Article

Thought Experiments in Video Games: Exploring the (Un)Ethics of Motherhood in Frictional Games' Amnesia: Rebirth

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Abstract
The essay explores the philosophical potential of Frictional Games' *Amnesia: Rebirth* (2020), a survival science-fiction horror game, which heavily focuses on story elements and deeply explores the idea of motherhood—a subject matter rarely encountered in this medium. By offering the semblance of control over space and time, suturing the player to the first-person perspective of a character only to gradually problematize the very notion of acting and suspending choice via highlighting any option as an ethical impasse—revealing a neither/nor nature of gamic choice—the game transforms itself from a Deleuzian action-image to a time-image, from an image favoring action to the one that problematizes time. What is more, the game functions as a thought experiment, juxtaposing epistemology and ethics via the idea of motherhood, which is shown to be an ethical choice from the perspective of individual action but unethical from the perspective of temporality.

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Frictional Games' *Amnesia: Rebirth* (2020) is a survival science-fiction horror game, which heavily focuses on story elements and deeply explores the idea of motherhood—subject matter rarely encountered in this medium. One plays the game from a first-person perspective, acting as Anastasie (Tasi) Trianon, a French sketch artist on a mining expedition to colonial Algeria in 1937. While flying to the exploration site together with a team of explorers, which includes her husband Salim Hanachi, she crashes into the Algerian desert. Soon after, Tasi regains consciousness inside an empty plane, having lost her memory. As one progresses through the story, one learns about her past and is thrust into many ethical dilemmas related to the experience of motherhood, trying to grapple with the memories of having lost one child to a debilitating disease, the painful mourning process that follows, realizing that one is pregnant at present and trying to protect the unborn child by escaping numerous monsters, avoiding the blackouts initiated by fear and anger, and dealing with the realization that, for the sake of this one child, one has effectively sentenced to death all of one's friends, including one's own husband. As such, the game is as much about traveling back into one's painful past as about advancing into an uncertain future. While the video game medium explorations in terms of its narrative and game design properties are abundant (for some foundational studies see Aarseth 1997; Bogost 2007; Galloway 2006; Juul 2005; Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman 2003; Wardrip-Fruin 2009), the triangulation between these aspects and philosophical implications—analyzing individual games as epistemological tools—is still somewhat rare, one of a few notable recent exceptions being Alenda Chang's study arguing that "games and scientific experimentation are cut from the same cloth" (2020, 20). Frictional Games, a Swedish independent game developer company, offers uniquely fruitful material for such studies since their games can be understood, as my analysis of *Amnesia: Rebirth* will show, as philosophical thought experiments, especially effective due to the video game medium being so closely entwined with the idea and experientiality of action.

Between Narrative and Game Design: Analyzing the Gamic

What characterizes games as a medium is action. So much so that, for Alexander Galloway, "*gamic vision requires fully rendered, actionable space*" (2006, 63, emphasis in original). To exercise gamic vision, one needs to perceive the in-game space as actionable, i.e., as ripe with potential for interaction, inviting to be explored. Such an actionable space is what distinguishes games from other visual media that mostly facilitate detached observation and contemplation. When watching a film, editing is what constructs and allows one to explore the filmic space and yet, with the exception of cut-scenes, in a game, "because the game designer cannot restrict the movement of the gamer, the complete play space must be rendered three-dimensionally in advance. The camera position in many games is not restricted. The player is the one who controls the camera position, by looking, by moving, by scrolling, and so on"

(Galloway 2006, 64). Specifically, the first-person perspective—relevant for *Amnesia: Rebirth*—is often fundamental in experiencing the gamic narrative and action as it serves to suture the player even more seamlessly to the actionable space. However, the leading tendency in first-person games to have a violent nature (spawning its own popular subgenre of the first-person shooter) has been a cause for concern for many decades, especially for many media-effects theorists. How does the higher narrative immersion (as compared to the media of detached observation) affect the playing subjects? Are the players consciously or unconsciously mapping the violent gamic worldview onto reality? Galloway delinks these two aspects: "I argue that it is the affective, active, mobile quality of the first-person perspective that is key for gaming, not its violence. […] [G]ames use the subjective shot to create identification […] [and] to facilitate an active subject position that enables and facilitates the gamic apparatus" (Galloway 2006, 69).

As for gamic temporality, the player is subjected to a flow of time that is highly mutable: "Games have the luxury of being able to exist outside real, optical time. Games pause, speed up, slow down, and restart often. But more than that, they can also transpire in moments of suspended time, as in turn-based role-playing games where the player plays (sets up actions, inspects statistics, rearranges character formations) solely during the interstices between other actions" (Galloway 2006, 65–66). Furthermore, in a recent study, Christopher Hanson goes so far as to argue that such an "ability to pause institutes an agency over temporality that begins to reveal the layered complexity of game time" (2018, 14). Gamic temporality does not simply reproduce other forms of temporality but institutes its own: "game time is bound up in both the player and the underlying structures, and [...] games create new experiences of time through their methods of temporal manipulation, navigation, and recursion" (Hanson 2018, 16). I too agree that space and time in video games are characterized by their readiness to be interacted with and controlled by the player, which deviates from natural perception. However, such spatiotemporal freedom does not translate into epistemological freedom. Gamic branching narratives and their alternative choices do most often lead to a number of set outcomes and failing to perform certain tasks results in the termination of the game. Galloway links such predetermination to "a folly of logocentrism; it is structured around a quest for knowledge, with all human thought broken down into neatly packaged discoveries that are arranged in a branching timeline where one discovery is a precondition for the next" (2006, 98). Cheng is also critical of gamic freedom in addressing player agency: "too often this kind of skill mastery equates to mastery of the external environment, and games often naïvely reproduce a whole range of instrumental relations that would be better reimagined" (2020, 23).

Subsequently, I do find the following statements by Galloway only ever so slightly too optimistic: "The experience of the shooter is a 'smooth' experience, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term, whereby its various components have yet to be stratified and differentiated, as text on one side and reading or looking on the other. […] The activity of gaming, which, as I've stressed over and over, only ever comes into being when the

game is actually played, is an undivided act wherein meaning and doing transpire in the same gamic gesture" (2006, 104). While the precise gamic narrative structure and transitivity are inherently open and are determined via the individual meeting of the game and the player, the nature of the specific quest is predetermined and only has a small number of different outcomes. As such, the gamic experience is smooth in terms of its spatiotemporality but not in terms of the actions, affects, and outcomes it produces as it tends to collapse into a predetermined epistemology and the algorithmic nature of gamic choice—either this or that. Likewise, Galloway tends to empower the player too much in terms of the changing reader-text relationship: "The critical terrain has likewise shrunk in the age of interactive media from a two-way relationship involving the text and the reader-as-critic to a singular moment involving the gamer (the doer) in the act of gameplay. The game-as-text is now wholly subsumed within the category of the gamer, for he or she creates the gamic text by doing" (2006, 105). Due to the pre-established nature of gamic worlds and narratives, one could even state the opposite: the game produces its player via offering her/him an actionable spatiotemporality, i.e., via allowing the player to perform acts that fit within the pre-established parameters of the game. What is thus needed, I argue, is closer attention paid to how the game as an open text within preestablished (closed) parameters is generating actions, meaning, and knowledge in a player-game encounter.

But to be able to analyze video games and gamic action in a media-specific way, without reducing them to either just another example of narrative storytelling (treating them as interactive literature) or to matters of computer science and game design (as in ludology), one needs to establish certain analytical parameters. For such purposes, Galloway's taxonomy that distinguishes different kinds of actions, performed by the player (whom he calls the operator) and the machine (the hardware and software of the gaming computer) is still one of the most valuable tools. Such actions can be either diegetic or non-diegetic where the former refers to "the game's total world of narrative action" (2006, 7) and the latter describes "gamic elements that are inside the total gamic apparatus yet outside the portion of the apparatus that constitutes a pretend world of character and story" (2006, 7). Diegetic and non-diegetic elements are present in other forms of narrative media and yet what separates video games from the rest is the fact that the non-diegetic elements are so much more prominent and essential to the nature of gaming, and "in some instances it will be difficult to demarcate the difference between diegetic and nondiegetic acts in a video game, for the process of good game continuity is to fuse these acts together as seamlessly as possible" (Galloway 2006, 8). Usually, when thinking about the pleasures of gaming, one thinks of submerging oneself in a make-belief world, being able to control it via the diegetic operator acts that take "place within the world of gameplay" and can "appear as either move acts [changing the position or orientation in the game environment] or expressive acts [selecting, picking, rotating, unlocking, opening, talking, etc.]" (2006, 22). For the operator, the gamic world is visually tactile, i.e., full of either non-actionable or actionable objects, i.e., objects that can(not) be interacted with (Galloway 2006, 24).

Additionally, the operator is inevitably engaged in non-diegetic acts prior, during, and/or after the gaming experience such as "preference setting, game configuration, meta-analysis of gameplay, loading or saving, selecting one player or two, and so on" (Galloway 2006, 13). Such actions and decisions have a great bearing on the outcome of the game and thus the non-diegetic operator acts "happen on the exterior of the world of the game but are still part of the game software and completely integral to the play of the game. […] [For instance, pausing] a game is an action by the operator that sets the entire game into a state of suspended animation" (Galloway 2006, 12). Conversely, the non-diegetic machine actions are "performed by the machine and integral to the entire experience of the game but not contained within a narrow conception of the world of gameplay. […] Included here are internal forces like power-ups, goals, high-score stats, dynamic difficulty adjustment, the HUD, and health packs, but also external forces exerted (knowingly or unknowingly) by the machine such as software crashes, low polygon counts, temporary freezes, server downtime, and network lag" (Galloway 2006, 28). Such non-diegetic machine acts can either be enabling or disabling, either granting the player more ability to act or diminishing it. But there are also "machinic embodiments that emanate outward from a game to exert their own logic on the gamic form. For example, the graphic design of the aliens in the Atari 2600 version of *Space Invaders* is a direct embodiment of how a byte of data, equivalent to eight zero-or-one bits, may be represented as a strip of eight pixels turned on or off" (Galloway 2006, 32). Such manifestations of the machinic imposing its material logic upon the diegesis are too treated as non-diegetic machine acts. Subsequently, in their ubiquity, the non-diegetic operator and machine acts are what distinguish the video game as a medium and create the perception of either a presence or a lack of control—reigning over the algorithmic or being at its mercy.

Possibly the most curious category of gamic action is diegetic machine acts such as ambience acts, present in some games, when the gamic diegesis is still in motion— a bird may chirp, a tree branch may move, a non-playable character may walk by— yet, without the player input, nothing of significance for the game's outcome will happen: "Ambience acts are distinguishable from a game pause through the existence of micromovements—just like the small, visible movements described by Deleuze as the 'affect-image.' They signal that the game is still underway, but that no gameplay is actually happening at the moment. The game is still present, but play is absent" (Galloway 2006, 10). Since ambience acts are still potent with gamic, diegetic meaning—unlike pausing the game and suspending its narrative transitivity—they invite contemplation and reflection and, depending on the game in question, may produce sublime experiences. Here, I would also make an adjustment to Galloway's definition since what is particularly interesting is that the diegetic machine acts are not simply issuing forth from the player's inactivity, but they may be actively suspending the ability to act, which happens when the diegetic world becomes too beautiful, fascinating, too overwhelming in its vastness and the player is jolted out of gamic activity. And it is as diegetic machine acts that video games come closest to "the logic of the traditionally expressive or representational forms of art such as painting

or film" where "the game exists as a purely aesthetic object in the ambience act. It can be looked at; it is detached from the world, a self-contained expression" (Galloway 2006, 11). Additionally, machinima/cut-scenes belong to this category. For Galloway, these are less gamic than ambience acts: "the discarding of operator and gameplay to create machinima from the raw machine [...] are at the end of the day the most non-gamic. The necessity of the operator-machine relationship becomes all too apparent" (2006, 12).

Reclaiming Time From Action Through Machine Acts

Amnesia: Rebirth challenges Galloway's categorization as its machinima (diegetic machine acts) is gamic since, for instance, transition screens marking the advancement to the next stage of the game have a bearing on the understanding of the diegesis and one's own choices. Namely, they convey the emotional weight of the actions in question, and without these cinematic or painterly inserts, gamic action loses its full significance. Such transitions are diegetically motivated as memories/flashbacks taking the shape of Tasi's sketches and combined with a voice-over from the past. If one were to isolate such instances, one would notice a clear narrative progression, telling a realistic and tragic story of a young couple slowly losing their only child to disease. At first, one sees Alys blissfully sleeping with her toy monkey as Tasi is singing a lullaby, Alys counting while making a tower out of building blocks or her drawing a "kittycat," which looks more like a lion—a clear allusion to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) since later Salim is reading from the book. Such idyllic family images/memories offer a brief escape into another world—without monsters and supernatural horrors, calming with its soothing ordinariness. But then the transitions become terrifying as Alys gets ill and withers away. One starts to wonder which time-space is an escape as the world of monsters starts to appear more like a release from the overwhelming sadness of the family tragedy. For instance, one sees Alys eating beanswhile hearing her dropping the spoon and having trouble breathing, making Tasi worried. One can assume that this is the first sign of the disease manifesting. Later, a scared Alys collapses on the floor, and then she is shown at the doctor's office, being checked with a stethoscope, only her steady heartbeat punctuating the silence. Afterward, Alys is in bed while Salim is sobbing. And this pattern of the child's physical suffering and her parents' hopeless witnessing thereof continues when one sees the girl crying on her birthday as her father asks her to blow the three candles on the cake in a scared voice: "Are you ready, little one…"

As one advances through the gameplay and its multilayered story, such painful memories intensify. A heartbreaking moment comes when Alys is looking through a window; the rain is softly falling and Tasi inquires the girl as to what she sees. Alys responds: "It's dark. It's all dark, mama." One understands from the elliptical storytelling provided in the earlier memories that Alys's eyesight must be gone by now, making this feeling of darkness visceral. Such a motif is further developed when Alys is seen in bed again; a swarm of black lines appears to arise like a shadowy substance

from her body—the girl is enveloped by darkness. Notably, the medium is relevant since Tasi being a sketch artist implies that these memory sketches are her subjective perceptions; it is Tasi who sees the disease as a monstrous shadow. Later, when Tasi is gently holding Alys—breathing harshly—and attempts to sing a lullaby in a shaky voice, she has trouble stopping herself from crying. Moreover, the player is confronted not only with the suffering of the child but with the grieving process of her parents too as the absence that follows is possibly even more excruciating than depictions of such physical suffering. In a medium solely dependent on the ability to act, one is faced with moments signifying a complete suspension of action or willingness to go on. One sees a silent sketch of Alys's picture with a burning candle next to it, then a table with three empty chairs and a meal for only two. A devastated Tasi is looking at a mirror. She and Salim are holding hands and Alys's monkey, while Tasi is humming the lullaby, this way the monkey becomes a substitute for the lost child, her memory preserved in the plush toy. Finally, one meets an empty bed of Alys, only the monkey is there, indicating emptiness and grieving. As these memories form the full picture of the tragedy that befell Tasi and the horror of such experience strikes the player, arriving at the point where all willingness to live is exhausted, one understands the importance of preserving the new child for Tasi—this new life being the only impetus forcing her to act within the game. That is, the machine diegetic acts motivate the diegetic operator acts.

What is more, the actionable space of intertwined diegetic operator and machine actions creates a parallel between reality and horror. As the presence of monsters, portals, and alien worlds filled with mysteries and dangers threaten the life of Tasi's unborn child—Amari, one grasps the pressing need to save this child. Thus, the science-fiction horror quest of a single mother to save her child becomes a mirror image of her previous quest to save her daughter in the past. Having failed the first mission, Tasi needs to succeed no matter what. While the player might not support her actions throughout the game, and, in fact, the game problematizes many of them, he or she understands why Tasi makes the choices she does. The moment when such parallelism between the two diegetic layers is captured most perfectly is when, after finding a portal back from the alien world to the desert, Tasi experiences a vision where she is climbing a flight of stairs in, presumably, her old house in Paris and finds a doctor's letter, hearing the words: "onset in infancy … fever, seizures … degeneration of the nerves … slow development … vomiting … loss of hearing, or of sight … muscle atrophy … no known treatment … breathing difficulties … within the year … invariably fatal …" Tasi enters Alys's old room as its walls start to dissipate, revealing a womblike skyline. She hears a child's voice: "Alys went away. I don't want to go away." Tasi spots a little girl sitting on a windowsill and asks: "Amari, what's wrong?" One suddenly hears a sound of water breaking as the wall with the window and the child float away—offering a representation of a baby being pushed outside during birth. Such an image combines several ideas: a subjective image of waters breaking during pregnancy, nearing separation anxiety, evocation of losing Alys to disease, and being forced to release Amari into a dangerous world, filled with monsters. In a sense, by providing such complex symbolism, the game implies

that, for Tasi, the birth of her new child is comparable to the death of her previous one, creating a link between giving birth and killing one's child.

Another parallel is created between the dystopian alien world and Tasi's predicament in the desert, linking the fates of the two women—Tasi, the protagonist of the game, and the game's villain, Empress Tihana. However, these separate gamic and narrative roles are fundamentally questioned by the game itself, as I shall discuss later. While Tasi's past is revealed through transition screens, the story of the now fallen futuristic empire of the alien world—a parallel dimension—and its Empress is presented via interacting with certain actionable objects such as tablets and green orbs (that civilization's technological equivalent to audio recordings), which offer historical records of what happened to that civilization. Considering the logic of the game, one may first be skeptical of the fact that the alien-looking script is suddenly translated into English and see it as a narrative metalepsis, a violation of the narrative fiction rules, or the game failing to mask its non-diegetic machine acts as diegetic. However, since later it is revealed that Tasi is infected and about to be transformed by the Empress into one of her creatures—a harvester—such a shortcut gains a diegetic motivation. The said records are written in an ancient and bureaucratic language, which is both alien yet reminiscent of our ordinary formal speech. One of such texts reveals that the Empress had an inherited disease, preventing her from ever having children and not even the elixir of eternal life—called vitae—that the alchemists invented for her could heal this malady: "I have completed the comparison of the samples from the Empress and from the bones of her mother, blessed Atua. It is clear now that both carried this sickness, although it did not manifest in the forebears. While vitae is powerful enough to rebind bone and sinew, without repeated application the health again deteriorates. A single dose is no cure, it merely drives the decay back for a time. Temaku orders that I test repeated application, quantities, insertion points, timings. In Her name."

Such information complicates one's perception of the story's villain—Tihana—who wants to take Tasi's child by any means necessary because she has eternal life without the ability to reproduce. The Empress knows that, with the application of vitae, she can delay Amari's inherited disease—the same one as Alys had—and it is likely that she identifies with the child due to their shared fate. When Tasi touches one of the alien records, it allows her to hear the Empress's thoughts, expressed in a diary-like form, giving more insight into her reasoning: "Temaku tells me that now, with vitae, I have forever, but the people who depend on me do not. There is always something—invasion, rivalry, sickness, penury. I have my duty. […] It is such a faint hope that they can find any way to heal me, that they can find any way to grant my dearest wish. 'Now you are eternal,' says Temaku. 'Now you need no heir.' None of them understand. This is not about politics or securing a future. This is not for the Empire. This is for me. Just for me." Such a glimpse into the character's mind establishes that the wish for a child is a personal—body natural—need, not related to the body politic. And as the empire is left to waste away, the Empress is sustained by her single wish for a child. After all, these are two women from two different

worlds, both trying to protect the child that each of them, the biological and the adoptive mother, thinks is rightfully hers. Quite fittingly, the Algerian records Tasi finds in an abandoned French fortress alluding to various sightings of the Empress describe her as both a goddess, a benevolent spirit, and a trickster—ambiguous figure. Due to diegetic elements granting access to multiple layers of the past, the actionable space turns into a space for achieving (self-)knowledge and, in contrast to Hanson's idea that gamic time is marked by manipulability (2018, 16), *Amnesia: Rebirth* reclaims such control for time—the game's temporality constantly manipulates the actionable space, turning it upon itself.

Problematizing Choice: The (Un)Ethics of Motherhood

Amnesia: Rebirth problematizes choice in multiple instances. One key moment has to do with the trickster nature of the villain, leading to the events that transpire in the desert. Notably, the fact that the character one plays has amnesia is a clever element and serves to better align the player with the character he or she is playing—to better suture the player to the actionable space. After all, Tasi learns about her past along with the player and she too must deal with the weight of her past decisions, encountering herself as a stranger first, which is the situation the player finds himself/herself in. One learns that, after the plane crash, Tasi and her colleagues were struggling to survive. Chancing upon an ancient statue of the Empress—worshiped as a local goddess—Tasi was offered a deal by a ghostly apparition—to stay with the Empress until the child is born and then give the child away to the Empress, who, in turn, would assure the survival of the entire crew, including her husband Salim who was about to die in a nearby cave. Tasi was pressured by almost everyone to give up her child—after all, she will be able to conceive more children, and her giving away one child will save many lives. Only her friend and team leader Hank goes against the majority by appealing to the right of Tasi to her own body, making that solely her choice. And so, Tasi chooses to keep the child, effectively dooming her friends and colleagues to death. The Empress appears to take pity on them and offers some help by suggesting drinking from a nearby fountain to heal the injured Hank's wounds and sustain them in the desert. But these are the words of a trickster; while the water from the fountain does heal and nourish them, it slowly transforms them into monsters. Presumably, they would not have been able to survive anyway, and Tihana does help them to stay alive, but only by depriving them of their identity as human beings.

Were the Empress's actions good or evil? Did Tasi make the right choice? Was there even the right choice to be made in the first place? And the game questions this pivotal choice even further when Tasi is faced with a painful reminder of the consequences of her choice in the form of some of her colleagues, including Hank, turned into monstrous harvesters. What is highlighted in this diegetic operator-machine encounter is the impeded actionability—seeing the significance of past choices without the possibility to undo them. Additionally, *Amnesia: Rebirth* employs non-diegetic machine acts to

complicate the player's choice at the present moment. Various power-ups, including in-game achievements that the player unlocks by performing certain actions and advancing, are granted by the game/machine but often fall outside of the diegetic time-space. *Amnesia: Rebirth* too gives the player achievements, appearing as badges on the right side of the screen—normally, that would jolt one out of the diegetic (yet not the gamic). At one point, Tasi discovers another colleague, Richard—still human and under torture. Initially, the player has to free Richard but then the latter attacks Tasi at which point the "darkness"—the disease given by the Empress—takes over and Tasi brutally kills her colleague. She does so in self-defense; however, when such actions amount to the player getting the achievement "Murderer," it forces the player to reconsider his/her actions. What seems to be protecting one's unborn child is also a murderous act committed against one's friend and colleague. Such an act is complex in its engendered affects since just a few moments before one learns from a few fragmentary recollections that Richard and another male colleague were madly in love and before his death Richard was calling out to both his beloved and his own mother. Also, this achievement works on another level since the timing implies a parallel to Alys's death (one sees the flashback of Alys not being able to see soon after) because, in a way, Tasi, by giving her this genetic disease, killed her own child (at least in her own mind).

Similarly, the choice of an ending is problematic if one attempts to see it in terms of straightforward success or failure. Upon first clicking on "New Game" in the selection menu, a welcome message appears—similar to Frictional Games' *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010): "This game should not be played to win. Immerse yourself in the world and the story. Fear and darkness are your enemies." Indeed, when the player reaches the final stage of the game, he or she has an option of three different endings that can be roughly equated to the good, the bad, and the secret endings usually found in video games. However, which ending is the good or the bad one is completely up to the player's interpretation since all of them are failures upon deeper reflection, challenging Jesper Juul's famously positive view on dealing with failure in video games: "Video games are for me a space of reflection, a constant measuring of my abilities, a mirror in which I can see my everyday behavior reflected, amplified, distorted, and revealed, a place where I deal with failure and learn how to rise to a challenge" (2013, 24). When Tasi delivers the child and stops one of her surviving colleagues—the doctor—from offering the child to the Empress in exchange for his life, Tihana insists on obtaining Amari, allowing Tasi only to say goodbye. Interestingly, here the game provides another corporeal experience of motherhood—Tasi breastfeeds the child and the player has the option of either looking down at the feeding child, which gives a visceral first-person experience, or looking away, avoiding such corporeality. Irrespective of one's choice, the action works to establish a clear bond between the mother and the child so that when Tasi is given the option of either leaving the child or running away, the latter choice seems more appealing. The game mechanics also signal that this is "the good ending" since if one chooses to leave the child one is given one more chance to change one's mind, which does not happen in the other case.

Eventually, this choice leads to Tasi using the portal to escape the clutches of the Empress and her dystopian fallen empire into Paris, which grants the player the achievement "Provider," signaling that this outcome has established the player as a proper parent. Yet when Tasi is finally on the street, her pants and sighs of relief sound curiously half-ghoulish, which might be just her being out of breath and exhausted from her ordeal. But if throughout the game the player has succumbed to the darkness too often, Tasi will become a ghoul. Whether this will be the case can be seen in the final sketch where one can see Amari playing in Paris, observed by Tasi, who may appear as a ghoul. Such an outcome is not that different from the bad ending, which is reached when Tasi puts Amari back into the crib and the Empress transforms her into a monster. Growling, Tasi finds her sketchbook, sees one final flashback of Amari, and leaves the sketchbook in the alien ruins. Such an outcome grants the player the achievement "Harvester," which seems like a defeat, but it can be just as easily seen as a positive outcome. After all, Amari will be able to survive and will have a caring mother in the Empress and Tasi, having delivered the child, might be viewed as having served her mission and now is being rightfully punished for murdering her friends. However, even if Tasi escapes and resists the infection, the fact remains that Amari will eventually succumb to the disease and die. One is furthermore bound to be haunted by the knowledge that one left millions of people being tortured for the sake of extracting vitae—the substance to sustain the Empress in her eternal life—when the game has planted many hints as to how to jam the system. One has the option to destroy this torture empire and end the people's suffering, but only by killing Tasi and Amari in the process, which unlocks the secret ending, giving the achievement "Iconoclast," a gruesome and tragic closure, yet ethically favored by the majority of the game's players.

Via interacting with actionable objects, the player realizes that the process of extracting vitae was perfected by reusing the same subjects. Atharu, their leading scientist, observes: "Research into the revised chamber has led to a breakthrough. Introducing the memory capsules allows for a more intense reaction to the pain, rising to a Tansur level of seventeen immediately. The subjects no longer rapidly burn out. Our supply problem is solved. Direct stimulation of the nerves, followed by a dose of elixir of Emmerysh, followed by an application of the subject's own best memories. Or, to view it another way, fear, oblivion, hope. Fear, oblivion, hope. It is so simple. Without fear, there is no vitae. Without hope, there is no fear." From other records, one finds out about various test subjects, and the research notes indicate that family bonds create the brightest of memories, which lead to the greatest amount of fear and vitae: "Subject one-one-four-five-S-V. Initial extraction indicates worker class, with a familial structure consisting of a partner and two offspring at the time of capture. High potential yield. Per protocol, focus further extraction on early contact with partner, and formative years of offspring. In addition, typical strong memories relate to capture location and parental connection." Of note is that the rhetoric implies not only a dehumanizing, objective scientific gaze but also treats humans/human-like beings as crops. Earlier, one had the chance to listen to

some of the recordings of various families and this way was shown that the citizens of this Empire were in many respects subject to the same fears, hopes, and bonds as we are. When Tasi, during the later stages of the game, must venture through some of the alien terrain, she encounters a multitude of extraction pods seeing some broken ones with dead bodies lying inside. And at one point, to heal Amari (although temporarily), Tasi/the player must follow the Empress's instructions and use a live subject to extract vitae, killing him. The function of these gamic elements is to complicate one's choice by shaping it into an ethical impasse.

Ultimately, these endings are all unsatisfactory and it is up to the player how to see each ending, depending on the choices he/she makes and what kind of impact the diegetic and non-diegetic machine acts that provide the backstory have. What the game achieves is to problematize each option since, by choosing, the player loses by losing oneself, one's child or one's moral compass. Consequently, one can rephrase the opening screen message by adding that "this game should not be played to win because one loses no matter what," showing that gamic failure in this encounter is not Juul's possibility for improvement but an ethical constant. *Amnesia: Rebirth* labors to make the player understand the full implications of one's choice and to suspend the ability to choose altogether since any choice leads to a loss. Galloway links the medium of video games to the Deleuzian concept of the action image, which describes "the expression of force or action in film. With video games, the action-image has survived but now exists not as a particular historical or formal instance of representation but as the base foundation of an entirely new medium" (2006, 2–3). However, *Amnesia: Rebirth* challenges this, for Galloway, medium-specific nature of video games by suspending action via its multi-layered temporalization and creation of Deleuzian any-spaces-whatever, which leads to the final moments of the game becoming pure optical and sound situations—the action-image unveils a time-image at its core. For Deleuze, such pure optical and sound situations in Italian neo-realist cinema where there is sensory input but no ways to act and react engender the time-image: "The space of a sensory-motor situation is a setting which is already specified and presupposes an action which discloses it, or prompts a reaction which adapts to or modifies it [as in the action-image]. But a purely optical or sound situation becomes established in what we might call 'any-space-whatever,' whether disconnected, or emptied" (1989, 5). Eventually, one can only look and listen and contemplate the impossibility of action. And so, here the game effectively inverts the algorithmic gamic choice of *either/or* into *neither/nor*.

Gamic Thought Experiment: Acknowledging the Other's Pain

The game's narrative structure implies parallelism between different reality levels and thus invites comparison to our own situation and its present-day ethical impasse—overpopulation. *Amnesia: Rebirth* juxtaposes a wish to preserve one's child (or attain one) and the survival of either the whole empire or one's friends (a metonymic representation of humanity) and this way highlights that what is considered

to be the ultimate goal of survival for an individual's genes achieved via reproduction is now at odds with the survival of the entirety of humanity since overpopulation—if not reigned in as Thomas Robert Malthus (1798, 18–38) was first to explicate in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*—will likely lead to the extinction of the species or force the species to survive in extremely harsh conditions: "*Homo sapiens* stands out as much more than an animal: our species alone exhibits the ability to reason and speak, to write and read, to plan for the future, and to produce civilization, culture, science, and religion. We are also the only primate that has put into jeopardy the future of its own species as well as that of other living things. Human overpopulation may ultimately lead to the destruction of our own living sphere, and consequently to the end of humanity" (Ankel-Simons 2007, 43). One thus faces a conundrum of environmental ethics: implementing measures to prevent overpopulation goes against an individual's perceived entitlement to the survival of his/her own genes; beliefs guided by positivist science clash with subjective prejudices and value judgments. And that is what the game narrativizes in a distilled, allegorical sense as well. Between destroying/abandoning one life (especially knowing how deeply motherhood matters to Tasi) that we have a first-person, subjective experience of and saving others who are not us and who subjectively are not accessible to us, which is the right choice?

In posing this problem, *Amnesia: Rebirth* functions as a thought experiment, allowing one to reflectively exhaust the idea of motherhood in the face of a fundamental entanglement of individuals, one's choice never simply being just one's own. Such an epistemological tool for furthering knowledge is well-known to such disciplines as theoretical physics, philosophy, and political science: "thought experiment aspires to produce new and unpredictable knowledge, and not just to expose the limitations of our conceptual apparatus [...]. It is thus an instance of modeling for, and one with the potential to innovate, not merely to recycle models" (McHale 2011, 142). Recently, fiction, especially science fiction, has been seen as another perfect example thereof. Even closer to my own project, Chang thinks of games, although only in passing, as "open-ended and existential experiments that combine subjective and objective facets of everyday experience" (2020, 3). Brian McHale explains that science fiction "projects a reality that is in some *systematic* way different from our own—different, that is, in its *models*, not just in its *individuals*. Science-fiction thereby throws our own reality-models into high relief; it *estranges* them and encourages us to reflect on them" (2011, 144–145, emphasis in original). For McHale, this exemplifies what Darko Suvin famously termed cognitive estrangement or "estrangement of received reality that leads potentially to a new cognition, and not just *re*-cognition" (2011, 145, emphasis in original). By exploring alternative realities, one is primed to see one's own as just one possibility, relativizing it (McHale 2011, 145). Such observations are highly relevant in the context of *Amnesia: Rebirth* not only in the light of it being a science-fiction horror game but also in terms of it encouraging such reality parallelism via its narrative strategies, discussed above. However, the ultimate result of such a thought experiment and its cognitive estrangement is

not to relativize our reality by presenting it just as one possible reality model but to show the inherent sameness of these realities and their ethical dilemmas.

Yet there is another way of seeing literary and video game texts as thought experiments, which is more productive when trying to grasp the game's epistemology. Michael Basseler states that "[a]s a fictional thought experiment, literary texts allow the reader to act out or think through certain situations on a trial basis without having to fear direct consequences for their own lives" (2019, 72) while making a reference to Stanley Cavell's differentiation between *knowing* another's pain and *acknowledging* it (see Cavell 1996, 19, 48). As such, one cannot simply disregard Tasi's actions as selfish and destructive since the player acts together with her, experiencing her suffering and interiority. And this suffering- and acting-together, uniquely facilitated by the video game medium, intensifies the Cavellian acknowledgment of another's pain. Basseler links the effectiveness of literature as such experiments performed in "the laboratory of the mind" (Elgin 2007, 43) to the necessity for involvement on the part of the reader because experimenting "implies a high degree of participation and cognitive as well as affective involvement […]: If there is no reader who is willing to get involved in the thought experiment offered by the text, then there is no such experiment in the first place" (Basseler 2019, 72). While that might be successfully achieved in many reader-text encounters, I argue that the most fruitful medium for such experimentation is precisely video games as exemplified by *Amnesia: Rebirth* and other games created by its developers. After all, *Soma* (2015) is a straightforward adaptation of fissure and identity continuity thought experiments known in philosophy of mind to the video game medium, making the pain of such experimentation not simply known but acknowledged. And the same goes for Frictional Games' (in collaboration with The Chinese Room) *Amnesia: Machine for Pigs* (2013), which explores the idea of fatherhood—all these games problematize the human and the ethics of choice.

Before concluding, it is fruitful to stay with the concept of acknowledgment just a while longer and advance deeper. In Josef Früchtl's reading of the Cavellian acknowledgment as a counter-principle to the idea of skepticism, i.e., ontologically doubting other minds and other subjectivities, acknowledgment relates to two essential aspects: "the problem of a relationship to the world as a whole [and] the problem of other minds. […] [Cavell holds] that what separates us as human beings or as subjects is not, or not primarily, our bodies, but our minds, or more precisely 'a particular aspect or stance of the mind.' Cavell names this aspect 'position' or 'attitude.' Thus what separates us from each other as entities in space and time and as empirical subjectivities is an attitude, an *ethos* in the Greek sense of the word" (2017, 194, emphasis in original). To intellectually infer those other subjectivities and realize that their suffering matters differs from acknowledging it: "'Knowing' things (in the world) is one thing; 'revealing' […] the world in which these things have their place (their significance) is quite another" (Früchtl 2017, 195). By forcing the player to know the character's past and act on the basis of this knowledge even when "knowing" complicates one's ability to act, the game transforms its epistemology—knowing the world the character is in and

knowing her own self—into ethics—the difficulty in acknowledging the other's suffering since that would compromise one's survival, "doing what you must to survive." For instance, the player/Tasi has no choice but to brutally kill her colleague Richard in self-defense just as moments before he was screaming in agony and calling out to his mother, inviting one to recognize him as a double of the child Tasi is now killing Richard for. Such a situation exemplifies the epistemology-ethics shift perfectly—the attitude of *knowing* that Richard is like Alys/Amari allows the player/Tasi to act in the world, while the attitude of *acknowledging* Richard as Alys/Amari suspends such action.

Conclusions: Gamic Action as Reflection

What does it mean to act? When examining video games as a medium, the notions of action and interactivity dominate. Often lacking is a more complex understanding of action in a medium-specific sense and that is the reason Galloway's model for investigating video games is uniquely useful as it allowed me to explain why *Amnesia: Rebirth* is challenging in terms of gamic action. By offering the semblance of control over space and time, suturing the player to the first-person perspective of a character only to gradually problematize the very notion of acting and suspending choice via highlighting any option as an ethical impasse—revealing a neither/nor nature of gamic choice—the game transforms itself from an action-image to a time-image. What is more, the game functions as a thought experiment, juxtaposing epistemology and ethics via motherhood. Such thought experimentation is of philosophical interest because of the medium properties identified by Galloway—when gaming, one is entwined in an operator-machine acting together, in contrast to other artistic media and the mode of detached reflection they generate. What *Amnesia: Rebirth* shows is that such acting together can twist upon itself and become reflective as a property of the gamic text-action itself and not simply as a possible individual response of a player since, after all, as Ian Bogost argues, the player's gamic beliefs have no necessary correlate out-of-game (2007, 188). Such a blurring of the media boundaries has implications for the Cavellian acknowledgment too. As Früchtl observes: "Film presents us as viewers with a world to which we may have access in our imagination, and yet not ontologically, at least not at the moment at which we perceive it. As agents we are excluded from it. It is a world, i.e., an action context, in which we cannot be physically present and act in" (2017, 195). And so, by offering its gamic action-as-reflection, *Amnesia: Rebirth* exemplifies that the video game medium might be a more perfect means to grasp the implications of the Cavellian acknowledgment than film, the medium Cavell examined.

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