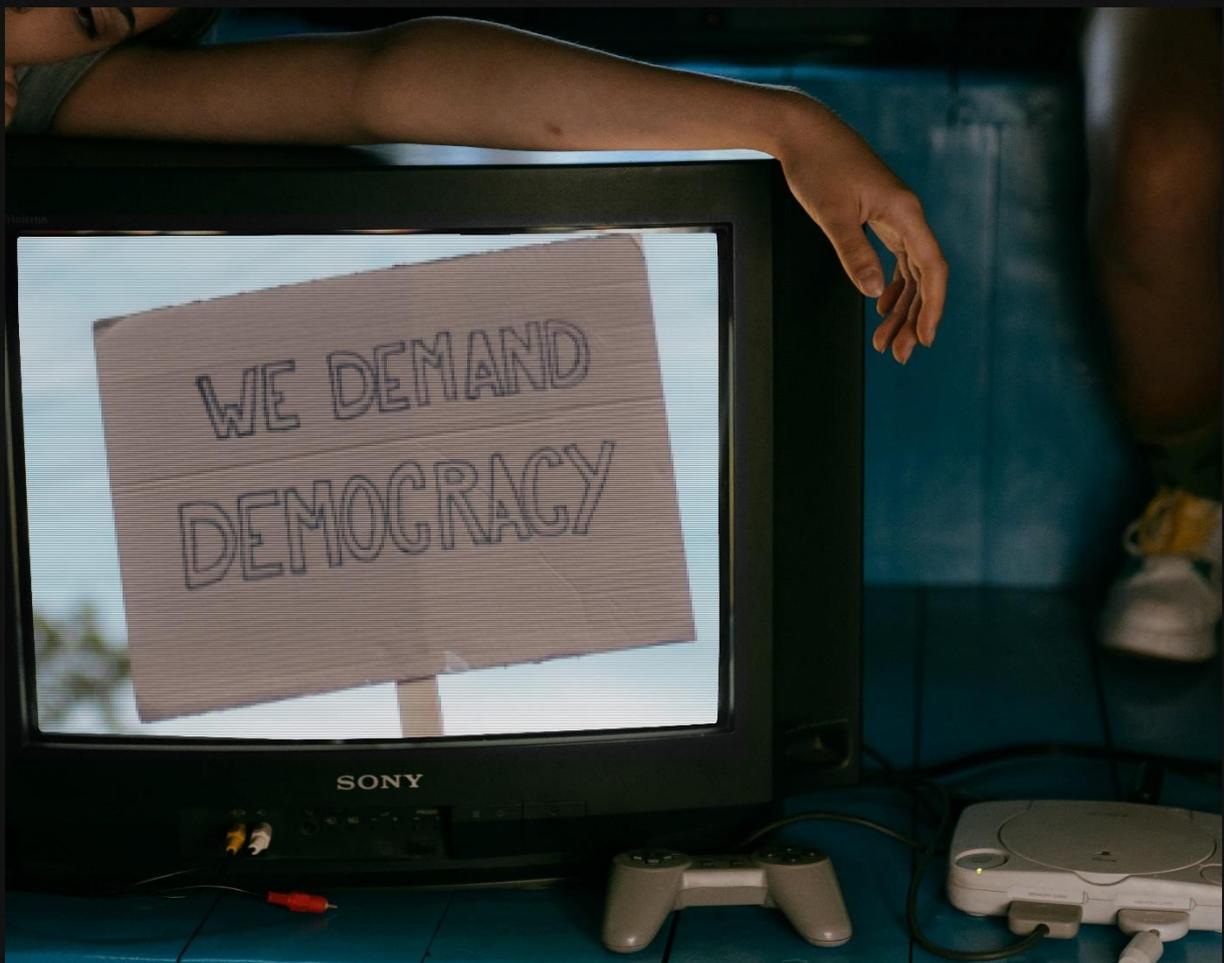


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# Autocracy for the People. Modes of *response-able* Action and the Management of Demise in *Frostpunk*

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## Abstract

In the post-apocalyptic construction simulation *Frostpunk* (2018) two modes of action are confronted with each other. On the one hand, the player-leaders' decisions concern *their* people. The players are, in Donna Haraway's terms, *response-able* for and to the survivors of a global climate collapse in a situation of co-presently "living-with and dying-with each other" (Haraway 2016, 2). The complex interdependence of social conditions and player choices in *Frostpunk* thus problematises any notion of winning. What is at stake is the possibility of forming a community itself by acting precisely as that community, experienced through simultaneously sharing and leading it. The second mode of action lies in the decisions that oppose the perceived well-being of the community: The players are forced to manage an inevitable demise by constructing buildings, saving resources, and advancing technologies in view of the next drop in temperatures or the next storm that will deplete all depots and diminish hope. Departing from the modes of similar *dictatorship simulations*, *Frostpunk* reconfigures the genre's autocratic gameplay (Dor 2018, Wiemer 2008, 2012) to open new political perspectives.

**Keywords:** Community, Construction simulation, *Frostpunk*, Genre, God game, Interface, Management, Post-apocalypse, Subjectivity, Sympoiesis, *Tropico*, gameenvironments

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Players are *response-able*. Donna Haraway's (2016) insistence on the ability to respond to catastrophic ecological and economic situations, inherent as *response-ability* in *responsibility*, also opens a new perspective on modes of gameplay in game scenarios of catastrophe. While gameplay may always be structured around players'







climate collapse, caused by a volcanic eruption in 1887 that led to a new catastrophic ice age:

“It feels as yesterday [sic], we were turning the wheels of progress. Until the frost... stopped it all. [...] We have lost our world to snow and with it, our last traces... ..of humanity. We bid farewell to plenty. And for those who remained, came the time to adapt. We decided to leave our homes and head north. [...] Finally... the time has come. To build the last city on earth”<sup>ii</sup> (Frostpunk 2018).

The accompanying visuals of soft transitions between shifting image layers show cities descending into chaos, large steam-powered vehicles ploughing through deserted landscapes of endless snow, sunken ships underneath the icy surfaces of seas and oceans, frozen beetles in once-vibrant blades of grass, survivors fighting their way through storms, finding shelter at last in an abandoned crater with a still functioning coal generator. The mission screen for *A New Home* finally appears and summarises the survivors’ flight from a sudden blizzard into the crater, setting the guiding principle for all future player actions: “Whatever we do, we should expect the worst now that the world as we know it has crumbled” (Frostpunk 2018). The only available response to this introduction into the world of *Frostpunk* comes in the form of one single button: “We will survive” (Frostpunk 2018). The game view then descends onto the main map of the crater. In its centre, a small community of people awaits instructions, huddled near the deactivated generator. Players need to collect coal, wood and steel, build tents to house the people, medical posts to care for those who fall ill in the freezing cold, hunter’s huts to gather food and a cookhouse to prepare meals. They will have to research advanced buildings and improve the existing ones, sign laws to set guidelines for the people and above all: they will have to keep the community of survivors alive, hopeful and content.

This set of actions and parameters can be described as an example of a *god game*, a *dictatorship simulation* or *government simulation*, or, more technically, a *city-building construction simulation*. Which label applies to a game like *Frostpunk*, or which collection of labels for which aspects of the game, is a question that only underlines the necessity for close analyses of individual games and their respective, heterogeneous forms of expression. Serjoscha Wiemer's (2012, 80) tabular overview of "Subgenres of Computer Strategy Games" lists the different categories of "Wargames", "Realtime-Strategy-Games", "Management-Games" and "God-Games." These genres are differentiated by respective "main objects of strategic action" (Wiemer 2012, 80): military; economic and military; financial and industrial; and social, economic, cultural and military. More important than assigning specific games to these categories, however, is the analysis of each game's interfaces as "a key element of computer-mediated experience and digital aesthetics" (Wiemer 2012, 76), which "create[s] a semiotic space in which perception, action, and technology are linked together in an interconnection of man and machine" (Wiemer 2012, 79). To understand the specific modes of meaningful strategic action in a game, it is therefore necessary to analyse its functional and aesthetic interface arrangements which also "include all forms of meaning production and all actions of players in relation to the structural and aesthetic organisation of the inputs and outputs of a game" (Wiemer 2012, 80). Wiemer consequently argues for close interface analysis as a way to understand the production of meaning through specific player actions as these emerge in and relate to the spatial and visual logics of the interface. This generates "structural homologies" and creates "family resemblances between different games" (Wiemer 2012, 78) without making it necessary to link these to a fixed genre taxonomy.<sup>iii</sup>











of presentation. The gameplay experience of management and construction simulations like *Tropico* is structured by a clear division of the embodied action of power and the spaces transformed to serve its needs, for example when placing farms to extract resources where they are most available, providing tourist accommodation to cover the highest rated spots of beauty and tranquillity on the island, or trying to reach the optimal coverage of electricity or availability of nightlife. The island as a concrete space vanishes behind informational transformations into abstract color-coded views of density. Any relation to the island worlds of *Tropico* and its inhabitants is mediated by interfaces, which create an informational availability of territorialised time and space for deterritorialised action upon them. The subject position created in the gameplay of *Tropico* can be described as that of a deterritorialised autocratic state apparatus itself, constantly transforming the shared time and space of a community into values to be manipulated at will.

**Playing *response-ably***

In order to analyse *Frostpunk* as a shift from these paradigmatic modes of construction simulation gameplay grounded in autocratic player action, a different perspective on community and acting *in* or *as* a community can be developed here with Donna Haraway's concepts of response-ability and sympoiesis. Haraway's publication *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) calls for new ways of "living-with and dying-with each other" (2016, 2) in order to *stay with the trouble* in a world neither certainly doomed nor about to be miraculously saved but in dire need for urgent and decisive action to avert the numerous threats to survival on the planet: "to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures" (2016, 1). New practices and ways of thinking are necessary to realize entirely new formations of response-ability for one another. Crucially, any ability to

respond to a time and space of global extinction can only be realized in a mutual process of being present in precisely this shared time and space. Haraway's notion of *living-with* and *dying-with* can be understood not only as a set of temporal terms to describe passive co-existence, but as the ground for mutual response-ability. This understanding of a shared world does not refer to a time and space merely arbitrarily inhabited with others, it rather means a world in which relations among innumerable beings and kinds of beings are continuously realised – and in continuously surprising and unexpected ways. Only then can responsible action for this world as well as for each other arise: in sharing relations to others that are grounded in the care for a shared world which makes these relations possible in the first place. *Response-ability* thus refers to the *responsibility* of such intricate relations with a multitude of others on the one hand as well as to the *ability to respond* that arises from this densely related perspective of sharing a space and time in meaningful and productive ways. Communities are capable of action precisely whenever and wherever they are rooted in *being-with*, in the full extent of what it means to *live-with* and *die-with*, i.e. not only to co-exist in ignorance, but to share a world and its capacities to weave relations in a common present.

What is at stake in the practices that arise as response-able actions is a temporality of ongoingness, threatened by the “double death” of the Anthropocene – not only the death of myriad beings and entire species but the “killing of ongoingness” (Haraway 2016, 44) as such. The Anthropocene has made ways of thinking grounded in neoliberal individualism fundamentally impossible, it is an age of “severe discontinuities” (Haraway 2016, 100). Ongoingness is threatened in that sense as the vanishing ability to think and create worlds of ongoing presence on this planet at all, offering conditions not only for bare individual survival but for “living and dying well together”, for sharing times and spaces, enabling “multispecies flourishing” (Haraway





sympoiesis as a specifically political way to acknowledge the human-machine *intra-actions* described by Galloway in new and original ways, the sense of community shaped in *Frostpunk*'s gameplay experience can be described in a concrete analysis of the game's aesthetic dynamics.

**Managing Demise**

*Frostpunk* presents a reconfiguration of the autocratic construction simulation paradigm not by departing from it entirely but rather by carrying it into a different gameplay experience with entirely different political implications that ultimately subvert autocratic action. The analysis of *Frostpunk* will mainly focus on the already mentioned first scenario *A New Home*. The core principles of *Frostpunk*'s gameplay are condensed in *A New Home* within one fictional setting and although other scenarios depart slightly from these principles, the key interface structures and modes of subjectification are similar in all of *Frostpunk*'s available scenarios so far.<sup>ix</sup> As Wiemer, Gallagher and most recently Rudolf Inderst (2020) remark, analyses of individual games pose an important object of critical video game research, and the analysis of one of *Frostpunk*'s scenarios alone, with its roughly four to six hours of play, presents just such an object of close analysis.

To untangle the complex relation between interface structures, modes of action and gameplay experiences, it is helpful to start with the general aesthetic and functional arrangement of the interface elements in *Frostpunk*'s main view. Similar to other examples of construction and management simulation and the general structure of strategy interfaces, as described above with the example of *Tropico*, *Frostpunk* features a main territorial map, which, in the case of *A New Home*, shows the inside of a crater. After researching the *Beacon*, a tethered hot air balloon rising above the



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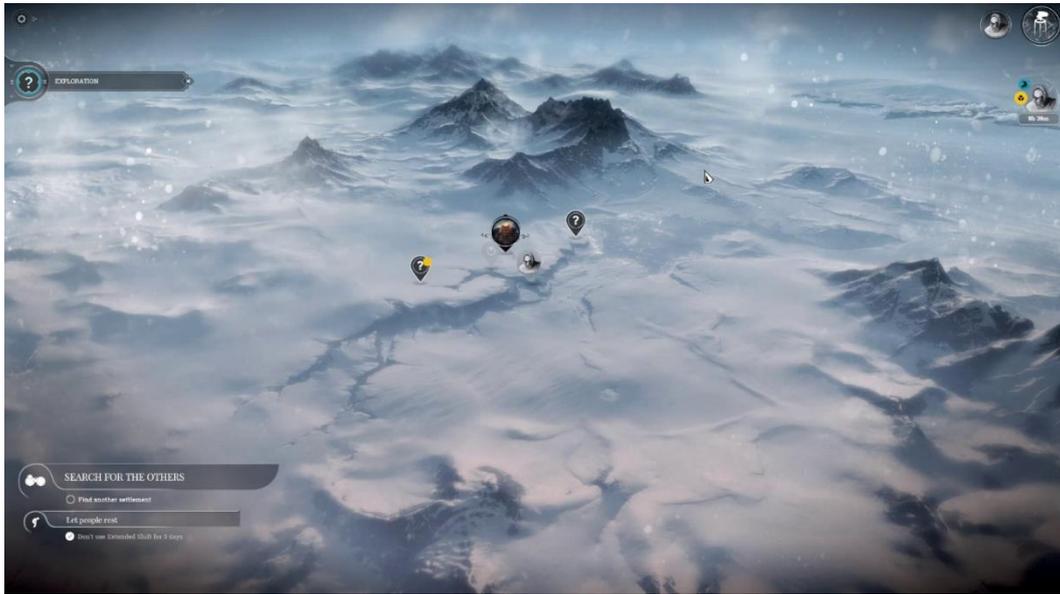


Figure 3. The abstract map of the *Frostland* in *Frostpunk*. Screenshot taken from *Frostpunk* on Windows PC ©11 bit studios.

Unlike *Tropico*, whose configurational interface design with backgrounds of crumbling brick walls presents a rather half-hearted attempt at critically or satirically creating a link between autocratic power and a lack of public well-being, *Frostpunk's* general interface design follows a different approach. Depending on the world's temperature, one of the most important variables in *Frostpunk*, the *lens* of the player view is covered with an expanding or retracting layer of cracked ice, edging closer from the fringes, infiltrating the spaces of player action. This basic interface design marks the player position as always already integrated within the game world. The ice on the screen constantly enables an experience of the changing weather as the defining state of the world within the expressivity of the interface itself, accompanied by intense sounds of crackling ice or steaming evaporation. This experience transcends any merely informational value: Colder or *warmer* weather (*warm* is a very relative term here, considering  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  would classify as quite pleasant in the game) presents a key parameter for deciding to which level the generator should be set, which buildings need extra heating, and how many resources increased insulation and higher generator power might require. At the same time, the narrowing field of









is up to the player-leaders to decide their fate, to gauge whether or not the community of survivors is able to support more people, but also whether the community can survive without the help of more workers and engineers at all.<sup>xi</sup> Most importantly, however, these decisions also force a decision about the kind of community the players want to shape, making the alternative far less mathematically inhuman as it appears at first glance. At the heart of these decisions, players constantly have to question the future of the community of survivors in the crater in a fundamental sense, realised through a series of interrelating alternatives. There are never enough resources to research all possible technologies, there is never enough time and space to create all buildings and improvements before the storm arrives, there is never a perfect balance between the offered alternatives in the *Book of Laws*. There is, instead, always the need to weigh certain kinds of destitution, certain kinds of scarcity and certain kinds of suffering against others.

This becomes even more clear when, after the fall of Winterhome is discovered, the players are offered two new paths in the *Book of Laws*, introduced by a single available button in response to the peoples' radical loss of hope: "I must give them purpose" (Frostpunk 2018). The two paths offered after the fall of Winterhome would lead the crater community in, again, two equally undesirable directions: Do we want to form a fascist society of *Order and Discipline* or a fanatic society of *Faith and Spiritual Strength*? Both paths, in turn, open up new decision trees of laws with several more mutually exclusive alternatives to shape the community. As in the first screen at the beginning of the scenario, with its single, determined answer-button "We have to survive" (Frostpunk 2018), the only action without alternative in *Frostpunk* is having to choose between alternatives from an autocratic player position.





and the dynamics of fictional game worlds, the two modes of experience mentioned above, hope<sup>xii</sup> and despair, can now be classified more precisely in terms of their temporal structure and in the ways they construct specific modes of subjectivity. Hope marks the experience of preparing for an uncertain future in *Frostpunk*, feeling a little more safe and at home with each action in a barren crater which is starting to transform into a liveable city, making the outlook on the days and hardships to come a little less gloomy. It presents a way to describe the temporality at the heart of construction simulation gameplay, as analysed above, in its fundamental relation of player action and fictional dynamics: A given world is accessed through autocratic action in order to construct a city and shape a society to live in that city. These modes of action – informational access, construction and configuration – only make sense in their relation to a future towards which the management of social, economic and political parameters is directed.

On the other hand, *Frostpunk* introduces a deeply affecting experience of despair through the specific aesthetic relation of interfaces and game world, in whose intricate interweaving any meaningful action is enabled at all. The despair of a world without a future lies entirely in its present, in the day-to-day nature of actions which cannot be related to grand plans for the design and flourishing of a society and economy in a world completely at the hands of autocratic actions, where nothing lies beyond the reach of the players. In *Frostpunk*, on the contrary, every action emerges fully within the shared time and space of immediate scarcity and suffering. Players are not so much concerned with the construction of cities as an activity of building towards an ever more plentiful future; they are entirely occupied with trying to manage an inevitable demise, sharing the living conditions in the crater, being present within the community of their people.<sup>xiii</sup>















better described as an autocracy *through* the people, the unique experience of acting autonomously and responsibly *as* a community and thus precisely against any autocratic power.

Chang poses a general question for environmentally complex gameplay in times of the Anthropocene which also might be quoted here to sum up *Frostpunk's* gameplay:

“Because games archetypally foreground player agency, the questions posed by collapsing or collapsed game worlds are helpfully not just ‘What is happening?’ or ‘What happened?’ but more important, ‘What am I (or even better, are we) going to do about it?’” (Chang 2019, 190)

Exactly the shift from an *I* to a *we* of creating different, possible worlds in a present which faces not yet certain doom and no miraculous salvation, is produced in *Frostpunk* as a gameplay experience by interweaving construction interfaces and fictional worlding in times of demise needing forceful and determined action as well as practices of response-ably becoming-with other beings and systems<sup>xv</sup> to secure ongoingness. This is not a process of reaching a static condition, a fixed form of community, but a process that challenges notions of fixed states, playing out precisely as the constant renegotiation of a community's shape through its actions.

Analytical practices of *close playing*, as Inderst (2020) summarises, require a specific focus and can only be productive as analyses built on the personal experiences of the player playing the game. Other perspectives besides a close focus on the aesthetic and functional interface arrangements and their relation to subjectification in gameplay are possible and necessary. The perspective *I* create in *my* actions of *my* playing in *Frostpunk* highlight only one way the game enables player action. It is necessary for every precise analysis to refer these actions back very closely to the game's concrete aesthetic and functional qualities which structure not just the









