

Collaborative learning through art games

Reflecting on corporate life with ‘Every Day the Same Dream’

Alina Petra Marinescu-Nenciu¹

Abstract

A consistent thread of literature has been dedicated to video games as a learning medium. Recently, attention has been increasingly given to games as opportunities for philosophical or ideological reflection on life. In the present paper, we examine an art game aiming for social critique. We discuss its learning affordances and the possibility of using it as a resource for coaching or counseling sessions. Specifically, we explore the diversity of messages transmitted by players engaging with ‘Every Day the Same Dream’ (EDSD), a La Molleindustria casual game tackling the issues of daily routine and refusal of labor. On the one hand, we look into players’ comments on several online platforms where EDSD can be played free of charge, considering their properties as collaborative media for learning. On the second hand, we analyze impressions coming from 12 people, former and actual corporate employees, who were asked to play the game and share their feelings and understanding with us. We conclude that the potential of a game to be used as a resource for learning might be considerably enhanced with proper contextualization and guidance and we propose three aspects that we consider essential if games are to function as resources for collaborative social critique and reflection.

Keywords

Art games, learning, social critique, game world, corporations, routine, game platforms

¹ Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Romania, alina.marinescu@sas.unibuc.ro

Introduction

There has been a gradual increase in the relevance of serious games with an existential or social critique bent. Serious or “grave” games (Vergopoulos & Boury 2012) represent a *new medium of social criticism*, taking advantage of specific characteristics such as interactivity, 3D graphics and player immersion (Snowdon & Oikonomou 2011). The challenge of serious video games aiming for critical expression consists in stimulating players’ reflexivity, while remaining playable and, at least to some extent, an entertaining or engaging experience (Woods 2004).

As subgenre of serious games, *art games* are designed to tackle the human condition and to stir up emotions, being usually prone to raise at least an eyebrow if not two. They advance complex messages, constituting a medium for *ideological communication* (Bogost 2006) (Soderman 2010). Games may propose reflections on offline life, either by explicit comments or through implicit experiential metaphors evoked through gameplay (Rusch 2009). Art games may, therefore, modulate other experiences, by proposing alternative frames of interpretation (Rughiniş 2012). In this case, designers’ goal is not (only) to entertain, but rather to question the status quo, the received wisdom and social arrangements, to get players to identify with novel ideas and attitudes and to reshape their representations of social life and human existence. *The focus changes thus from excitement to reflection*, from entertainment to ideas transmitted by interaction with the game world.

The *design* of the art games is often simple, as regards graphics, text, and game mechanics. They are created to convey, in combination, powerful messages. Art games make use of variable amounts of text to contextualize players’ actions (Bogost 2006). Some present the player with no text or only a few lines (as it happens in our case study), while others use substantial stories to guide the player’s interaction with the game world. Therefore, depending on the amount of explicit communication between designers and players, the game message may be more or less clear or, on the contrary, ambiguous or open.

Characters are used as resources for advancing social critique through empathy. Each character’s journey is meant to lighten a facet of the social realm, and the player’s identification with the character is a powerful trigger in the game rhetoric. Empathy works both ways: by relating to a character, the player can either take over her or his emotions, or distance oneself from them. Thus, when playing a game in which characters feel negative emotions, players may feel depressed or, on the contrary, may become aware of their relatively privileged situation (should this be the case) and become more cheerful. The players’ choice of positioning themselves in relation to game characters also shapes the message they derive from gameplay.

In this paper we are interested to explore and analyze the diversity of messages derived from players from an art game aiming for social critique. We conduct a case study of La Molleindustria’s game ‘Every Day the Same Dream’ (EDSD) (La Molleindustria 2009), discussing its learning affordances and the possibility of using it as a resource for coaching or counseling sessions.

We are interested not only in our reading of the game, or other researchers' (Soderman 2010), but essentially in how other people derive meaning from simply playing EDSD. We therefore make use of two methods in our analysis. Firstly, we examine players' comments on several online platforms on which the game is available to be played online. Secondly, we examine the impressions of 12 actual and former corporate employees, friends and acquaintances with the author, which we have asked to play the game and to reflect on it, following several questions:

- What is the game about?
- What do you think about the main character? What emotions does he transmit?
- How did you feel when playing the game?
- What might be the purpose of such games?

The paper is structured as follows: we start by a brief discussion of serious games and gameplay as resource for learning. We then go on to discuss 'Every Day the Same Dream' as a setting for reflection on daily life and corporate routine, reporting on our analysis. The final section concludes the paper.

Learning through gameplay

A consistent thread of literature has been dedicated to game use as a learning medium. Much of this research is dedicated to games used as 'inputs' (Rughiniş 2012) into courses or training forms – such as games that simulate activities, or otherwise present information to students. Affordances of games and learning opportunities have been tackled within various frameworks [16] [17]. The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) approach initially designed to enhance teacher knowledge by using technology in the academic environment was revisited in the light of game genres eliciting different types of pedagogical inputs depending on gameplay interactivity. Moreover, to upgrade technology grounded learning experiences, the Inquiry, Communication, Construction, and Expression framework (ICCE) took into consideration students' backgrounds and interests.

Recently, attention has been increasingly given to games as opportunities for philosophical or ideological reflection on life.

Assessment of art games has been primarily focused on their capacity of eliciting moral gameplay (Sicart 2010; Sicart 2009a; Sicart 2009b) or ideological awareness (Bogost 2006) (Treanor & Mateas 2009), taking a step further from entertainment to meditation and introspection. Art games have been appreciated for their capacity of immersing the player into the game world and stirring up deep emotions.

In order to understand games as a medium for learning, it is important to pay attention not only to the game itself, but also to the rich environment in which players actually play the game, the so-called game 'paratext' (Consalvo 2007). For example, players consult reviews, read and post messages on forums, participate in online markets for game resources, modify the games and so on. We pay particular attention to forums on platforms that host the game, starting from the observation that they offer an

environment full with textual messages about the game, including formulations of the game meaning (Marinescu Nenciu & Rughiniş 2015). Players therefore do not only experience the game: if they play on such a platform, they experience a collaborative setting that shapes their reflection and learning.

Hundreds of comments and reviews are to be found on dedicated gaming platforms such as Jayisgames² or Kongregate³ where thousands of players share their opinions and understanding of the games, or other platforms, such as personal blogs or course platforms such as Sample Reality (Sample n.d.). Comments address technical aspects, harvest emotional reactions or just describe game experiences (Marinescu Nenciu & Rughiniş 2015). Sometimes users ask for advice and share tips and tricks that would help them finish up the games. Sometimes, users post just single, isolated comments, not related with previous lines, but usually they answer previous statements, back up certain opinions or come up with arguments meant to contradict previously added comments.

Given the above, we observe that forums on online gaming platforms are a medium where people engage in collaborative learning processes with various outcomes:

1) Sharing knowledge regarding game procedurality: becoming acquainted with new games, learning various tips and tricks in relation to walkthroughs, game traps, technical inaccuracies etc.

2) Sharing understanding regarding game latent content: finding new perspectives to decipher underlying messages;

3) Bringing added value to game meaning, by offering and receiving different interpretations prone to modify perceptions over various realms (everyday-life connected issues, ideologies, social critique etc.);

4) Asking questions and finding various answers to different questions regarding games.

5) Sharing emotions: making fun of certain game routines or characters, identifying oneself with the characters or with the game routine etc., offering or asking for emotional support.

6) Engaging with evaluation mechanisms: all the game platforms offer some sort of evaluation mechanism (comments can be rated, sorted chronologically etc.).

²<http://jayisgames.com/>

³<http://www.kongregate.com/>

Table 1. Comments discussing the art game ‘Every Day the Same Dream’ on two different platforms and their corresponding learning outcomes.

Platform	Comment	Learning outcome
Jayisgames	The lady in the elevator tells me I have one last step, but I can't figure it out. I've already (Spoiler) talked to the homeless man, visited the cow, gone to work in my underwear, and jumped off the top of my work building. What's the last one?	1
Sample Reality	Interesting “game”, I enjoyed it. But I don't agree that this game has no game over. It's a puzzle and as long as there is no solving of the puzzle of course there is no game over... there can't be. The game is over when you quit playing it, like any puzzle. So I would not call this a GAME... it's more like an interactive puzzle. Anyhow it's great, I just wish it left more of a message.	2
Sample Reality	I thought the game was really boring and the music drove me crazy. Reading other people's reactions gave me a lot of new perspectives on the game. It's amazing how simplistic the game is but yet so many people really appreciated the effort that went into making it.	2
Sample Reality	The only complaint I have was that the whole game focused on escaping the monotony of life. Which in itself isn't a bad thing at all, but the way the game gave you a final escape through suicide was a total let down. While some people may think that this is ultimate freedom, I see it as the end of freedom. How are you free if you end your ability to make choices? Suicide means you killed your own right to be free to do stuff. In the game, I would have liked it if the person/player had the freedom to choose to quit his job in search of something more meaningful in life then repetitious office work.	3
Jayisgames	Well for such a creepy little game, I believe it got very high marks. Maybe it's an inspiration to be more? Maybe it reminds us to slow down? (I stood in front of my wife in boxer shorts many times and never got breakfast or a kiss!) Maybe they just want to remind us that there are many folks out there who have to do this everyday just to keep the world as we know it running smoothly? Spoiler Maybe in the end you were just a ghost watching life go on?	1, 5

The above classified learning outcomes can come either one by one, in separate comments, or nested together - a single intervention can share procedural information and share emotions at the same time. Moreover, one person can post an indefinite number of comments, tackling different topics every time, and one can also reply to multiple comments.

Every day the same dream? Learning with art games

In order to deepen our understanding regarding how games can be used as learning material in various situations, we draw on Sicart's (2011) thesis on games eliciting moral gameplay and focus on 'Every Day the Same Dream' - an art game that has elicited a variety of gameplay interpretations and generated numerous ideological approaches in the online community.

Launched in 2009, as part of the 'Experimental Gameplay Project' by La Molleindustria, 'Every Day the Same Dream' was finished in six days and was described to its future players as a 'little game of alienation and refusal to work'(Marinescu Nenciu & Rughiniş 2015). While presenting players with a simple 2D design, 'Every Day the Same Dream' aims to incite existential reflections on daily work routine. The storyline is also minimalistic, the player having to engage with a typical middle class male character through several activities: getting dressed, kissing his wife, driving to work, meeting his boss and sitting in his cubicle. When done, the day starts again with the bedroom scene. So does the rather psychedelic soundtrack. Still, if the character interacts with an old woman in the elevator, he finds out that he has to take five steps to become a new person. Thus, from now on, the player may change the avatar's known routine by interacting with five human or non-human characters – each in a different day. In the last episode, the player finds his avatar alone in the game world, passing by his empty cubicle to see an identical character (of unclear identity) jumping from the office rooftop.

'Every Day the Same Dream' tackles the typical white collar worker's condition, framing it as a mechanical life: the man has practically no identity and engages in a very simplistic sequence of actions. The game requires players to break the pattern and explore life outside the box. The avatar gets the chance to cut himself loose, by getting every day just a few steps further from the well-known path (see Fig. 1). Nevertheless, the end of the game does not necessarily present a liberated character – on the contrary, the game ends with a suicide. The ending scene does not have a clear meaning, as it is not obvious who is the jumping person: is it the playing character? A colleague? In what moment of time does it take place? The open ending has generated a substantial amount of player comments that propose alternative interpretations, thus formulating different game narratives (Marinescu Nenciu & Rughiniş 2015). Still, the player usually gets to have the expected 'A-ha!' moment, contributing to a possible series of disruptive thoughts that might tip the balance towards a lifestyle overhaul.

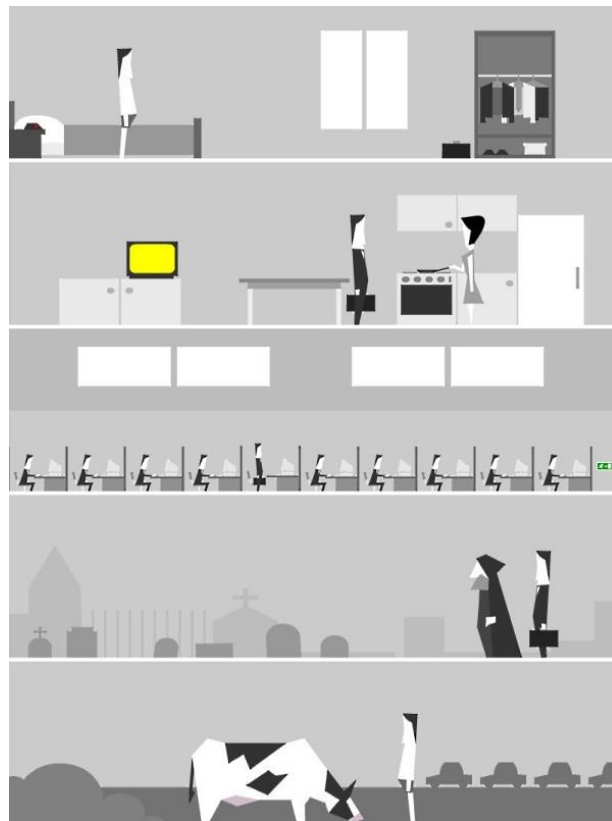


Figure 1. Scenes from Every Day the Same Dream

Even if the player might not go as far as having a life changing experience when engaging with Molleindustria's invitation, 'Every Day the Same Dream' is one of those games attempting to get into 'the mechanics of the soul' (Rutsch, 2009) and to elicit emotions (anger, frustration, enchantment, relief, despair – among others). According to Rutsch, this is the means to get the player deeper into the game, at a level where gameplay becomes aspirational and a process of identification with the moral quandaries of the avatar develops. A possible engine of identification consists in the player's immersion in the fictional world of the game, while a second one relies on game procedures to simulate and challenge structures of everyday life. Last but not least, there is the use of experiential metaphors, which arise when players recognize their own life in the situations in which the game throws them.

In addition to examining player comments, we decided to also evaluate the game through the perspective of social actors with known socio-demographics and working background. By reading the game messages through their lens, we could thus acquire a better understanding of how players derive meaning from gameplay. Consequently, we asked 12 men and women, former and actual corporate employees, to engage with the game and briefly share with us what they could make out of it, their feelings and state of mind given their own working experience. Data was collected by a single researcher, online, via e-mail, during one month. The subjects in this research are also part of a

broader Ph.D. study on the decisional processes of corporate employees when leaving their companies and they were already engaged in a previous series of in-depth interviews concerning their professional experiences.

Their opinions regarding EDSD varied in length and perspective. Still, two main categories of answers were salient, as illustrated in Table 2:

Gameplay-focused answers – looking to describe and explain different technical aspects of the game;

Message-focused answers - more preoccupied with *what* the game might be transmitting than with *how* the message gets to the player.

Table 2. Selection of answers to the question: ‘What is the game about and how did you feel playing it?’.

Gameplay-focused answers	Message-focused answers
At first, I was annoyed, when I couldn’t understand what was happening and I didn’t do any moves that would get the character out of the routine. But then I started to play with the TV, alarm, old woman etc. At the second iteration I went out of the “system”. I enjoyed playing with the leaf, with the cow, to go to work in my underpants, to get “fired” (T.M., male, 29, project management).	It’s quite pessimistic, especially in the end; I gather that it says that life is sad when you have a monotonous job and that there is no way out; that is not true, there is always a way. A little bit too hipster and counter-system, as far as I am concerned (A.G., 28, mal, IT).
The game was very interesting, with the no-face/no-identity John caught up in an endless routine... I found out all the 5 steps and I finished up the game. The music was nice :p, obsessively repeating the same notes... (C.T., male, 29, advertising).	I wouldn’t really say it’s a game, but rather a little movie meant at drawing attention on the routine in a corporate employee’s life. Feelings transmitted seem Bacovian ⁴ , lead and grave. Everything is grey and cold, and the main character is a zombie in his own life (A.B., female, 30, online publishing).
I was annoyed to see that when the boss send him to his cubicle I went out to see what’s after exit but then I got back to do my duty. During the second round I was surprised by the pleasure I felt when killing the character ☺). I threw him down the building. It writes jump and when you hit space he jumps (I.V., female, 29, online publishing).	It’s a bit grey and monotonous. I don’t identify with the character. He has few alternatives – I don’t believe that in real life you are unable to change things, like the game implies (D.O., female, 32, IT).

Eight out of twelve answers tackled gameplay-focused issues with only few observations regarding the message imbued in the game. Only four subjects focused on the game content. People mostly talked about *how* the game facilitated their way towards a new understanding of everyday life and work. Still, they didn’t exactly say *in what ways* their perspective changed after having played EDSD. In their comments, the 12 subjects emphasized on the game procedurality and underlined the most obvious message, that of the daily routine, but did not make explicit how they derived their interpretation from game mechanics and story elements, what is the lesson they

⁴ George Bacovia is a Romanian poet who wrote several well-known poems with a heavy emotional atmosphere.

personally take from the game, if any, or how their life routine or work related perspectives might change after EDSD. Moreover, some of the players felt bored or uneasy.

Game creators often use multiple, frequently non-communicating, layers of meaning and condition the player to gradual, step-by-step understanding of the message. It is up to the player to go to a higher level of interpretation, if willing and able to do so. This might explain why answers were focused on descriptive aspects of the game, than on interpretive ones. Lack of time to finish up the game, boredom, not being into games or lacking appetite for serious games might be equally part of the answer of why our research participants did not engage at a deeper level with EDSD.

Only two players tried to actually look for and decipher a deeper message, one that might be prone to become ‘food for thought’ and to change one’s perspective in life. They took the time to finish up the game and then offered answers showing a real interest in the latent content. Moreover, they asked for a face to face meeting to discuss about ‘the true’ message of the game. Both subjects are males, working in corporations at the present time. Their former interest in playing games was probably an important trigger for their curiosity and anxiousness to reach the end of the game. They knew that otherwise one would obtain only truncated pieces of message and information and that they needed to go through all the levels of the game and see its ending in order to improve their chances to a better comprehension of the game underlying messages. This point to the observation that players’ understanding seems to depend on their familiarity with video games. At least in our case study, people who are not used to playing games are less prone to make it into the deeper layers of understanding that the game provides.

1) I think it’s about alienation determined by this routine. Initially, I thought that the character was searching for ways to get out of the routine of “searching for something”, but considering the given activities (visiting a cemetery, going to work in underpants), I believe it’s all about alienation and the refusal to be productive for oneself and for the society (I noticed that the graph was going down with each “special” activity). And after you finish the 5 steps, it looks like a purgatory (especially because he sees a guy whom he resembles jumping). Initially, I was tempted to say it’s about braking out from the routine/ from an identity and that the one dying in the end is his old self, but I think that it is about alienation, losing touch with reality and becoming useless for society (C.T., 29, advertising).

2) I liked that it lets you choose what you want to do: to continue being a sad conformist or to explore and do something else; I like seeing alternatives to careerism being represented. Games like this one, but without the suicide in the end, could promote the idea that you can always make yourself happy, it is never too late (A.G., 28, IT).

Being a former gamer might also help in terms of procedurality and overall orientation. Once trained and accustomed with the game medium, is easier to develop the skills needed to play any game smoothly. Moreover, instead of feeling bored and ready to give up the quest at any time, a former gamer would feel challenged to reach the next level and curious to reach the end of the game.

Even when not played until the end, EDSO stirred up various emotions among the subjects, developing feelings of empathy, frustration, hate, determination etc.

- 1) I would have liked to be able to harm the fat guy somehow (e.g.: hit him with the suitcase or smth.) (T.M., 28).
- 2) It's quite pessimistic, especially in the end; I gather that is says that life is sad when you have a monotonous job and that there is no way out; that is not true, there is always a way (A.G., 28).
- 3) Feelings transmitted seem Bacovian, lead and grave (A.B., 30).
- 4) I felt a bit frustrated (...). I was annoyed to see that when the boss send him to his cubicle I went out to see what's after exit but then I got back to do my duty (I.F., 29).

Moreover, the high degree of immersion provided by the game becomes obvious when subjects talk about how they identify or not with the main character. Even if they weren't asked to say whether they think the character resembles them or not, seven respondents mentioned this identification process one way or another. This evaluation of one's identification with the character is less frequent on game platforms where users have different professional backgrounds.

- 1) I felt a bit frustrated because I identified myself with the character, obviously ☹ (I.V., 28, former corporate employee).
- 2) It's a bit grey and monotonous. I don't identify with the character (D.O., 33, corporate employee).
- 3) I must admit I don't find myself in the game. I got over that moment... And among the people I know, very few can identify with it ☹ (T.M., 33, former corporate employee).

Five of the participants who discussed their identification with the character are actual corporate employees, while the other two have quit this type of work environment. The ones still working in large companies underlined the fact that they didn't identify themselves with the character and that corporate routine is not a *modus vivendi* for them - while the others associated this image with the feelings of frustration they once felt. Both types of answers point to the fact that the game faced the players with a life experience they knew and which they considered negative. Most participants dissociated themselves from the proposed diagnosis of a routine-plagued person, either by denying its relevance or by considering it a matter of the past.

Conclusions

On the one hand, our findings point to the fact that a serious, art game as ‘Every Day the Same Dream’ has great potential in being used as medium for tackling the issue of everyday routine and questioning the outcomes of a corporate working engagement. On the other hand, evaluations made by former and actual corporate employees who were asked to play the game focused more on the description of the game routine and understanding of the explicit content rather than on deciphering underlying messages.

Even if most of our research participants (10 out of 12) were not familiar with playing video games, playing ESDS stirred up many emotions. Albeit not requested, seven participants discussed their identification with the main character.

We believe that the potential of a game to be used as a resource for learning might be considerably enhanced with proper contextualization and guidance. If participants in our study had been briefed regarding the possible underlying messages of the game, or if they had read a couple of reviews before engaging with the game, their understanding could have been deeper. Moreover, if they were interested in the topic beforehand and they would have played and discussed the game in a dedicated environment, as a life coaching session, the value of gameplay as an experiential metaphor would have been stronger.

When using games as educational media we consider that the following aspects should be taken into consideration:

1) Coaches or trainers should expect a diversity of players’ engagement with the game, depending on their previous gaming experiences, among others; some players will be more focused on mechanics and conditions of success, while others will be more focused on the game message.

2) When using video games as learning resources, it is important to take into account learners’ variable abilities to complete a game. Walkthroughs and playing advice should be made available – either by directing them to already available forums, or by designing a helpful interaction within the learning group.

3) In order to explore the diversity of possible interpretations of a game, it is useful to play the game in the context of its ‘paratext’ – looking at how other players have reacted to this experience. Players have thus the chance to achieve a deeper understanding of the game and to position themselves among a variety of meanings.

Acknowledgement

This paper is a result of a research made possible by the financial support of the Sectorial Operational Program for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132400 - “Young successful researchers – professional development in an international and interdisciplinary environment”.

REFERENCES

- Bogost, I., 2006. Videogames and Ideological Frames. In *Popular Communication*. pp. 165–183.
- Consalvo, M., 2007. *Cheating. Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Marinescu Nenciu, A.P. & Rughiniş, C., 2015. Every Day the Same Dream? Social Critique through Serious Gameplay. In *eLSE 2015 - The 11th International Scientific Conference eLearning and Software for Education*. pp. 1–8.
- La Molleindustria, 2009. Every Day the Same Dream.
- Rughiniş, R., 2012. Serious Games as Input versus Modulation: Different Evaluations of Utility. In *26th Conference on People and Computers BCS-HCI 2012*. Birmingham: ACM, pp. 175–184.
- Rusch, D., 2009. Mechanisms of the Soul: Tackling the Human Condition in Videogames. *Proceedings from DiGRA*.
- Sample, M., *Sample Reality*.
- Sicart, M., 2009a. The banality of simulated evil: designing ethical gameplay. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 11(3), pp.191–202.
- Sicart, M., 2009b. *The Ethics of Computer Games*, Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Sicart, M., 2010. Wicked Games: On the Design of Ethical Gameplay. In *DESIRE'10*. pp. 101–111.
- Snowdon, J. & Oikonomou, A., 2011. Games as a new medium for social criticism. In *2011 16th International Conference on Computer Games (CGAMES)*. IEEE, pp. 101–106.
- Soderman, B., 2010. Every Game the Same Dream? Politics, Representation, and the Interpretation of Video Games. *Dichtung Digital*.
- Treanor, M. & Mateas, M., 2009. Newsgames: Procedural Rhetoric meets Political Cartoons. In *Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*.
- Vergopoulos, H. & Boury, C., 2012. Ceci n'est pas un jeu. Le plaisir, les « jeux sérieux » et les « jeux graves ». In *Ludovia 2012*.
- Woods, S., 2004. Loading the Dice: The Challenge of Serious Videogames. *Game Studies*, 4(1).

Alina Petra Marinescu-Nenciu is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work. Formerly, she received her master's degree from the same institution after graduating "Research in Sociology". She is mainly interested in studying decisional processes, the relationships between organizational and personal identities, the dynamics of values in relation to the corporate environment, but also the process of narratively constructing various experiences in conversation. In 2007, she graduated Journalism with a thesis on informing and manipulating through the written press, a topic that represents another research focus of hers. Shortly after, she developed a career in corporate communication. Currently, she works as teaching assistant at the Faculty of Sociology and as junior researcher in a series of projects.