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Rethinking creativity through digital games. When gamers go "crazy"

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Abstract This paper inquires into the creativity involved in uncommon and apparently nonsensical ways of playing digital games. Starting from the observation that most videogames present features which are at the opposite of "free imaginative play" typically associated with creativity, we use semiotics to examine the emergence of creative play in such games. We do so by looking at the conditions of possibility for a divergent enunciation to appear from strict structures of expression and from consolidated practices. First, we emphasize how this form of creativity is part of the very development of play. Then we move to games and examine six different types of creative play, considered both "crazy" and "ingenious" by the gaming community. This examination shows the strong presence of creativity in such games, the rational and encyclopedic thinking behind it, its connotation as madness in relation to existing norms, and how the enunciative divergence of games allows for uncommon play to creatively emerge from within the expressive system itself as a consequence of a possibilistic attitude toward rules, uses and meanings. In the conclusions, we emphasize both the social and academic potential of philosophical explorations of technology and point to future research using games in the contemporary debate on the creativity of AI.

Keywords: semiotics, creativity, play, videogames, madness

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0. Introduction

We often consider creativity and play as two faces of the same coin. Free play in children is an emblematic example of that, being considered both a crucial part of development fostering creativity and a reflection of human creativity itself (Winnicott 1971). In a case such as this one, the creativity of playing resides in the presumed boundless imagination, spontaneous curiosity and unstructured process of discovery behind the child's actions, which lead to unexpected outcomes that we may find brilliant. And it is often by referring to this form of free playing that we talk about the extraordinary intelligence of children and may claim that each child is a genius. There are, however, other forms of play which are apparently much less creative (think of chess or darts). In particular, there is a form of play which is nowadays extremely common and stands in opposition to the stereotype of free play: videogames. Indeed, what does it mean to be creative in a video game? How does creativity manifest itself in a coded world? And what kind of creative thought characterizes the stereotype of the

mad genius in video games? Social media is full of videos[1] showing gamers using "smart" strategies of deception, problem-solving and skillful execution to win over someone else. As such, the ideal video game player looks much more like a rational performing machine than like a daydreaming kid. Studying the emergence of creativity in digital games may, therefore, be interesting as it implies inquiring into a conception of creativity outside of its typical stereotype associated with both genius and madness.

While philosophy typically dealt with this notion through theoretical reflections inspired by art (Dewey 1934, Garroni 2010), we propose here a different approach: an observation of how creativity emerges from playing video games in ways that may appear nonsensical and are outside of common sense. It is in this metaphorical way, referring to the social construction of discourses about behaviors "outside the norm", that we will discuss madness in this paper as an attribute of a kind of creativity that subverts (bends, breaks, etc.) existing rules resulting in what is interpreted from the outside as crazy play and crazy gamers.

On the one hand, this metaphorical usage of madness is certainly less rigorous than one based on its clinical aspects (psychopathology, neurodivergence, cognition) and phenomenological forms (Pennisi 2025). On the other hand, this approach is thought-provoking for semiotics since it allows us to study the social construction of madness through the examination of *the pragmatic conditions for a divergent enunciation* to appear *from within strict structures of expression and from consolidated practices*. In such a perspective, creativity and madness both occur outside of common sense and yet both emerge through sign production from within the same means through which common sense can be created: something echoing a semiotic approach to divergent thinking (Eco 2016, Lobaccaro 2024). Indeed, the atypical and divergent subjectivities of both "the genius" and of "the mad" can only emerge by acting through what has been said/done by a community and by expressing their identities through a common system of expression. In other words, their creativity results from a specific type of semiotic production (*ratio*) occurring through enunciative concatenation with the semiotic encyclopedia (Eco 1975, Eco 1979, Paolucci 2010, Paolucci 2020, Violi 2015), which is the very condition for subverting expectations, signifying a difference and thus for looking genius or crazy.

Finally, such view may also allow for a dialogue with scholars investigating the clinical side of madness. Indeed, within the disciplines of psychology and psychoanalysis there are theses, such as Winnicott's, which consider the creativity of play as a fundamental condition for both the exploration and construction of the self (Winnicott 1971: pp. 72-73), up to the point of conceiving play as a therapy (Lenormand 2018). In this regard, our approach may be complementary since studying creativity and madness as forms and processes of enunciative divergence in play is for philosophy of language a similar way to investigate the construction of subjectivity.

In this paper, we will conduct this exploration of creativity in digital games by examining six examples of creative play in different genres: 1) Combinatory, 2) Bending, 3) Subverting, 4) Risk-Taking, 5) Role-Playing, and 6) Overinterpreting. This typology will highlight four main characteristics defining the "crazy genius of videogames": finding new ways of combining already existing elements, bending-subverting-expanding the rules of combination, attributing meaning beyond the textual semantics, and playing against efficient uses of games. This will show how these creative behaviors 1) are socially associated with madness in light of their divergence from norms, 2) are forms of enunciative divergence emerging from within the same system and through the same expressive means which constituted norms and practices, and 3) are the expression of a profoundly rational mode of thinking – fully aware of the rules, uses,

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJHtqe6yr9g.

and contents it subverts – and of an encyclopedic relation to meaning that exploits the virtual, possibilistic dimension inherent in every element of expression.
This exploration will thus prove how philosophical investigations of technology can open new perspectives on creativity and, in conclusion, will point to possible future research using games to better understand our idea of creativity in relation to the contemporary debate on artificial intelligence.

1. The development and directions of creative play

Starting from the sensorimotor and exploratory play of the first months of our life, the activity of playing in children is emblematic of our understanding of creativity. This is especially true when we look at the literature on the development of play (Lillard 2015) and more specifically at what classical authors such as Piaget and Vygotsky would call the phase of "symbolic play". It is indeed already here, around 18 months, that we develop the basis of what will become a proper lusory attitude (Suits 1978) and that the activity of play becomes a specific moment intentionally dedicated to the activity of having fun without any other purpose. Yet, this "fun" has something special if considered in relation to creativity and madness: it has to do with actions which are non-literal and with meanings which are "out of the ordinary" (*Ivi*: 427). After having learned the literal and ordinary by mimicking it (around 13 months), this special form of meaning-making occurs, in the symbolic play phase, with the semiotic activity of substitution by «using one object to stand for another» as «the 3-year-old using the stuffed cat to stand for a person» (*Ivi*: 426). Therefore, the creativity of the symbolic phase is not only related to imagining things but more specifically in using imagination to presentify scenarios, objects, or roles that are absent. By doing so the children are already simulating reality through "as if" logic which regards both the object of play and the subject playing. In the first case, this is an operation of separation of the referent from the object, such as using a stick as a horse, through which «children first understand that actions (and the objects on which the child acts) can be separated from reality, and that those actions might be based on the meaning of the imagined situation instead of the physical properties of the objects (*Ivi*: 429). In the second case, the subject considers itself as if it were someone else, a *persona*, and through this activity, such as pretending to be a parent, «children learn to take the perspectives corresponding to those roles, and to behave according to their norms» (*Ivi*: 430). Then, the development of children involves a development of playing which becomes gradually more structured as it incorporates specific playthings, such as cards, and play rules which formally make a game. The imaginative aspect of playing also changes in light of a more referential and iconic importance of toys: we no longer play with just any puppet representing a cat but with the character of our favorite TV show. Similarly, with construction toys such as *Lego* children may now aim at recreating specific objects of reality. Yet, creativity is still at the center of these forms of playing. Five-year-old children may play at school with the official cards of their favorite cartoon, but they often do so without actually knowing or caring for the rules. Instead of calculating the numbers and reading the descriptions of cards they may, for example, toss the cards in the air and consider that the one falling face-up wins against the other. They may use their toy of Spiderman as a simulacrum to reenact exactly what they have seen in the last episode, but to do so they pretend that things aren't what they look like and resemantise objects (Thibault 2020) around them: the edge of the bed is the edge of the building, that toy from another TV show is a new enemy, and so on. Moreover, they also act like the characters they play by engaging in a role-playing activity that involves inventing dialogues and assuming

different identities. As Umberto Eco wrote, the meaning of playing is here related to what is creatively added and produced to the already existing game by the player:

> Stefano, figlio mio, ti regalerò fucili. Perché un fucile non è un gioco. È lo spunto di un gioco. Di lì dovrai inventare una situazione, un insieme di rapporti, una dialettica di eventi. Dovrai fare pum con la bocca, e scoprirai che il gioco vale per quel che vi inserisci, non per quel che vi trovi di confezionato (Eco 1992: p. 111).

This same creative activity of role-playing may, for some, accompany them through both adolescence and adulthood as in the case of the players of *Dungeons & Dragons* who not only interpret characters but also engage in narrative writing. Similarly, both adolescents and adults may continue to play card games and board games without correctly applying the rules, and even by modifying them intentionally. Consider the famous case of *Uno*, with most players adding "+4" cards to "+4" cards, despite what the official rules say, to have more fun[2]. Finally, several successful board games may also rely on the imagination of the player (*Dixit* 2008) on spontaneous storytelling (*Aye, Dark Overlord!* 2005) or involve creative activities such as drawing (*Pictionary* 1985).

In sum, while at first glance we may consider that the development of play entails a decrease in creativity because of the growing importance of rules and limitations, what really occurs is that the *creativity of play changes direction throughout our life*. As children, the initial spontaneous subjective free imaginative play is directed toward the invention of playful activities that may become sharable only *a posteriori*. By growing up, creativity moves forward and shape forms of freedom and self-expression by *diverging and inventing from the already known norms and rules*. In both cases we find the same *possibilistic attitude toward truth* which is typical of abduction and which is why play features in Peirce's semiotics (Zingale 2009). From the standpoint of a philosophical inquiry on the relationship between creativity and madness, these two directions represent two interrelated research avenues.

The first one concerns several similarities between the stereotypical creative make-believe activity of playing and the stereotype of madness: a serious attitude toward fiction, a serious belief about one's own lie, a serious detachment from the norms and rules of everyday life, the mismatch of identities and situations, and so on. Both early and late playful behaviors can be seen as a way to transform oddness into something familiar through repetition, to shape a new habit of both thinking and being which may appear incomprehensible to those observing it from the outside. Moreover, because of the many simulative aspects and forms of play, there is also a similar situation of ambiguity and difficulty of interpretation. Indeed, the observable and functional behavior of an individual cannot always be enough to distinguish if it is playing or not, a distinction existing sometimes only on a psychological level (Lillard 2015: 427). Furthermore, notions such as awkwardness, atypicality, and non-functionality (*Ivi*: pp. 427-228) are still used today to define and recognize a child playing. It is therefore not surprising that play, and especially pretend play (*Ivi*: pp. 442-446), became a central object of study for the functioning and modelling of the human mind in psychology (*Ivi*: 433) and has also acquired importance in the semiotic and philosophical reflection about subjectivity (Paolucci 2020). Games and play highlight, in fact, how much natural and pleasurable it is for our minds to engage in such activities which are believed to be universal both in timing and appearance (Lillard 2015: 454). And it is significant to observe how the most notorious notion used to contextualize the activity of playing

[2] https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/uno-says-you-cant-stack-2-and-4-cards-but-twitter-is-playing-by-its-own-house-rules-2954216.html.

within rational boundaries is Huizinga's concept of "magic circle" (1938), a term which semantically refers to the non-rational domain of magic. Finally, even within its boundaries the out-of-the-ordinary activity of playing is not always seen as something positively extraordinary. In fact, games have often been accused of producing, from *D&D* in the 70's to *Fortnite* fifty years later, a dangerous dissociation from reality and also a negative influence on the player's personality.

The second potential issue, which is the one that we will discuss in this paper, is instead related to how technology influences our concept of creativity. Indeed, what does it mean to be creative in a digital game? Is it even possible to play creatively? Whereas the commercial stereotype of videogames depicts them as places of unlimited freedom and multiple identities in new worlds, the scientific literature of both game studies and game design has been pointing out for two decades how digital games actually present only an illusion of freedom (Fassone 2017, Bódi 2023). Moreover, data on the most played videogames also reinforces the idea that, let's think of *Candy Crush*, imaginative play is far from being the main value of most games. Even the previously mentioned *Fortnite,* which distinguishes itself for its social function and for its building mechanic inspired by the creative game *Minecraft*, apparently fails to present any kind of "pretending" similar to the forms that we discussed. We could easily argue that:

A. The visual representations substitute both the need of imagining and resemantising, there is no "as if" toward objects.
B. The avatar used to play does not entail any kind of deep psychological identification and is just a functional representation of the player in the virtual world, there is no "as if" toward subjects.
C. The indeterminacy of the performative outcome is counterbalanced by the scripted nature of the content and situations hindering any proper invention and roleplaying.
D. The enforcement of the rules by software does not even require an interpretation of the rules and is a barrier impeding their modification.
E. The mathematical determination of the "meta" requires an extremely logical and strategic approach to play aimed at the maximum efficiency, hence removing creativity from the act of building itself[3].
F. The situation created by the rules, the spectacularization of last man standing competition which can bring teenagers to earn real millions, is regrettably more like a copy of social reality than a reinvention of it.

To better understand the specificity of creativity in digital games we must therefore explore some examples of it.

2. Creativity and Madness in Digital Games

A typical way of answering the previous questions would be to name games which are designed around the importance of the user's imagination and creativity: from independent games such as *Elegy for a Dead World* (2014) to the freeform mode of famous tycoon games (*Zoo Tycoon* 2001) and of course the worldwide success of *Minecraft* (2011). Moreover, creativity and lateral thinking can be part of the core-design: puzzle games created by Zachtronics, such as *SpaceChem* (2011), are created expressly to allow hundreds of different original solutions. Similarly, games can be designed as open-ended to have little or no objectives allowing and encouraging the players free exploration of their content (*No Man's Sky* 2016) and roleplaying/storytelling (*Stellaris* 2016). There are

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCUvxJ1WXec.

also many creative features in videogames related to visual customization (cars, avatars, weapons, houses, etc.). Finally, there are also many creative practices inside the videogame community related to the modification (*modding*) of the original code and content. But what is interesting for us is, instead, to look for cases of creativity emerging in "unexpected" and "unprecedented" ways from common games without any particularly creative features. More specifically, we are interested in games centered around winning and efficiency logic which consequently entails the development of consolidated practices of playing them. Cases which, as we will see, can lead to impressions of madness in relation both to the player and to the representation on the screen. Unexpected, however, does not mean inexplicable. On the contrary, the vast literature on games as systems has clearly highlighted how the very identity of games is to present *combinatory spaces of possibilities* within *limitations* (Bartezzaghi 2016). Without these multiple possibilities we would not perceive games as they are since everything would be predetermined: nobody would play a game involving a die with just one number. But this is also true for limitations, since without them there are no interesting choices to be made: any game designer knows that very well (Salen, Zimmerman 2003). It is precisely through this conflict between freedom and limitations that, in game design, we create what is known as "player expression" through the possibility of choosing among different viable solutions: from cultural units (favorite Pokémon, car, weapon, character build and appearance, civilization) to ethics (playing good or evil) and playstyles (aggressive, defensive, etc.). In a Benvenistian way (Benveniste 1970), this possibility of choosing within the system of expression creates for the players the impression/illusion not just of agency but, more importantly, of an "appropriation": the game becomes "their own". Games therefore are the perfect example of subjectivity arising from indeterminacy through the dialogical relationship between structure and interpretation, an aspect of games that has been of great interest for semiotics are (Giuliana 2024) in both an interpretative (Eco 1962, 1978, 1979) and structuralist (Idone Cassone 2014, Thibault 2016) view. Even if theoretically explicable, the virtual nature of possibility in games ensures that their realization is never obvious: it is in this sense that we are talking of creativity emerging in "unexpected" and "unprecedented" ways. Moreover, in light of the relation between creativity and madness we will inquire into cases which became known as examples of players being "geniuses" and "going crazy". Keeping the comments for the conclusions, what we propose here is a typology of creativity which is not intended to be exhaustive but serves our general reflection.

2.1. Syntagmatic Creativity: Wawa in *Dragon Ball Fighting Z* and K-style in *Guɳz*

As we said, the combinatory possibilities of games are at the heart of both their meaning and their freedom. Simple possibilities of combinations such as standing and crouching, or shooting consecutively on a wall, have allowed players to *creatively invent silly* practices capable of generating the unexpected: this is the case of "tea-bagging" in *Halo2* (2004) and of "bullet drawing" in *CS:Go* (2012). Now, the very word of "combo" invokes a very specific genre of videogames: fighting games. In some sense, we could say that all fighting games present the challenge of combining one move after another in the most efficient way to create long sequences/sentences of damaging actions that cannot be avoided by the adversary. With the added challenge that realizing such long "combos" requires a significant sensorimotor and mental effort with a high probability of failure. Because of that, this genre is well known for its very high learning curve and investment required: players must first thoroughly study the system of possibilities (the moves of each character and then how they interact with all the moves of all characters), then practice them and finally study their heuristics. What we are describing here is not

exclusive to fighting games but is emblematic of the honing activity of video games at the opposite to the stereotype of creativity: using muscle-memory for execution and knowledge-memory to learn a game's logic and to master its challenges through focused, repetitive play, with failure leading to adjustments and further attempts. Yet, fighting game players are also famous for being innovators. Indeed, thanks to their competitive nature and success, fighting games such as *Street Fighter* have been among the first and most famous to demonstrate the unexpected possibilities of apparently extremely strict non-creative games and to consequently create the figures of the "videogame genius". Consider the case of the "crazy parry" of the player Daigo during the famous "Moment 37", which realized something which was thought impossible to do in that situation. Yet, this precise case of "Moment 37" coincides with the stereotype of videogame "honer" geniuses which act like machines because of their reflexes and cold-blooded mind. In the last years there has been, however, a more recent "genius[4]" player being creative as a *machine*. This is the case of Wawa and of the game *Dragon Ball Fighting Z* (2018). Here the interesting aspect is that there is a specific character, Adult Gohan, who was designed to be weaker than the others but to be able to have, after a great investment during the fight, the highest possible freedom of combination. By choosing this character as his "iconic" one, Wawa became known in the community for its creative playstyle which would leave both the audience and the commentators unable to predict what would happen. A second and perhaps even more emblematic case of combinatory creativity generating madness is the case of the competitive game *Gunz* (2003). Here, players have discovered possibilities of combinations beyond the knowledge of the creators which lead to the invention of a frenetic and acrobatic playstyle[5], named K-style, which looks completely nonsensical and mad both within the game (because of erratic animations) and also by looking at the real player's movements. Yet, this well-studied style was the key in pushing the limits of the game and in creating a new common interest in it.

2.2. Risk-Taking: Huk in *StarCraft* and Let me solo her in *Elden Ring*

Within the system of combinatory possibilities of most videogames, each one can be considered in light of its efficiency in relation to a risk-reward analysis. Understanding this mathematical layer defines the stereotypical identity of the "gamer", which is always looking for ways to "break the game" by finding the strongest and most reliable solutions to win consistently. Sometimes, as in the previous case of *Gunz* but most notoriously with "rolling[6]" in *Tetris* (1989), players even invent new ways of physically interacting with the device to optimize odds of winning. As such, in games presenting a high degree of challenge or competition some of the suboptimal solutions may never be realized and may never become "common sense" if considered *severely detrimental to one's own interest*. Indeed, the idea of "self-harming" is typical of the representation of madness and is present as a mechanic in several games which let us play as crazy characters (like Krieg from the 2012 *Borderlands 2*). Yet, it is precisely by using these often extremely risky possibilities that some players may be considered both "crazy" and "geniuses". In competitive situations these strategies have, indeed, the advantage of being less known by the adversaries and as such they represent a bet on the unexpected. A good example is the *StarCraft II* (2010) player Huk who became famous for inventing an extremely risky "all in" economic strategy known as "Mothership Rush". This

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OrmKK_D9so.
[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvC67kmYxPA.
[6] https://www.youtube.com/shorts/RyJNtuBxul8.

strategy has become famous as it consists in quickly investing a large amount of resources in the construction of a spaceship (the mothership) considered weak (a bad investment) but then capable of going directly to the opponent's base for a surprise attack whose outcome effectively decides the entire game. The excessively risky and reckless dimension of this bet has thrilled the entire *StarCraft* community leading to the figure of Huk as a crazy genius, even in those cases where it did not lead Huk to victory. But this is also true for non-competitive settings. An emblematic example is the one of the *Elden Ring* (2022) player "Let me solo her". Here madness also assumes a visual appearance as the avatar of this player appears naked and with a pot on his head. An outfit completely inadequate to face the boss where he can be summoned: Malenia, the hardest in the game and among the hardest in gaming history. Here madness is overemphasized by the fact that this risk (wearing no armor) is not part of any strategy (build), but simply a way to affirm the player's identity and skill. Yet, when talking about players being geniuses of *Elden Ring* there are few names which can compete with this player who *mastered the behavior of the AI and every move in the game*.

2.3. Rule-Bending: Mercer in *Baldur's Gate 3* and BausFFS in *League of Legends*

The enforcement of rules by software is a clear limit to the modification of them. However, similarly to the film *The Matrix* (1999), software rules can often be bent in unexpected ways. A common example is "exploits", possibilities overlooked by the original creators, giving players advantages similar to the one of cheating. Like in the two previous examples the discovery of such exploits occurs through knowledge of the game and, more importantly, through a community sharing this knowledge. In relation to creativity, a case of rule-bending much more interesting than exploit is however the one of unforeseen strategies. A recent example is the one of the actor Matt Mercer who in 2023 solved the problem of entering into a bank within the role-playing game *Baldur's Gate 3*. Normally, this would be done through players travelling, doing missions, dialogues and so on. He, however, stacked crates (the "overlooked" mechanic) to form a tower and then used a special arrow on the top to teleport. In this case, however, the unexpected and genial solution is the result of a system which is designed to allow and encourage the player creativity. In light of our main research question, a more interesting case is the one of a "genius" player of *League of Legends* named "BausFFS" who has been acting in an apparently "crazy manner" by bending the rules. The technicalities of this strategy are too complex[7] to be explained here, but we can highlight the main point of interest. In short, *LoL* is a multiplayer game based on team fights leading to either "kills" (you beat the other), "deaths" (you die) or "assists" (you helped another player to kill). These fights are strongly influenced by factors going beyond reflexes and guessing, most notably you can earn and spend gold in many ways to obtain items making you stronger. Normally, the more you kill and the stronger you are which is why "k/d/a" is used as a parameter of skill for both other players and for the automated systems of the game. BausFFS found, however, a way to consistently win by being continuously killed showing therefore a "shameful" k/d/a. From the outside, this way of playing looked completely crazy and was initially infuriating all his teammates who consistently reported him and ask him for his exclusion. Even the automated system *banned* him as a result of not knowing how to interpret this way of playing. In reality, however, BausFFS's strategy was extremely rational and perfectly calculated and worked precisely because it went against the consolidated way of playing.

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbwAulaZr4k.

2.4. Subverting: Pacifist Runs in *Super Mario Bros* and "Magna Santi" in *SimCity*

The previous examples of creativity were either intended or unintended but still coherent with the purpose of the game. However, syntagmatic creativity can also lead to subverting the implicit ideological content of games, playing against the game's intended goals. This is the case of the classic *Super Mario Bros* from 1985, a score-oriented game which had rules awarding points to the player for kills, coins gathered and for timing. In terms of creativity this game is quite famous for its speedrun community, a group of players sharing the objective of aiming toward perfect execution, knowledge and rule-bending to finish the game as fast as possible. By doing so, many unexpected possibilities of *SMB* have been discovered throughout decades. Among these, what we are most interested in is the rise of a peculiar type of play named "pacifist" which was intended to go against the common sense behind point awarding. Indeed, because of the necessity of the space of possibility, the game had to have conditions for the players allowing them to *not* take the money and to *not* kill monsters. As such, a new way of playing was born requiring very creative solutions (such as new paths within the levels) for the new challenges implied by this execution which may look completely crazy if decontextualized since it goes against anything the game would reward the player for and against how everybody else plays it. A similar yet opposite example is the one of "Magna Santi": a city built in *Sim City 3000* (1999) from architecture student Vincent Ocasla after four years of work and planning. This dedication led to a "perfect" city of six million inhabitants that could stay that way for the next 50,000 years without ever going bankrupt. Perfection achieved by imagining and realizing a completely mad totalitarian social system, without schools or hospitals, based on slavery, poverty and short life expectancy. Clearly the game was never designed to make something similar (Juul 2005), but the player took over the virtual possibilities given by the game, most notably making bankruptcy as the only condition of game over, to create an Orwellian dystopic world in a game meant for fun, freedom and irony. A creative work so disturbing that in an important interview he had to specify «I am not autistic, or a savant, nor suffer from OCD, or suffer from any other form of clinical mental disease or illness for that matter»[8].

2.5. Rule-Adding: *Pokémon* Nuzlocke and *Skyrim* without walking

The software in games can enforce its own rules, but it cannot do much to prevent players from adding new rules. Although we have already seen this with the case of pacifist runs, there are other examples which are much more emblematic of this form of creativity since they are explicitly aimed at creating conditions for unreasonable and impossible events to occur, creating a novel challenge within the game's goals. Among the most notorious cases of self-imposed rules is the *Pokémon* Nuzlocke[9] challenge, a way of playing which was born mainly to improve the challenge of the original game by limiting captures to one per area and permanently fainting Pokémon that are defeated. This involves the necessity of going "out of consolidated way" of playing. But the main one that we want to discuss here is the case of *Skyrim* which players have tried to finish without ever using the input keys/sticks which are needed to "walk": a crazy idea unrelated to having more fun through challenge but aimed at creating amusing situations within the game. To understand the madness of this idea, we must emphasize that *Skyrim* is a huge open-world game (lots of traveling) with action combat (so

[8] https://www.vice.com/en/article/q-a-vincent-ocasla-the-22-year-old-who-designed-the-perfect-totalitarian-city/.
[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuzlocke.

movement is important) and exploration (jumps, traps, etc.), requiring 30 to 100 hours to complete when played normally. It is precisely because of that that only "genius" players can tackle the numerous challenges posed by these rules, requiring completely unconventional approaches to familiar mechanics. As in the previous case, explaining in detail these solutions is impossible here. But we can make at least one example: to move forward, the only initial solution is to use the charged punch animation; however, this depletes the stamina, making it unreliable. Instead, the player must first attack and then cancel that same attack. Moreover, if the attack animation is performed while over-encumbered – a normally negative status – the character will slide forward slightly. Whereas for any other player this would be detrimental or insignificant, for this challenge it becomes extremely beneficial. So, the problem-solving involved here is dependent on an extremely advanced knowledge (of each mechanic's, rules, object properties and so on) which is then used to subvert common sense. By doing so, this extremely rational study of the game results in "mad" gameplay, full of creativity, which has earned over seven million views on YouTube[10].

2.6. Role-Playing: Sergeant Hartman in *Helldivers 2* and being the mole in *PUBG*

When we think about roleplaying, we immediately have in mind a very specific genre which is quite distant from multiplayer shooting games. Yet, the simple existence of a name and of a communication channel can actually create roleplaying opportunities in any game. A recent example of this is the game *Helldivers 2* presenting cutscenes and an overall "writing" mimicking movies such as *Starship Troopers* (1997) and being a parody of discourses about democracy, comradeship and the bravery of soldiers. Within this context, players[11] have been acting similarly to fictional mad characters such as Sergeant Hartman (*Full Metal Jacket* 1987) to interact with other players via the microphone. This crazy yet genius interpretation was also reflected by often extremely fun and uncommon ways of playing (such as punching aliens instead of shooting them, a very inefficient strategy), coherent with the rp. But sometimes roleplay can also consist more simply in acting "as if" we were the enemy. This is the famous case of a Korean player of the battle-royale game *PUBG* (2017) who found himself surrounded by a swarm of opposing players and, noticing that they were all wearing red shirts, in a flash of genius put on the same outfit and took the crazy risks of joining them as if he was part of their team. A deception made this time by turning off the microphone. He then stayed with them as a mole, faking to earn their trust, and then "unexpectedly" killed them all: something so memorable that articles were written on this event[12].

2.7. Overinterpretation: Twitch Plays *Pokémon* and the Pope in *Eve Online*

The cases of "creativity and madness" that we have described can be further enhanced in online massive multiplayer games which have always been ethnographically and semiotically (Giuliana 2025) interesting for how frequently unexpected events can occur, such as players holding real funerals. The existence of different servers also favors the possibility of creating "special rules", such as role-playing servers in *World of Warcraft* or ASD-friendly worlds in *Minecraft*[13]. There are countless stories about real events in such

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmpXf0nFCII.
[11]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMvyTN5OAxU; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ovz8GREME0.
[12] https://www.polygon.com/2017/8/30/16226368/pubg-red-shirt-korean-streamer-chinese-betrayal-video.
[13] ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder

games involving the bending and subversion of game design rules and mechanics. Moreover, if we think of emblematic cases such as the one of Leroy Jenkins, it is almost as if "going crazy" had an added value in contexts requiring a communal agreement between players. So much that both newspaper[14] and academic journals (Oultram 2013) have mentioned the deliberately disruptive and offensive behavior of players (such as trolling) in MMORPGs[15] as a way to explain the disrespect of norms and common sense in the real-world during events such as Covid-19. What we want to highlight as a last example is, however, in some sense the opposite: communal forms of creativity emerging from the game and leading to a collective overinterpretation (Eco 1979) of game events leading to non-sense narratives. The first case that we want to discuss is a little different than traditional MMORPGs since it is the one of a single player game "modified" to be played by thousands of players through the *Twitch* chat. This was the idea behind "Twitch Plays Pokémon", where the result of thousands of players contemporarily giving randomly selected input was the representation of a completely mad character (going in any direction, making terrible choice, etc.) and of complete chaos. So much that at some point finishing the game looked impossible and a solution was proposed to make progress easier by selecting only the most common inputs: a solution refused by the players. What is interesting here is the effort of a whole community to both act crazy and creatively construe together a narrative making sense of what was occurring. The most notable example being the recurrent wrong action of selecting a completely unusable fossil-item in combat which was overinterpreted as looking for advice from a fossil-God. But even a single chatbox can have similar effects, as in the case of the "Pope" the complex space-themed and economy-centered MMORPG *Eve Online*. Here, a retired man became, by giving real-life advice to younger players, widely accepted by the community as a spiritual figure and began to be called "the Pope". A title which became an occasion for role-playing inside the game as such and to exert an influence over thousands of players collectively and spontaneously adhering to this narrative as if it was part of the game. To the extent that when the actual creators of the game invented a storyline around a "god", "the Pope" had the authority to name this a heresy and to trigger a war of hundreds of players sailing into space to defeat it. This was, obviously, completely nonsensical as there was absolutely no scripted content about such "war against god" inside the game. Yet, this unexpected and "crazy" outcome was accepted and endorsed by the creators who made it part of the storyline.

3. Conclusions

Throughout six examples, we have seen that the "crazy genius of videogames" is characterized by four main meaning-making attitudes, behaviors and strategies: finding new ways of combining already existing elements, bending-subverting-expanding the rules of combination, attributing meaning beyond the textual semantics, and playing against efficient uses of games. Thanks to this inquiry we have reached at least three conclusions. The first one is that many features of "free play" are absolutely present in digital games which are not designed around imaginative and creative play: from pretending (*TPP*) and roleplaying (*Helldivers*) to the invention of rules (*Skyrim*) and of new ways to play (*Gunz*). The second one is that there is a clear linguistic connotation and social interpretation of divergent creativity as madness in all these cases in light of the normalized practices of play within these contexts. The third and last one is that

[14] https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/11/politics/coronavirus-leroy-jenkins-states-reopening/index.html.
[15] MMORPG = Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

through videogames we can confirm that creativity and madness appear through enunciative processes generating divergence from within the system itself as a consequence of a profoundly rational (see sections 2.2-2.5) and encyclopedic attitude toward the virtual meanings of expressive possibilities. So, we see that creativity and madness occur outside of common sense but emerge through sign production from within the same means through which common sense can be created.

These conclusions appear important to us for three main reasons. First, from a social perspective, this examination can be used against a certain mystic stereotype of creativity as well as against the irrational stereotype of madness. Second, from a strictly theoretical perspective, it seems to consolidate and confirm the validity of the interpretative legacy of semiotics and especially the more recent evolution of its theory of enunciation (see 1.). Third, these results emphasize the general value of philosophical investigations about technology and the specific case of digital games is one which appears especially promising for future research in the contemporary debate on creativity (Wilson 2017, Moruzzi 2025) in relation to artificial intelligence. Indeed, when we look at how A.I. learns to act in digitalized game-like situations (Giuliana 2023), we can observe behaviors that fit into our previous typology such as combinatory, rule-bending and sub-optimal creativity. For example, AI will combine interactions in unexpected ways to discover how to walk on its head[16], will bend rules to invent ways of jumping[17], and in the famous case of the "move 37" in *Go* it will use creative strategies that cannot be explained in terms of mere efficiency but only of «unpredictable brilliance» (Simpson 2024: p. 236). This has even led, as it recently occurred in *Fortnite*[18], to AI appearing mad by leaving us *with no rational explanation of a certain thought behind its discursive production*. Yet, and we would like to conclude on this, the answer that we are looking for is more likely to come from the knowledge about the semiotic logics of meaning-making rather than from desperately trying to pierce the "black box" of the mind behind an action that *we* interpret as "inexplicable".

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