emphasizes the existential nature of these decisions and foregrounds player agency as the determining factor for game experience. *DayZ* is noteworthy insofar as it rejects a moral baseline inherent in the diegesis; it denies players a pre-scripted narrative, instead relying on open-world mechanics that allow player interaction with little algorithmic limitation. In combination with the persistent game mechanics and the simulated hostile environment, the game becomes a lived experience of the sf trope of postapocalypse that is unlike any provided in film or literature.