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**Sabine Himmelsbach
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**Radical Gaming
Immersion Simulation Subversion**

HEK (House of Electronic Arts)

Christoph Merian Verlag

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intro

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Boris Magrini

Radical Gaming – The Language of Video Games in Media Art

Video Games, Indie Games and Game Art

Once considered a niche or adolescent entertainment product, video games are now an integral, if not dominant, part of the world's cultural production that touches all sections of the population and all ways of life. With an estimated global revenue of \$180 billion in 2020, the video game industry now has a larger share of the entertainment market than the film and music industries.¹

Video games have changed the entertainment industry and consumer habits, and their influence has also had an impact on other cultural products, both in terms of technological innovations and in terms of collaborations and adaptations between video games and various other entertainment forms such as cinema, literature, and music. Also, on a theoretical and academic level, video games are increasingly the subject of studies by researchers analysing their social dynamics, psychological impacts, or aesthetic forms. Some of the main topics of these studies include the commercial strategies of the video game industry, the

¹ Wallace Witkowski, "Videogames are a bigger industry than movies and North American sports combined, thanks to the pandemic". <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/videogames-are-a-bigger-industry-than-sports-and-movies-combined-thanks-to-the-pandemic-11608654990> (first published 22.12.2021).

addictive nature of the games, the problem of gender discrimination, the reinforcement of alienating or violent behaviour, but also the narrative and educational potential of video games.

Not only has the production of commercial video games multiplied, but so has the production of independent video games, which propose innovative forms in terms of both content and aesthetic. The existence of video games with artistic and literary ambitions is nothing new, but the increase in the global market for video games has certainly facilitated the development and commercial success of these productions too. Today, video games with specific mechanics and content that are far from the formulas that make the most popular video games commercially successful are easily accessible on 'Steam,' the largest online distribution platform. Some of these games have enjoyed economic success and won numerous awards. Games such as *The Stanley Parable* (2011)² and *Undertale* (2015)³ produced with a limited budget, with free software and created by individual or small teams of game developers, have become almost cult objects precisely because of the artistic inventiveness and intelligent content they offer – a meta-discourse on video games in both cases – as opposed to more commercial games.

The proliferation of video games and their genres has also led to the multiplication of different communities sharing their passion on online platforms such as 'You Tube,' 'Twitch' and 'Discord.' Video games are not homogenous products, and it is not correct to think that there is a consistent community of gamers, a typical profile, rather there are several communities that constitute niches with very different values, tastes and ideologies. Yet, there is something that video games have in common. One of the most influential

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The Stanley Parable, 'Galactic Café', 'Galactic Café', 2011.

3

Undertale, 'Toby Fox', '8-4', 2015.

video game theorists, Ian Bogost, states that video games are both revolting and divine, and that they should be understood as “devices we operate.”⁴ This short definition sums up what distinguishes a video game from other cultural products, identifying the interactive nature of video games as their most distinctive element. Whatever form video games take, and however different they are in terms of game mechanics, content, narrative and aesthetics, a video game always requires the active participation of the player. Interactivity adds to the narrative possibilities and immersion offered by video games for producers who aspire to create works that go beyond entertainment.

The critic John Sharp writes: “To make sense of artists’ games requires that we recognise that there is a difference between games as entertainment and games as a medium.”⁵ While so-called commercial video games seem to follow strategies that satisfy most consumers and take few risks in terms of formal experimentation, game mechanics and narrative, there are video games that do not follow this logic. In addition to independent game producers, artists have also ventured into this form of cultural production, and what is often referred to as game art has existed for several decades. Since the 1990s, artists such as Jodi, Cory Arcangel, Mary Flanagan, or Eva & Franco Mattes have used video games, mainly by modifying existing games, producing installations inspired by them, or creating performances in online virtual universes. The *Gamescenes. Art in the Age of Videogames* publication edited by Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta presents several examples of this production, which continues to evolve.⁶ Museum institutions have also taken an interest in video games as an art form, sometimes considering the artistic qualities of video games, and sometimes favouring the work of artists who use this medium.⁷

4
Ian Bogost, *How to Talk About Videogames*. Minneapolis, 2015, p. 1.

5
John Sharp, *Works of Game*. Cambridge/MA, 2016, p. 106.

6
Matteo Bittanti, Domenico Quaranta, *Gamescenes. Art in the Age of Videogames*. Milan, 2006.

7
Examples include: *Games. Computer Games by Artists*, 11.10.–30.11.2003, Hartware Medienkunstverein, Dortmund; *The Art of Video Games*, 16.03.–30.09.2012, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington/DC; *ZKM. Gameplay*, 21.06.2013–03.08.2014, ZKM, Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; *Videogames. Design, Play, Disrupt*, 08.09.2018–24.02.2019, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Interaction and Immersion as Artistic Media

The *Radical Gaming* exhibition aims to explore the recent production of works created by artists through the medium of video games. While these works are created using video game technologies, they differ greatly from the pioneering works of game art and conventional video game productions. Firstly, what distinguishes the works of these artists is undoubtedly the intentional and thoughtful use of interactivity and immersion, which are characteristics of the language of video games. The artists create works in which the viewer can experience the game in first person, and is invited to take an active part in its evolution. Interactivity is not just a playful component, but is conceived as an element that contributes to conveying the artist's discourse. The interactivity of these works distinguishes them from other artistic works where video games are used to create audio-visual works and installations. What distinguishes these works from traditional video games, on the other hand, is certainly the desire to provoke speculative reflection rather than simply offering an entertainment product. The themes often dealt with by artists concern social, political or ecological issues.

While these ambitions are close to those of alternative video game production, as already mentioned, the works of the artists presented here are also distinguished by another feature, which concerns more formal aspects. They are the result of the assimilation of recent artistic strategies, mainly influenced by the so-called post-digital aesthetics that characterised

the second decade of the 21st century. The artists belonging to this new generation of game art pay attention to the formal choices not only related to the virtual universe of their works, but also to the context of their presentation in the exhibition space. The experience of their digital works often occupies the real space to accompany the viewer's transition between reality and the virtual world. In contrast to the usual formal solutions that marked the beginnings of digital art, the artists of this new generation know how to develop a specific individual language that is always consistent with the virtual world they create. Although united by the impact of digital culture worldwide, the artists of *Radical Gaming* nevertheless represent different cultural contexts.

Identities and Affiliations

The theme of identity is recurrent in the works of many video game artists. The immersive nature of the language of games allows this theme to be explored in a more intimate way, offering players the possibility of experiencing first-hand individual stories and above all experiences, difficulties or opportunities associated with different and often non-conforming identities. They use the language and mechanics of video games to convey a message in defence of minorities and discriminated groups, or to discuss stereotypes associated with gender belonging. The use of interaction and immersion, in this case, allows the artists to make the viewer experience first-hand moments of exclusion or communion, injustice or love.

Jacolby Satterwhite, for example, creates immersive universes in virtual reality, using the technique of motion capture and software associated with video game production such as 'Maya.' His universes, as in the case of the work *We Are In Hell When We Hurt Each Other* (2020), are populated by hybrid characters that confront the spectator with overtly sexual and erotic bodies who are linked to different groups of belonging, particularly the homosexual and queer spheres. At first glance, Satterwhite's works may seem provocative, due to their obscene nature, especially for people who are confronted with this universe for the first time. Yet it is precisely this sincerity, this refusal to hide the codes of belonging that constitutes an invitation to inclusion, respect and tolerance.

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's interactive online games take a more radical approach. In *Resurrection Land* (2020), the users are asked to identify themselves and declare their racial and gender affiliation, as well as their position on black and trans communities. The players' declaration determines their experience of the game, which takes place in an imaginary city dominated by a black and trans community. If the spectator identifies him or herself as a member of this community, his or her inclusion will be greater than that of a player who identifies himself in opposition to this community. The game is thus both an experience that allows the black and trans community to live in a virtual space of protected communion – the term 'healing' is often used in these contexts – and at the same time offers the possibility for players who do not identify with this community to experience exclusion first-hand, and thus suffer what the black trans community is forced to live through on a daily basis.

The artist Theo Triantafyllidis subverts the fantasy genre, creating a transsexual ogre, normally non-ex-

istent in such stereotypical universes and whom the player is invited to embody. In the *Pastoral* (2019) world he has created, there are neither wars nor fights against mythical dragons and antagonistic people: the player can simply enjoy a moment's rest in a hay-field. While conventionally the fantasy genre is characterised by a logic of violence and domination, for Triantafyllidis, the subversion of the fantasy universe lies above all in the elimination of the warlike character and the constant conflict between classes and races.

Finally, Cassie McQuater appropriates the dungeon crawler genre to develop a poetic work in which women play a predominant role. In a traditional dungeon crawler, the player is called upon to explore dangerous locations, such as castles, labyrinths and fortresses where they fight evil entities in order to collect loot or free their captives. Originally, the genre was geared towards a male audience and not infrequently the goal for the player was to free princesses held captive in fortresses. Like many other genres, the dungeon crawler has evolved over the years, and these initial stereotypes have also been subverted in more recent commercial games. McQuater's *Black Room* (2017–ongoing) appropriates female characters from famous video games in the form of graphic sprites. Not only does her appropriation partly reveal the sexist nature of these female representations, but above all it offers them a second life. As the player goes deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine dungeon, they embark on a surreal journey where the aim is not to collect a material ransom, instead the focus is on the characters they meet along the way. Traditionally, the role of these characters and their stories is to facilitate the player's clearly defined quest, but in the context of McQuater's work the purpose of the journey becomes about the encounters with these various characters.

The possibility of embodying different characters and immersing the player in unaccustomed universes is thus an opportunity offered by video games precisely because of their specificity, which the artists exploit to invite the public to live new life experiences and confront identities different from their own.

Science Fiction and Digital Technologies

In her book dedicated to the creation of independent video games, Anna Anthropy states that games excel in storytelling, claiming the importance of developing a multiplicity of narratives that oppose the usual narratives of commercial video games.⁸ This is echoed in Hannah Brady's essay, which points out that the dominant stories of video games often reinforce stereotypical views of the role of protagonists, thus reinforcing players' imaginations of social norms and gender roles.⁹ It is therefore no coincidence that artists who create video games do so to tell different stories, fictions that explore other realities and possible scenarios. Science fiction is a particularly suitable genre for this purpose, as it allows the artist to address very real and current issues rather than simply entertaining with fantastic tales. Developments in technology, its opportunities, but also the problems that may ensue, is a predominant theme in these works. Reflections on artificial intelligence, biotechnology, the internet and social networks are often accompanied by considerations of the automation of work, alienation, social inequalities and ecological problems.

The Keiken collective has developed a fantasy universe with its *Metaverse* series. Their latest online

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Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters. How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York, 2012.

9

Hanna Brady, "Building a Queer Mythology", in: Bonnie Ruberg, Adrienne Shaw (eds.), *Queer Game Studies*, Minneapolis, 2017, pp. 63–68.

video game *Wisdoms for Love 3.0* (2021) allows the viewer to embark on an initiatory journey to come into contact with hybrid entities and is asked to make ethical choices that determine his or her fate in the virtual universe. Furthermore, the game offers the possibility of obtaining digital works, called wisdom tokens, in the form of archetypes of alternative existential models.

The automation of work, in which artificial intelligence takes on increasingly predominant tasks, is a recurring theme in Lawrence Lek's work. The protagonist of his video game *Nøtel* (2016–ongoing), which can be visited by the user, is a zero-star hotel because it has no human employees. In a sophisticated and technological environment, at first sight very luxurious, everything is automated to satisfy the clients, who however quickly find themselves in a claustrophobic, impersonal and highly guarded place.

Sometimes fiction overlaps with reality, as in the stories told in Nicole Ruggiero's work about famous internet personalities. Bloggers, youtubers and influencers are portrayed by the artist by combining elements of reality and fiction. Her work *How The Internet Changed My Life* (2021) is a reflection on the evolution of our behaviour, increasingly influenced by online interactions and identities created to meet the expectations of the community. At the same time, her work offers models of non-conforming identities, and of famous personalities who have been able to build an individual lifestyle precisely through their online activities.

The theme of Mikhail Maksimov's sci-fi game *Sanatorium Anthropocene Retreat* (2020) is evolution. Set in a reconstruction of the Russian pavilion in the gardens of the Venice Biennale, the player embodies

a non-human agent with the goal of moving up the evolutionary chain from a virus to a human being and eventually to an artificial intelligence. The nihilistic irony of the work is revealed in its destructive ending, as the culmination of evolution, in this dystopian game, seems to be to acquire devastating power. The robot that consists of the last stage of evolution is in fact a weapon of mass destruction capable of obliterating other existing forms in the surrounding environment. Taking inspiration from first-person shooters, which is one of the most popular genres of video games, Maksimov's work can be read as an ironic commentary on their commercial production. The destructive power of the robot that players can embody once they have completed their evolution does not even spare the contemporary artworks in the galleries of later game stages.

As is often the case in cinema or literature, science fiction is a tool used in these video games by artists to discuss the ethical implications of technological innovation and reflect on the fate of humanity.

Defying Game Mechanics

Sometimes it is the experimentation and subversion of the usual mechanics of video games that become a territory of analysis for artists. The gameplay, such as the rules that determine how the player interacts with the environment, characters and other objects in a video game, is a fundamental component of these, and is often discussed and evaluated in specialised magazines. Moreover, many researches have revealed that gameplay can be adjusted to increase excitement

and satisfaction during play, and is therefore associated with the release of dopamine, and is thus responsible for creating addiction.¹⁰ Some artists have been particularly interested in reflecting on and disrupting the language of video games and their game mechanics, by subverting their usual rules and norms.

In his game *Levels and Bosses* (2017–21), Leo Castañeda reflects in particular on the concept of player vs. environment (PVE) which is common to the vast majority of commercial video games, where the player is constantly opposed to programmed forces (environment) governed by non-player characters (NPCs) such as monsters and so-called bosses. In Castañeda's case, the environment assumes a preponderant aspect and forces the player to confront the interface and game mechanics in order to evolve in a hostile context.

In *Antraal* (2019), Sahej Rahal has created a world populated by mysterious creatures that move and interact in a natural environment. The creatures, the environment and even the camera movements that allow the player to observe their evolution are governed by an artificial intelligence that determines their behaviour. The player does not have to fight against these creatures, but is invited to interact with them. Instead of using the usual interaction commands and interfaces, such as mouse and keyboard, the player uses a microphone, which is the only source to determine the evolution of the game. This non-intuitive game mechanic can be frustrating, as it does not give the usual satisfaction that a traditional virtual character control would allow.

One artist who has been particularly interested in analysing and disrupting game mechanics is Eddo Stern. His *Dark Game 4* (2014–ongoing), which he

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Koepp MJ, Gunn RN, Lawrence AD, et al., «Evidence for Striatal Dopamine Release During a Video Game», in: *Nature*, May 21, 1998, vol. 393, pp. 266–268. <https://doi.org/10.1038/30498> (16.06.2021).

has constantly updated and modified over the years, questions the interaction interface, forcing players to use custom-made equipment created by the artist. Rather than relying on the players' visual and auditory abilities, this device requires a sensation-based interaction. Players are thus forced to confront an environment and face challenges all while being deprived of their most common senses. In addition, the game is also designed for users who have hearing or visual impairments, and therefore consists of an approach that allows for the integration of a part of the population often excluded from commercial products.

A seemingly absurd and nonsensical game *The Tool* (2020), by Mikhail Maksimov, allows players to match very different objects, such as animals, plants, planets, environmental phenomena and human instruments, and then create named tokens that describe the combinations chosen by the player. But the poetic power of the game is revealed in the way that players can engage in the online exchange of their object associations, thereby allowing them to formulate and share abstract thoughts.

These works demonstrate that it is possible to upset game mechanics to offer unusual experiences. We can consider that artists use this strategy and develop new interfaces or interaction dynamics to provoke reflections on themes present in the content of the works, or even to allow players to create their own content to be shared among the audience.

Politics, Culture and Metaphysics

Works of art, literature and film have always been a privileged vehicle for reflecting and commenting on subjects touching on the political, social and cultural spheres. The committed character of these works is often seen as an element that distinguishes them from entertainment products. Similarly in the field of video games, many authors have sought to offer critical discourse on real issues. Perhaps more than any other attribute, the fact that a cultural product deals with political or social issues, what is often described as committed art, is what facilitates its appreciation as a cultural rather than a commercial product. Video games such as *Papers, Please* (2013),¹¹ *Gone Home* (2013),¹² *This War of Mine* (2014),¹³ and *Sunset* (2015)¹⁴ have used the game mechanics and immersion of this medium to address issues such as immigration, the difficulty faced by non-binary identities, war and social injustice. These and similar games have not remained in a niche, but have been a critical and public success and often won awards.

Although he has denied in several interviews that he wants to deal with politics in his work, Lu Yang has created works filled with cultural, philosophical and social references, accompanied by reflections on religion, technology, sexuality and gender identity. His video game, *The Great Adventure of Material World* (2019) contains elements that characterise the artist's eclectic but very personal universe, inviting the player to evolve through various levels, in an itinerary that is as much a metaphysical reflection on themes related to identity, existence and destiny as it is an ironic commentary on capitalism and the culture industry.

11
Papers, Please, Lucas Pope, '3909 LLC', 2013.

12
Gone Home, 'The Fullbright Company', 'The Fullbright Company', 2013.

13
This War of Mine, '11 bit studios', '11 bit studios', 2014.

14
Sunset, 'Tale of Tales', 'Tale of Tales', 2015.

The video games of artist Miyö Van Stenis explore themes linked to biopolitics, patriarchy and the cult of violence. These works exploit the dynamics of first-person gameplay, often associated with the shooter genre and competitive games. Her new work *Eroticissima* (2021), however, is an attempt to create a protected space for erotic encounters in virtual worlds, in order to explore different sexual identities and behaviours.

Sara Culmann has recreated a part of the Skolkovo Innovation Centre district in Moscow, the technological research centre developed over the last decade, immersing the player in a post-apocalyptic environment in which information elements such as posters, objects and above all audio files are scattered, revealing a context of corruption and financial speculation associated with the district. Her work *Skolkovo. The Game* (2016–2021), which lies between reality and fiction, is a commentary on the relationship between techno-capitalism and politics that goes beyond the specific reality of the Moscow quarter.

Singapore's housing policy is the focus of the work created by Debbie Ding. The authorities require that certain spaces on the ground floor of buildings be left vacant in order to allow activities that relate to the community life of the neighbourhoods, such as weddings and specific parties. Since opportunities to occupy these spaces are rare, they remain empty most of the time. In *Void* (2021), the player can navigate a small boat and explore the public spaces of Singaporean homes that the artist has digitised with 3D scanning, and collect objects scattered throughout this desolate world. The title of the work refers to the emptiness of spaces devoid of life and activity, but also to the emptiness that often appears in virtual spaces, especially in those places where the player

is not usually invited to go and which have been left out by the programmers. These visual glitches have always fascinated the artist, and have become metaphors for imbalances that also exist in real life.

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Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. 2012, p. 160.

The possibility offered by interactive works to mix real and fictional elements, and the freedom given to the player to explore virtual universes, make video games a privileged medium to deal with current issues and convey concepts and emotions in a way that is perhaps more intimate and profound than other cultural products.

Subverting the Rules

As video games and their audiences have multiplied, the tools for game production and distribution platforms have also increased, democratising game creation. Software and graphics engines such as 'Unreal' and 'Unity' are among the most popular for creating 3D games, but there are many others, such as 'Game Maker Studio' and 'RPG Maker,' that are easy to use. Video game producer and theorist Anna Anthropy calls for the multiplication of video game creation, arguing that precisely because this cultural production touches an increasingly important segment of the population, it is necessary to diversify the contents and welcome a multiplicity of different voices and visions. "Every new game is a voice in the darkness,"¹⁵ states Anthropy, emphasising that if commercial video games do not take risks to meet the expectations of the majority of the public, it is up to people on the fringes of commercial production to create alternative experiences. As Anthropy points out, video games are nothing more than a set of rules, and are therefore particularly suited to exploring themes concerning

human relations. Other theorists, particularly from the field of postcolonial and gender studies, have reiterated the need to subvert the norms proposed by commercial video games. Collen Macklin states that “[g]ames release us from ourselves and let us try on new identities,”¹⁶ while Naomi Clark emphasises that “games can be deployed on serious subjects to convey political consciousness.”¹⁷ More and more game theorists, producers and enthusiasts are defending the need to diversify the production and facilitate the distribution of video games, in order to propose alternatives to the dominant narratives, but also to the gaming experiences and commercial logic based on mechanics aimed at creating instant gratification and addiction.

It is remarkable that visual artists have appropriated the language of video games to produce conceptual works, especially since what most distinguishes a work of art from a product of the entertainment industry is its independence from the systems and dynamics of commercial distribution. Although it can certainly be argued that artists are nonetheless dependent on other systems linked to the art world. Even educational video games, known as serious games, and independent video games often follow a didactic or ludic purpose that determines the choices, the contents and the game mechanics. The use of the language of video games as an artistic medium – in particular interactivity and immersion – offers an opportunity for artists to convey ideas, experiment formally and tell stories in a different way.

While artists have been using video games since the 1980s, their works often resulted in videos that the viewer consumed passively. The development and easy accessibility of software for creating video games has enabled a larger number of artists to make

16

Collen Macklin, “Finding the Queerness in Games”, in: Ruberg, Shaw (eds.), *Queer Game Studies*, 2017, p. 256.

17

Naomi Clark, “What is Queerness in Games, Anyway?”, in: *ibid*, p. 10.

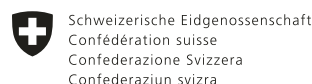
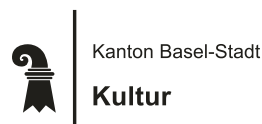
real interactive games as conceptual works, which the viewer can play and experience first-hand. The subversion of the usual gaming paradigms, in terms of content, aesthetics, narrative, or game mechanics, is a strategy favoured by artists engaging with this genre, who have additional elements, interaction and immersion, to convey their artistic universes and ideas. The themes dealt with by these artists sometimes focus on the language and sociology of video games themselves, but more often than not they deal with broader themes, ranging, as we have seen, from the question of gender identity to biopolitics or the automation of work.

As mentioned in the introduction, what distinguishes a cultural product from a commercial one is above all the presence of a discourse that provokes reflection on real issues, as well as its formal creativity. There is no doubt that certain commercial products, films and video games also deal with social and political issues, but these are often treated without taking too many risks, as not to irritate the majority of the public, in order not to limit sales. The more radical approach taken by artists who enjoy greater freedom in the production of their works makes no compromises, allowing experimentation at the level of narrative, aesthetics and game mechanics. The *Radical Gaming* exhibition testifies to the existence of a production that is therefore opposed to the logic of the market. By appropriating the medium of video games, the artists presented here disrupt both its traditional narratives and aesthetic forms, inviting us to immerse ourselves in unusual, provocative experiences that would probably not be possible in a traditional distribution context.



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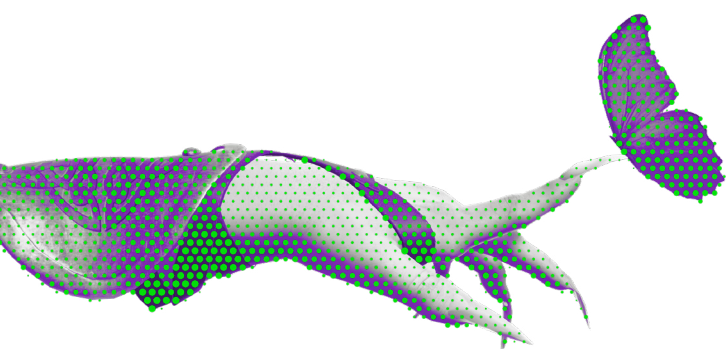
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