'We're Not Gonna Take It.' The Countercultural AAA Aesthetics of *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus*

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ABSTRACT
Released in 2014, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames 2014) was received favorably as a new studio's attempt at redefining the venerable "Wolfenstein" franchise, paying homage to its pivotal role in the birth of the FPS genre (Pinchbeck 2013, 9) while updating gameplay, production values, and sensibilities. Last year's sequel, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (MachineGames 2017), however, was met with an unexpected controversy. Alt-Right sympathizers attacked the game on social media (Maiberg 2017) and review-bombed it (Moseman 2017), outraged by its 'political correctness.' Publisher Bethesda foregrounded the games timeliness and topicality (Batchelor 2017), as did the press and independent developers alike (Gaynor 2018) in the context of increasing acceptance of Alt-Right demagogues by right wing mainstream politicians.

The games press debated *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* with similar controversy. Seen sometimes as exemplary of what AAA games in 2017 should be doing (Francis 2017) and how they should be doing it (McKeand 2017), others felt that its impact was diminished by the uneven, often farcical tone (A. Robertson 2017) and its lack of realism (E. Smith 2017), while yet others considered its politics nothing more than a plot device (A. Robertson 2017).

This presentation will demonstrate that even the appreciators of the game have largely ignored the aesthetic coherence that MachineGames strive for in their ambition to have gameplay and story "pull in the same direction at the same time" (Graft 2014). What appears to critics as flaws of the game that "hold Wolfenstein back from its potential status as the quintessential modern First-Person Shooter" (Brynard 2018) will be shown to be part of an intricate ludo-narrative balance.

At the core of this aesthetic are the factors positively commented upon by critics: the diverse cast that is an important factor in what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter call "games of multitude" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 188); the archetypal division of roles between characters which as an ensemble "form what most would consider to be some of

the key facets of humanity – for better or worse" (J. Robertson 2017); and insights into "the awful Nazi regime's twisted ideology, albeit through a lens of absurdity" (McKeand 2017). This last term, absurdity, is crucial, as it points toward a stylistic undercurrent also identified in reviews as "grotesque, cathartic, beautiful, horrible and shocking" (A. Smith 2017). *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* is more than "an exercise in deconstructing" (Evans-Thirlwell 2018) its characters and its generic roots.

The argument presented here is that *The New Colossus* is a prototypical example for the use of the carnivalesque as a poetics of defamiliarization in AAA games (Majkowski 2014). What the game sets in scene is nothing less than the death and rebirth of FPS conventions, yet not in a self-serious and obvious grand gesture, but through a series of carnivalesque movements that highlight the ritualistic cycle of death and rebirth (Bakhtin 1984, 164) of genres as a defining constant of digital games (and culture at large). The narrative dimension and the ludic dimension work together in defamiliarizing the comfortable conventions of FPS in a unified carnivalesque aesthetic. The carnivalesque work of art is a liminal contribution to a ritualistic negotiation between parts of a culture. MachineGames take a position within the subculture of gamers, even more specifically, of Western European players and developers of FPS, reacting against the co-option of games by the Alt-Right and the #Gamergate movement – a connection suggested by the game entering production in the summer of 2014, the origin of the #Gamegate movement (Mortensen 2015).

The presentation will show through exemplary sequences of the game in the light of Bakhtinian theory how *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus* reappropriates the surface-level traits of unreflected mainstream game design: a shooter with a white male protagonist killing hundreds of literally faceless enemies. Instead of flirting with ideas of white, male supremacy, the game continuously exposes nazi rhetoric (Casmir 1968) and central values of fascist and supremacist ideology like masculine virility (Spackman 1997) and deconstructs them. While player character B.J. Blazkowicz starts out in the first game as a perfect image of Aryan body ideals, he is on the brink of death throughout most of the second game, a derelict kept alive by machines. When he becomes able-bodied again, it is through grafting his head on a vat-grown Nazi supersoldier-body. His sexuality goes unmentioned after the body-graft, and his decisions are lead by the moral ideal of the dead leader of his resistance cell, Caroline Becker. The carnivalesque aesthetic is most pronounced in the final battle, when Blazkowicz is saved by his pregnant girlfriend Anya by not only single-handedly defeating half a dozen of high-level enemies, but also protecting him from an explosion with her body. Stripped of her burnt clothes, splattered in blood, her face a hollow-cheeked mask reminiscent of a skull, Anya straddles Blaskowicz in an imagery typical of carnivalesque ritual birth (Bakhtin 1984, 126).

The gameplay mirrors the aesthetic devices of the cut-scenes in exactly the points that critics sometimes perceived as flawed: the awkward stealth mechanics regularly force failure upon the player, evoking a sense of ineptness; putting the avatar in a wheelchair and lowering his maximum health value are constant mechanical reminders of the frailty of the human body; reducing the number of weapons over the previous game, yet allowing the fewer weapons to be freely combined results in a procedural rhetoric that exchanges fascist ideals of purity and strength in numbers for strength through diversity.

The presentation will primarily demonstrate how many overlooked layers of meaning are present in the careful construction of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, and how this contradictory complexity – from the subtitle's hidden allusion to the title or Emma

Lazarus' sonnet engraved into the foundations of the statue of liberty, the source of the oft-quoted "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses" to the end credit's soundtrack of a cover version of Twisted Sister's "We're not gonna take it" – works together as a game specific, carnivalesque meaning-making.

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